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Exploring Early Childhood Teachersâ Perspectives Regarding How They Teach Vocabulary

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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by

Serena Williams

MA, University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2009

BS, University of Houston, 2003

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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August 2020

Abstract

Previous studies have been done on the lack of quality and consistency of vocabulary instruction in low socioeconomic schools. The problem addressed in this study was that some students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in low income early childhood classrooms while other students were performing poorly. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low socioeconomic schools of students with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their zones of proximal development. The conceptual framework used in this study was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development, which specifically outlined the role that the zone of proximal development has in providing vocabulary instruction. Data were collected from a purposeful sample of 8 teachers using semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using a combination of a priori, open coding, and axial coding. Themes that emerged from the data included emphasizing the importance of an adequate vocabulary and providing explicit vocabulary instruction, vocabulary integration, and social interactions. Findings from this study may provide all education stakeholders with insight regarding the importance of vocabulary acquisition and an overview of teaching strategies and delivery models for enhancing vocabulary learning for low socioeconomic early learners.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my significant other, children, and all of those who have supported us along this journey. Without your love and support, I would not have made it to where I am today. Rodrick, I thank you for pushing me to be better daily. Your support and encouragement have not only helped me through this journey, but to also strive to be a better mother, person, teacher, and leader. Blake, Ryah, and Ryder, I am so proud to be your mother and hope that my determination and perseverance inspires you to do great things in your future.

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First, I would like to give thanks to God, who has given me strength and perseverance in every aspect of my life. I would like to acknowledge my doctoral chair Dr. R. Curtis, for her guidance and encouragement through the dissertation process, and to Dr. A. Beckett and Dr. K. Hunt for their direction and expertise. I would also like to give a heavenly acknowledgement to Dr. D. Callahan, my first dissertation chair, for encouraging me when I was prepared to give up and directing my path at the beginning of my doctoral journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Early childhood research has indicated that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension (Bowne, Yoshikawa, & Snow, 2017; Duguay, Kenyon, Haynes, August, & Yanosky, 2016; Hoffman, Teale, & Paciga, 2014; Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Phillips, Ingrole, Burris, & Tabulda, 2017; Wang, Christ, & Chiu, 2014). Children who do not have a strong vocabulary foundation during their early childhood years will most likely have difficulty with reading and comprehension skills in the future (Hindman, Wasik, & Snell, 2016). Researchers have also indicated that there is an approximate 30-million-word gap between children who come from economically disadvantaged homes and their more fortunate peers by the time they enter kindergarten (Neuman & Wright, 2014; Phillips et al., 2017). This wide gap in vocabulary knowledge between students from different socioeconomic status (SES) groups indicated that young children entering kindergarten from disadvantaged homes need a teacher who is equipped with teaching techniques that will begin to close the vocabulary gap (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

Researchers have noted that vocabulary instruction in schools serving low SES students lacks the quality and consistency to grow a student's vocabulary (Duguay et al., 2016; Hindman et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2017; Nelson, Dole, Hosp, & Hosp, 2015). They stressed the need to translate existing research on vocabulary instruction into practice in low SES schools so that educators can begin to narrow the vocabulary gaps existing between children from disparate SES backgrounds (Duguay et al., 2016; Hindman et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2015). Exploring early

childhood teachers serving low SES students provided insight into the strategies that are consistently being used to encourage vocabulary growth. This study was conducted so that teacher education programs and school systems, locally and across the nation, might encourage early childhood teachers to implement instructional strategies that support the vocabulary development of children from low SES homes. The potential for positive social change is in providing all education stakeholders with insight regarding the importance of vocabulary acquisition, as well as an overview of teaching strategies and delivery models. Utilizing this research could ultimately result in young children leaving the early childhood years with a solid language foundation (Lerner & Parlakian, 2014). Learning strategies and delivery models that lead to a solid language foundation might also promote positive social change by assisting more young children in learning to read and, eventually, reading to learn.

In this chapter, I lay the foundation of this dissertation by outlining each component of the research beginning with the background knowledge pertaining to vocabulary instruction in low SES schools. The problem being explored in this study is shared, along with the purpose and research questions. This study explored vocabulary instruction practices in early childhood classrooms through a constructivist lens. The conceptual framework that was discussed was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development, which posited that children learn language through interactions with their parents, caregivers, peers, and culture (Follari, 2015). In this chapter I also review assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, nature of the study, and

definitions. Finally, I describe the significance of the study, which includes the implications for potential social change in the early childhood field.

Background

Vocabulary acquisition during early childhood is a key factor in determining a child's future reading skills (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 2014). Children who lack the adequate vocabulary in their dominant language during early childhood will most likely struggle with basic reading and comprehension skills (Hiebert et al., 2014; Marulis & Neuman, 2013). Further, young children from low-income families are more likely to struggle with vocabulary acquisition and knowledge during early childhood than children from middle to high income families (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015; Marulis & Neuman, 2013). Vocabulary limitations of children from low-income homes lead to greater difficulty than their peers from higher income homes with basic reading skills needed to fully comprehend grade level text (Pace, Luo, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2017). The main oral language skill deficiency that is attributed to the lack of basic reading skills and comprehension is vocabulary (Marulis & Neuman, 2013). Springer (2013) stated that vocabulary is an essential prerequisite to reading because students cannot understand what they read unless they have knowledge of what the words mean.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), approximately 31% of all fourth grade students are reading below the basic skill set level required to pass a standardized test compared to 44% percent of fourth grade students who received free and reduced lunch. According to Phillips et al. (2017), vocabulary knowledge during

early childhood is strongly associated with fourth grade reading achievement scores. Neuman and Wright (2014) stated that the size of a person's' vocabulary is strongly related to how well that person comprehends what they read throughout their lifetime. It was further noted that "the highest rate of vocabulary development" occurs during early childhood and the pre-primer grades (Dashiell & DeBruin-Parecki, 2014; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Wang et al., 2014).

Kindergarten students from lower SES backgrounds typically have a lower vocabulary than their peers from higher SES homes (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Hindman et al., 2016, Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Westgate & Hughes, 2018). Many related factors have been attributed to the lack of vocabulary exhibited in children from lower SES homes (Hindman et al., 2016; Fitzpatrick, McKinnon, Blair, & Willoughby, 2013; Wang et al., 2014). Hindman et al. (2016) noted a major factor contributing to this social disparity is the amount and quality of language that children are exposed to during their first years of life in the home and childcare setting. Young children from lower income homes are exposed to fewer words and their meanings (Hindman et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2014). Economically disadvantaged children are often read to less, attend lower quality child care centers, engage in fewer activities that promote brain stimulation, have lower quality diets, and are exposed to more pollutants which all play a factor in the role of vocabulary development (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). Researchers have shared that there is gap in practice in the early childhood field regarding the quality and consistency of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2017).

This study was needed so that early childhood educators working with students from lower SES backgrounds can begin to translate existing research regarding consistent and high-quality vocabulary instruction into practice and begin to narrow the existing vocabulary gap between children from disparate SES backgrounds.

Problem Statement

Vocabulary development during early childhood is an important factor in determining a child's future reading skills (Hiebert et al., 2014). According to Wasik and Hindman (2020), vocabulary development comprises various indicators. According to I-Station Indicators of Progress (ISIP), indicators that are specific to vocabulary development include: oral language, grammar, and syntax, and listening comprehension. ISIP is a computer-based assessment that provides continuous progress monitoring by assessing students' skills in the early reading domains throughout the school year (Iststaion, 2020).

The problem addressed in this study was that some students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in low income early childhood classrooms while other students were performing poorly (Fiester, 2010; & Zauche, Thul, Mahoney, & Stapel-Wax, 2016). Researchers have suggested early childhood teachers who provide instruction within students' zone of proximal development (ZPD) typically see significant growth (Bowne et al., 2017; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Hiebert et al., 2014; Hill, 2017; Hindman et al., 2016; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Solovieva & Garvis, 2018). ZPD is the difference between what a learner is able to do independently and what they are capable of doing with the support, guidance, and encouragement of a more capable person (Wass

& Golding, 2014; Zauche et al., 2016).Previous studies in this area have also revealed that the quality and consistency of vocabulary instruction for children from low-income homes is poor (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011). Wright (2011) conducted a study to evaluate the quality and quantity of vocabulary instruction in kindergarten that occurred in various SES schools and found that educators from lower income schools provided limited vocabulary instruction that occurred minimally and consisted of common or basic words that were not within students' ZPD (Snell, Hindman, & Wasik, 2015). Nelson et al. (2015) observed 76 kindergarten teachers in a 3-year span and noted similar findings. They found that while most teachers had knowledge about the importance of vocabulary instruction, they spent a minimal amount of time teaching vocabulary. Most of the observed teachers mainly focused on phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency with little time devoted to vocabulary and language building activities during their literacy block.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), approximately 31% of all fourth-grade students are reading below the basic skill set level required to pass a standardized test compared to 44% percent of fourth grade students who received free and reduced lunch. Phillips et al. (2017) attributed this reading difficulty to each child's vocabulary acquisition, stating that the primary difference in children reading on grade level and those likely to struggle was vocabulary. In the 2012-2013 school year, approximately 58% of kindergartners in a large suburban school district located in the Southern United States did not meet expectations in the area of vocabulary on the end of the year universal screener, ISIP (Texas Education Agency, n.d). In the 2015-2016

school year, approximately 42% of all third grade students did not meet the minimum

standard requirements on the state reading test (Texas Education Agency, n.d). This

school district serves a diverse population in which 76% of students receive free or

reduced lunch (ProPublica, 2016). However, some early childhood teachers in this

district have a higher proportion of students who make a year's growth or more in

vocabulary within 1 school year.

There are several studies in the early childhood field that describe strategies that

assist with promoting oral language and vocabulary in a low SES setting (Chen & Kim,

2014; Gorski, 2018; Hindman et al., 2016; & Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; van Steensel,

Oostdam, van Gelderen, & van Schooten, 2016). However, children from lower SES

homes continue to enter grade school lagging behind their peers from higher SES homes

in vocabulary (Hindman et al., 2016). Gorski (2013) agreed that low income students

entering grade school often lag behind their peers academically and attributed it to a lack

of equitable resources afforded to their parents, poorly funded schools, and teachers who

are not equipped with the skills to adequately teach literacy skills to children in poverty

(Lawson, 2015).

Researchers in the early childhood field have noted that vocabulary instruction is

missing from the components typically taught in reading and language instruction in low

SES schools (Beck, McKeown, Kucan, 2013; Coyne et al., 2018; Loftus-Rattan, Mitchell,

& Coyne, 2016). Loftus-Rattan et al. (2016) noted that regardless of the reading

framework used, early childhood curriculum guides rarely contained measurable

objectives in vocabulary. Teachers introduce new or uncommon vocabulary without

scaffolding or providing opportunities for students to talk and monopolize the conversation, and they rarely provide accurate definitions (Hindman et al., 2016). This lack of consistency does not allow students to be successful in attaining the vocabulary needed to become successful readers later in life (Cuticelli, Coyne, Ware, Oldham, & Rattan, 2015).

According to Hindman et al. (2016), and Nelson et al. (2015), most kindergarten teachers observed included some vocabulary instruction into their literacy blocks, indicating that early childhood educators have some knowledge regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction for children from low-income homes. However, the quality of vocabulary instruction, as well as how vocabulary research informs practice in the classroom when working with this population still needs to be addressed (Beck et al., 2013; Hindman et al., 2016; Lawson, 2015; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011). This study was needed so that early educators of children in low SES schools can begin to address the gap in practice regarding vocabulary instruction.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to investigate the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2014) described vocabulary as an essential part of becoming a fluent reader and being able to comprehend text. When vocabulary acquisition declines, reading comprehension is compromised (NAEYC, 2014). Exploring the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary

scores regarding how they teach students based on students' ZPDs provided insight for other educators on the instructional practices that should be used when working with students from low income homes.

I used a qualitative, exploratory case study design to address the problem presented in this study. The purpose of an exploratory case study is to provide an in-depth analysis into a phenomenon and to explore the processes that occur (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I selected an exploratory case study as the approach for this study because it allowed me to employ various data collecting techniques (see Creswell, 2014). The specific technique that I used to collect data was in-depth interviews. In this study I aimed to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs?

In this study, I defined a teacher who was successful in vocabulary instruction as a prekindergarten or kindergarten teacher for whom at least 85% of students in their classes showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. One factor of teacher success in most states is determined by student growth measures (Mantzicopoulos, French, & Patrick, 2018). IISIP was the universal screener that the Southern state in which this

study took place uses to determine students' growth. I utilized ISIP data to intentionally select participants who met the criterion of being a successful vocabulary instructor.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development. The sociocultural theory of cognitive development operationalized the topic of vocabulary development during early childhood because it addressed the context in which young children acquire language and practices that should be used in the classroom to support vocabulary development and growth (Lin, 2015). Two components of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development that specifically guided this study were the ZPD and the more knowledgeable other (MKO). Both components outline the role that teachers have in providing the appropriate levels of support and instruction towards promoting vocabulary growth (Lin, 2015; Shabani, 2016).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development framed this study and was used as the contextual lens to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. Components of the sociocultural theory of cognitive development provided a conceptual basis for this study. Specifically, components of this theory guided my understanding of how vocabulary development is nurtured and instructional strategies that should be implemented in the classrooms to promote optimal student growth. This theory guided the data analysis phase by assisting me with determining themes that emerged from the semi structured interviews. Chapter 2 of this

study provides a more detailed analysis of the relevance of the constructivist lens in the development of this study.

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative study, I used an exploratory case study approach to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. An exploratory case study design specifically allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (see Creswell, 2014). An exploratory case study approach not only allowed me the opportunity to explore the phenomenon, but also to explain the phenomenon while remaining open to new discoveries (Streb, 2010). The specific data collection method that I used in this study was in-depth interviews. The research question that guided this study was:

> RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs?

Participant selection in qualitative studies should be purposive so that the phenomenon being studied can be thoroughly understood by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a purposive sampling strategy to select three prekindergarten and five kindergarten teachers for a total eight early childhood teachers working in Title 1 schools from one school district. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately select participants who can assist with getting the data needed to answer the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The participants were interviewed to explore

the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. The conceptual framework for this study guided my understanding of how vocabulary development is nurtured and the instructional strategies that should be implemented into the classroom setting to promote optimal student growth. This framework also guided the data analysis phase by assisting me with determining themes that emerged from the semi structured interviews.

According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017), qualitative researchers should utilize a small sample size so that they can obtain rich, detailed data. I analyzed the data collected from the interviews using a combination of a priori, open coding, and axial coding. I triangulated the data by looking for similarities and differences from the in-depth interviews and member checking. Member checking was added to this study to increase the trustworthiness by having each participant review the draft results to confirm the accuracy of my interpretation of their own interview data. Further discussion of data analysis is provided in Chapter 3.

Definitions

The following section provides definitions of relevant terms that apply to this study:

Early childhood years: The years from birth to age 8, which are considered the critical years for healthy development and a successful education (NAEYC, 2014).

Explicit vocabulary instruction: The teacher specifically plans the words that the learner will acquire and teach word learning strategies that can be used independently by students in the future (Wang et al., 2014).

Implicit vocabulary instruction: Vocabulary that is acquired incidentally by the learners but was not intentionally planned for by the teacher (Bowne et al., 2017).

I-Station's Indicators of Progress (ISIP): A program used to assess reading and reading skills. This program was used by the state as a universal screener in grades preKindergarten to third grade and given to students three times per school year. The universal screener assessed student ability and determined student growth in the following areas: vocabulary, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and alphabet knowledge (Imagination Station, 2018).

Reading comprehension: The ability to understand what is read, considered one of the foundational reading skills (Chiang et al., 2017). Springer (2013) stated that vocabulary is an essential prerequisite to reading because students cannot understand what they read unless they have knowledge of what the words mean.

Scaffolding: The process of advancing a learner's vocabulary by providing various levels of support (St. John, Oztahtaci, & Tarullo, 2018). This process is synonymous with the ZPD used by Vygotsky to describe that learning occurs between what is known and unknown, and teachers must determine the known and use it to move learners towards the unknown (Vygotsky, 1978).

Socioeconomic status (SES): A measure based on a combination of income, sociological, and education status in relation to other individuals or families (Suskind et

al., 2016). The criteria used to identify educators working in low SES schools was based on whether the school met Title I eligibility. Title I eligibility was determined by the percentage of students that are eligible for free or reduced lunch (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Specifically, 40% of students must come from low-income homes for a school to meet eligibility criteria.

Student growth: The change in a student's performance on the same test over time (Bradfield et al., 2014).

Teacher effectiveness: Teacher effectiveness in most states is determined by student growth measures and observation assessments (Mantzicopoulos et al., 2018). This study used ISIP data to determine teacher effectiveness at vocabulary instruction. Teacher effectiveness at vocabulary instruction in this study was defined as a teacher for whom at least 85% of their students gained at least 1 year of vocabulary growth, and this pattern had been demonstrated in the teachers' classrooms for at least 3 consecutive years (Amrein-Beardsley & Collins, 2018; Mantzicopoulos et al., 2018).

Vocabulary: The knowledge of words and their meanings (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

Vocabulary acquisition: The learning and understanding of new words so that they can be used to communicate (Baker et al., 2015).

Vocabulary instruction: Vocabulary instruction involving the various strategies, methods, and materials that teachers use to teach new words and their meanings (Wang et al., 2014). The purpose of vocabulary instruction is to introduce new vocabulary words

to students so that they will later use them in their social and academic lives (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

Zone of proximal development (ZPD): The difference between what a learner is able to do independently and what they are capable of doing with the support, guidance, and encouragement of a more capable person (Wass & Golding, 2014; Zauche et al., 2016).

Assumptions

Assumptions are aspects of the study design that are not controllable by the researcher but must be true for the study to be valid (Wargo, 2015). For this study, I assumed that the displayed vocabulary growth by various student cohorts was a direct result of the teachers using the ZPD to provide vocabulary instruction. This assumption was necessary to ensure that the participants selected for the study provided information that aligned with the purpose of the study. To ensure that participant selection was accurate, the following criteria was used: participants must have been working as either a prekindergarten or kindergarten teacher, participants must have been working in a Title 1 school in the school district in which the research was conducted, and participants must have had at least 85% of students in their classes who showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year.

I also assumed that the data collected through interviews from teachers in a low SES school district would be factual and aligned to the vocabulary instructional practices that they used to enhance vocabulary acquisition. To develop a deep understanding of

the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary

scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs, it was important for

participants to feel free to communicate openly and honestly. The interview questions

were designed to ask open-ended questions that allowed participants to answer freely in a

way that may lead to additional data. To create an interview environment that promoted

open and honest answers, I informed participants that all data collected was confidential

and pseudonyms were used to protect their identity.

Scope and Delimitations

In the 2012-2013 school year, approximately 58% of kindergartners in a large

suburban school district located in the Southern United States did not meet expectations

in the area of vocabulary on the end of the year universal screener, ISIP (Texas Education

Agency, n.d). In the 2015-2016 school year, approximately 42% of all third-grade

students did not meet the minimum standard requirements on the state reading test (Texas

Education Agency, n.d). This school district serves a diverse population in which 76% of

students receive free or reduced lunch (ProPublica, 2016). However, some early

childhood teachers in this district have a higher proportion of students who make a year's

growth or more in vocabulary within 1 school year.

In this study, I explored the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES

schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their

ZPDs. This study may begin to address the gap in practice stated as the problem of this

study. I chose a qualitative, exploratory case study to shed light on the importance that

vocabulary has on a child's future academic career and the how early childhood teachers

in low SES schools teach students based on their ZPDs. This study was limited to only early childhood teachers in grades prekindergarten through kindergarten working in Title 1 elementary schools within this school district. Early childhood teachers working in schools that serve a population not considered as low SES status were not considered. The identification of successful early childhood teachers in vocabulary instruction was based on the following criteria: at least 85% of students in the cohort groups exhibited at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to ISIP for at least 3 consecutive years.

In this study, I viewed vocabulary instruction through a constructivist lens. I selected the constructivist lens because it describes how learners acquire and begin to use vocabulary, informs educators on the knowledge and skills about children's development of vocabulary and how to foster vocabulary development, and the role that adults or the MKO has in promoting vocabulary development (Lin, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). I did not select a quantitative methodology for this study because quantitative methodologies examine the relationship between variables and seek to confirm or deny a hypothesis (see Creswell, 2013). A qualitative methodology was best suited for this study because I was seeking to explore a problem and develop an understanding of the phenomenon (see Creswell, 2012). I designed the investigation to explore a specific population, in this case early childhood teachers' in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores, and an exploratory case study approach was appropriate for a study of this nature (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This study only included prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers for whom at least 85% of students in their classes showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015

school year. Populations that were excluded from this study included early childhood teachers in grades prekindergarten and kindergarten that were not in Title 1 schools, and prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers who had not consistently grown at least 85% of their students' vocabulary according to ISIP for 3 or more consecutive years.

One of the concerns in case studies is that the research findings are not always transferable to larger population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To enhance the transferability of this study, I included rich descriptions and direct quotes from the participants. This study only focused on teachers from a small size school district for whom at least 85% of students in their classes showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. Therefore, the findings of this study may be useful to educators in larger populations working with the students from similar SES groups. Providing sufficient descriptive data will allow educators in other districts to determine whether the findings from this study would be applicable to their schools (see Meriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

Limitations related to this qualitative, exploratory case study revolved around the type of study, participants, and the research methods used. According to Yin (2017), the researcher is the primary instrument in data collection and analysis and must have an in-depth understanding of the purpose and processes of case study research. I have a basic understanding of conducting research and no previous experience in conducting a case study. Therefore, my lack of experience and knowledge level regarding conducting a qualitative, exploratory case study must be considered as a limitation. My role as the

primary person responsible for collecting and analyzing data was another limitation due to the potential of bias. To address both limitations, I consulted with others more experienced in conducting case studies regarding participant selection and data analysis. I also asked a peer-reviewer to read through my data analysis to limit any biases, and to increase the validity of my study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

This study took place in various elementary schools within one school district located in the southeast part of Texas. I am familiar with this district and its elementary campuses because I have worked in this district for 16 years, 9 of the 15 years as an administrator. My familiarity with the elementary campuses and some of their teachers may have introduced bias when analyzing the research data. To avoid potential bias, I took ethical precautions that included keeping personal views regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood setting to myself and not discussing the research with anyone involved with the research or at school. I refrained from including participants who were at schools where I was a teacher or administrator. I used audit trails to ensure trustworthiness and transparency throughout the study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used reflective journals to monitor my own biases of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood setting. I also provided member checks as each participant looked at a summary of data from their individual interview, which reduced my personal biases and established creditability (see Connelly, 2016). Finally, I used a peer reviewer to check the data to increase the validity of the data and to reduce any biases that may have occurred during the collection process (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Significance

In this study, I addressed a gap in practice and in the literature about practice by extracting teacher data to provide recommendations for improving vocabulary scores of the low performing low SES schools. Bowne et al. (2017) stated that it is essential for early childhood teachers to understand and learn how to support vocabulary growth during everyday routines, as well as how to provide direct instruction in this area. Awareness of the phenomenon presented in this study could ultimately encourage all early childhood teachers to attend professional development courses that are directly related to vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom. Information gathered from this study will inform elementary school leaders, district personnel, and the early childhood community of the role that vocabulary plays in a child's academic success and how early childhood teachers in low SES schools teach vocabulary to their students based on their ZPDs.

Vocabulary is an important topic in the early childhood field because young children not developing or acquiring adequate language can be detrimental to their futures (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). The long-term effect for society is the "30-million-word gap," which posits that children from lower income families may have less vocabulary than those from professional and higher income families (Hill, 2017; Phillips et al., 2017). Research findings regarding the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs can lead to positive social change by providing all education stakeholders with insight regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction and recommendations for

improving vocabulary scores in low performing low SES schools. Utilizing this research

could ultimately result in young children leaving the early childhood years with a solid

language foundation (Lerner & Parlakian, 2014). This solid foundation might promote

positive social change by helping young children learn to read and, eventually, read to

learn.

Summary

Research in the early childhood field related to vocabulary development in

children from lower SES status homes specifically highlights the significant role that

vocabulary has on a young child's future academic skills and the gap that exists between

different SES classes (Gorski, 2018). The problem addressed in this chapter was the gap

in practice regarding some low SES schools in which students were performing well on

vocabulary assessments in early childhood classrooms while students in other low SES

schools were performing poorly (Fiester, 2010; & Zauche et al., 2016). The purpose of

this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low

SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on

their ZPDs. The research question was presented along with key terms that are related to

this study. I described the qualitative exploratory case study, the assumptions,

limitations, scope and delimitations, and significance of the study.

Chapter 2 of this study contains the literature review. The literature review

presents existing research related to vocabulary development in children from low SES

homes and strategies that early childhood teachers use to promote vocabulary growth.

Chapter 2 also includes the strategies for the literature search, conceptual framework, and

a review of the literature related to key variables and concepts of vocabulary instruction. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

  The problem prompting this study is a gap in practice regarding how in some low SES schools, students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in early childhood classrooms, whereas in other SES schools, students were performing poorly. Researchers suggested that early childhood teachers who provided instruction within students' ZPD typically saw significant growth (Bowne et al., 2017; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Hiebert et al., 2014; Hill, 2017; Hindman et al., 2016; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Solovieva & Garvis, 2018). Researchers specifically noted that young children who entered elementary school struggling in language and vocabulary development were at-risk for becoming struggling readers and dropping out of school (Chiang et al., 2017; Wright & Peltier, 2016). These risk factors are heightened for children who come from lower SES homes. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs.

  In Chapter 2, I review the major concepts aligned to vocabulary instruction in early childhood programs educating students from low SES homes. I begin this chapter by exploring the main components of the sociocultural theory of cognitive development, which explains how children acquire language and teachers' acquire their knowledge about how to teach vocabulary their role in fostering vocabulary. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development was the specific theory that guided this study. I review current research related to the differences between early childhood

students' vocabulary development based on SES, vocabulary acquisition and emergent

literacy, practices of vocabulary instruction, and research on best practices in early

childhood education.

Literature Search Strategy

For the literature review I used the Annie Casey Foundation database, Walden

University dissertation database, Google Scholar, ProMed, Academic Search Complete,

Directory of Open Access Journals, EBSCO Open Access Journals, Education Source,

ERIC, ProQuest Central, Science Direct Subject Collections, Taylor & Francis, Wiley

Online, academia.edu, ed.gov, havard.edu, and researchgate.net. Searches focused on

peer-reviewed articles, the majority of which were published within the last 5 years. I

searched several key terms associated with vocabulary development of disadvantaged

children and vocabulary teaching practices in the early childhood classroom. Key search

terms included: *vocabulary development, early childhood, disadvantaged children, early

literacy components, vocabulary instruction, research-based vocabulary strategies, low

socioeconomic status,* and *teaching practices in the early childhood setting.*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural

theory of cognitive development. The sociocultural theory of cognitive development

operationalized the topic of vocabulary development during early childhood because it

addressed the context in which young children acquired language and practices that

should be used in the classroom to support vocabulary development and growth (Lin,

2015). Components of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development

that specifically guided this study were the ZPD, social interactions, and the MKO. All components outlined the role that teachers have in consistently providing the appropriate levels of support and instruction towards promoting vocabulary growth (Lin, 2015; Shabani, 2016).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development emphasizes that children learn language at two levels, through social interactions and at differing cognitive levels. First, learning occurs in a social context with peers and with someone who is more knowledgeable than the learner, the MKO. This belief posits that vocabulary is learned when another person who has more understanding and knowledge, usually a teacher or parent, guides learning (Lin, 2015; Shabani, 2016). The MKO is then able to provide targeted guidance for the learner using the ZPD, which is the second level of learning. The ZPD is defined by Vygotsky as the distance between the learner's developmental level and independent level (Clarà, 2017; Shabani, 2010; Vygotsky, 1978). Both levels work together to provide learners with instruction that is meaningful and in the appropriate setting.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development also pinpoints the key role that social interactions have in vocabulary development. He posited that social interactions play a leading role in development and cognition (Lin, 2015). This is attributed to the belief that learning first takes place while interacting with others at the social level, and then independently (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this concept, educators should provide conscious and unconscious opportunities for students to use

language to interact with each other, the teacher, and their environment so that learning occurs at both levels.

According to key components of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development such as social interactions, MKO, and ZPD, vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom requires that the teacher, the MKO, have a depth of vocabulary and knowledge regarding vocabulary instruction so that they can promote growth for all students at various levels (Hindman et al., 2016; Wright & Peltier, 2016). The teacher can then use their knowledge to continually meet students at their vocabulary instructional level and guide students towards integrating new vocabulary. Therefore, vocabulary instruction is viewed through the presented lens. The conceptual framework assisted with the design of the research question and the interview questions. I constructed the research question to gather information regarding the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. I used a priori coding to code data based on the constructs of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development. I followed a priori coding with open coding using codes that emerged from the data. Both were followed by axial coding, which combined and linked a priori codes and open codes that developed themes.

Previous studies regarding vocabulary instruction in early childhood programs that serve disadvantaged students have applied various frameworks to their research (Buckingham, Beaman, & Wheldall, 2014; Wang et al., 2014). Major concepts of research that have been studied in this area included parent-child interactions and

vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom (Buckingham et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2014). For instance, Buckingham et al. (2014) conducted a study that explored low SES students and reading skills. Focuses of this study included the influence of the home language environment and parent-child interactions on early literacy skills such as vocabulary knowledge. Both were found to be significant factors in the educational gap that existed between different SES groups (Buckingham et al., 2014). The simple view of reading theory was used as the theoretical lens for that study. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the importance of culture and how social interactions with MKO can advance vocabulary development (Shabani, 2016).

Wang et al. (2014) developed a "comprehensive model for vocabulary instruction" (p.1076) based on their findings regarding vocabulary practices. This study identified the major components of vocabulary instruction the early childhood classroom should possess. The major components found were guided by the beliefs that social interactions are critical elements of vocabulary instruction, thematic units support vocabulary acquisition, and vocabulary learning should be multifaceted (Wang et al., 2014). The current study benefited from the sociocultural theory because I sought to explore and explain the teaching practices of early childhood teachers in low SES schools that assess vocabulary growth with their students to help me explain the identified gap in practice. The sociocultural theory informed me on instructional techniques that best support vocabulary growth during early childhood.

There are several studies in the early childhood field that described strategies that assist with promoting oral language and vocabulary in a low SES setting (Chen & Kim,

2014; Gorski, 2018; Hindman et al., 2016; & Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; van Steensel et al., 2016). However, children from lower SES homes continue to enter grade school lagging behind their peers from higher SES homes in vocabulary (Hindman et al., 2016). Gorski (2013) agreed that low income students entering grade school often lag behind their peers academically and attributed it to a lack of equitable resources afforded to their mothers, poorly funded schools, and teachers who are not equipped with the skills to adequately teach literacy to children in poverty (Lawson, 2015). Previous studies in this area have revealed that the quality of vocabulary instruction for children from low-income homes is poor (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011). Wright (2011) conducted a study to evaluate the quality and quantity of vocabulary instruction in early childhood classrooms that occurred in various SES schools and found that educators from lower income schools provided limited vocabulary instruction that occurred infrequently and consisted of common or basic words (Snell et al., 2015). Nelson et al. (2015) observed 76 early childhood teachers in a 3-year span and noted similar findings. They found that while most teachers had knowledge about the importance of vocabulary instruction, they spent a minimal amount of time teaching vocabulary. Most of the observed teachers mainly focused on phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency with little time devoted to vocabulary and language building activities during their literacy block.

The cited studies revealed that most early childhood teachers observed included some vocabulary instruction into their literacy blocks, which indicated that early childhood educators have some knowledge regarding the importance of vocabulary

instruction for children from low-income homes (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011). However, the quality of vocabulary instruction, as well as how vocabulary research informed practice in the classroom when working with this population still needed to be addressed (Beck et al., 2013; Hindman et al., 2016; Lawson, 2015; Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011). This study was needed so that educators could address the gap in practice regarding how some low SES students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in early childhood classrooms, whereas other such students were performing poorly.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Recent research highlighted the importance of including vocabulary instruction during the early childhood grades (Bowne et al., 2017; Dashiell & DeBruin-Parecki, 2014; Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Vocabulary is an important factor during early childhood because it is a critical component of learning how to read and sets the foundation for other content areas to build upon (Graves, 2016). Children who do not have a strong vocabulary foundation during their early childhood years, will most likely have difficulty with reading comprehension skills and acquiring content vocabulary in the future (Hindman et al., 2016). On the other hand, young children who were exposed to a vocabulary rich environment, were more likely to enter the early childhood grades on or above level and maintained that status until they graduated from high school (Loftus-Rattan et al., 2016).

It is estimated that young children learn approximately 3,000 words per year, and about eight to nine new words per day (Nelson et al., 2015). However, many young children, especially those from disadvantaged homes, do not acquire the same amount of words (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). Thus, causing the existing word gap. Researchers have also noted that this word gap significantly increased throughout a child's educational career (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Stanley, Petscher, and Catts (2018) noted in their longitudinal study that a child's vocabulary knowledge during early childhood can determine their reading comprehension skills at the third and tenth grade years. Experts stated that in order to break the negative influence that a lack of vocabulary acquisition may have on children's future and to narrow the literacy achievement gap, early childhood educators should focus on understanding vocabulary acquisition and how to implement vocabulary instruction into their literacy block (Barnes, Grifenhagen, & Dickinson, 2016; Bowne et al., 2016; Hadley, Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Nesbitt, 2016).

The definition of vocabulary is the knowledge of words and their meaning (Neuman & Wright, 2014). It is composed of two main areas, receptive and expressive. Receptive vocabulary encompasses listening and reading. Listening and reading are important because this is how we gain information about the world. Expressive vocabulary is comprised of speaking and writing, which is how we communicate and express our needs as well as our knowledge about the world that we live in. All areas are critical during early childhood because young children are beginning to learn about the

world that we live in and learning how to express themselves to others, either academically or socially. Both areas are needed for young children to grow and be successful in school and in life (Peterson, McIntyre, & Forsyth, 2016). Therefore, educators of young children should be aware of the importance that it plays towards student success as well as how to implement vocabulary instructional strategies in their classrooms.

Practices of Vocabulary Instruction

Many researchers in the early childhood field agreed that the vocabulary skills acquired early in life can have a major influence on a young child's future academic career (Duguay et al., 2016; Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Phillips et al., 2017). This is attributed to the idea that young children must not only be able to decode the words that they are beginning to read, but they must also be able to understand the meaning of the words so that they can comprehend read text (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Neuman and Wright (2014) stated that when children understand what word's mean, they begin to make connections with understanding what words represent and eventually the various connections that words have. For most students to become successful at understanding the connections of words in the later elementary grades, they must be exposed to and taught different vocabulary words and their meanings during their early childhood years (Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

Since the idea of learning new vocabulary involves more than just being exposed to new words, vocabulary instruction should be more than just a teachable moment that happens every so often (Neuman & Wright, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Wright & Cervetti,

2017). Best practices, regarding vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom,

suggested that vocabulary teaching practices should include:

- Neuman and Wright (2014) suggested that vocabulary instruction must be explicitly taught.

- Word selection should be specifically selected by the teacher using methods such as scaffolding previous knowledge and include words that are within an appropriate difficulty range for the students being served (Nelson et al., 2015; Neuman & Wright, 2014).

- Teach word learning strategies and assess student's ability to use the learned strategies (Nelson et al., 2015; Snell et al., 2015; Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

- Provide opportunities for repeated exposure and incorporate socially meaningful activities (Snell et al., 2015; Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

The next sections expanded further on best practices of vocabulary instruction in the

early childhood classroom.

Explicit Vocabulary Instruction

Recent research regarding vocabulary instruction during early childhood has

noted that vocabulary instruction is more effective when it is explicitly taught (Bowne et

al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2015). This is attributed to the idea that not all children,

including those entering the school setting with a vocabulary deficit, learn from just being

exposed to new words (Bowne et al., 2017; Goldstein et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2015).

For example, in a national early childhood evaluation report (Goodson, Wolf, Bell,

Turner, & Finney, 2010) found that young children who received explicit vocabulary

instruction gained more vocabulary knowledge and performed significantly better than their peers who did not receive explicit vocabulary instruction (Jayanthi et al., 2018). Bowne et al. (2017) highlighted similar findings in their study regarding the relationship between teacher language, vocabulary instruction practices, and students' vocabulary growth. They found that the relationship between explicit vocabulary instruction and students' vocabulary growth was positive and significant in the quantity of conceptual and declarative information provided to students. Other areas of explicit instruction that have shown to be effective in the early childhood setting include: interactive read aloud, shared reading activities, integrating personal experiences into classroom activities involving language and vocabulary, providing child-friendly explanations, and integrating learned words into class discussions and activities (Bowne et al., 2017; Jayanthi et al., 2018; Myers & Ankrum, 2016; Nelson et al., 2015).

In contrast, to research supporting the effectiveness of explicit instruction, Bowne et al. (2017) shared that the most effective vocabulary instruction occurs when explicit and implicit measures are both utilized during vocabulary instruction. This notion is supported by a meta-analysis conducted by Marulis and Neuman (2010) that examined explicit vocabulary instruction practices in programs serving students from low SES homes, in which they found that vocabulary instructional practices that included both explicit and implicit approaches had students who made greater gains than from just one (Heafner, Triplett, Handler, & Massey, 2018). Coyne et al. (2018) also concluded that explicit instruction solely does not yield enough growth measures to begin to close the existing vocabulary gap. However, explicit instruction partnered with extended

interventions will produced a significant amount of vocabulary growth (Coyne et al., 2018).

Word Selection Strategies

Researchers have highlighted the importance of young children learning a specific amount of new vocabulary words per day and year to maintain and possibly close the existing vocabulary gap (Nelson et al., 2015; Wright & Cervetti, 2017). However, Hindman et al. (2016) suggested that there is little known about the amount of vocabulary words that should be acquired in any time frame. The reason being that research that yielded a specific amount of learned vocabulary most likely occurred in a laboratory instead of a classroom setting (Hindman et al., 2016). Meaning that studies that yielded a specific amount of learned words in a specific timeframe are unauthentic. While the amount of vocabulary words that needs to be acquired is debatable, there are similarities regarding how children learn new vocabulary words. These similarities are noted in various frameworks that researchers have highlighted to assist early childhood educators in selecting appropriate vocabulary words to teach (Beck et al., 2013; Hindman et al., 2016; Sprenger, 2017).

Sprenger (2017) suggested that every word a young child learns be classified into three tiers: basic frequency words, high frequency academic words, and low frequency sophisticated words. Basic frequency words are described as the words that we use in everyday speech, such as table, television, and jump. These words are basic because they are easy for young children to store in their long-term memory (Sprenger, 2017). High frequency academic words often have multiple meanings and are non-content specific

because they are used academically across all disciplines (Beck et al., 2013 & Sprenger, 2017). Examples of these words include analyze, examine, and manipulate; words that are not usually present in casual conversations. In contrast to high frequency academic words, low frequency words are content specific academic words. Educators should use the tiered framework along with ZPD to inform their vocabulary instruction (Beck et al., 2013; Sprenger, 2017).

In contrast to the tiered system of selecting vocabulary words to teach, Logan and Kieffer (2017) suggested that educators should focus on teaching academic vocabulary in the classroom. The academic vocabulary that they suggested can be broken into two categories, general and discipline-specific academic vocabulary words (Logan & Kieffer, 2017). General academic vocabulary are words that are used across disciplines. Discipline-specific academic vocabulary is similar to the low frequency and sophisticated vocabulary that is noted by Sprenger (2017), in that they both are specific to academic content areas.

Biemiller (2015) agreed with the concept of the three-tiered system of words proposed by Beck et al. (2013) and Sprenger (2017). However, Biemiller disagreed with which words and their meanings should be considered to teach in the various tiers. Biemiller (2015) suggested that tier one words should include word meanings that are known by most children by the end of second grade. These words are not worth teaching in the primary grades because they will most likely be acquired as young children begin to learn root word meanings (Biemiller, 2015). Tier two words should include the word meanings that are known by few children by the end of second grade. These words are

not worth teaching because they are considered not to be useful for young children since they will probably not encounter them in reading or other academic areas (Biemiller, 2015). Biemiller (2015) discovered that the words and meanings that should take priority during instruction are the tier three words. These words and their meanings are known by some children by the end of second grade, usually by students with a vast vocabulary. It is important to start with tier three words because it helps the teacher to focus teaching more complex words that should be taught with little depth. This strategy is proven to increase word meaning acquisition from five-word meanings per week to 20-word meanings per week (Biemiller, 2015).

The strategies highlighted by researchers regarding word selection all stressed the importance of knowing individual students and the whole class' vocabulary ZPD. Selecting words that are not within either ZPD will most likely result in students not acquiring new vocabulary and their meanings. This will ultimately widen the existing vocabulary gap (Beck et al., 2013; Biemiller, 2015; Logan & Kieffer, 2017; Sprenger, 2017). All researchers stressed the importance of early childhood educators knowing the vocabulary levels of all students as well as the class as a whole in order to begin to close the existing vocabulary gap (Beck et al., 2013; Biemiller, 2015; Logan & Kieffer, 2017; Sprenger, 2017).

Assessing Vocabulary Acquisition

Assessing young children's vocabulary is an important factor in providing quality vocabulary instruction (Watts-Taffe, Fisher, & Blachowicz, 2017). This is because early childhood educators must be aware of each students' vocabulary knowledge to provide

adequate and appropriate instruction. According to Riley-Ayers (2014), the primary

purpose of early childhood education is to support and promote growth; academically and

developmentally. For early childhood educators to provide quality vocabulary

instruction, they must be aware of each student's vocabulary abilities throughout the

school year (Nelson et al., 2015; Snell et al., 2015; Wright & Cervetti, 2017).

Vocabulary assessment is an ongoing process. Assessment is described as the

process of gathering, synthesizing, and interpreting data regarding student progress and

performance (Burns, Silberglitt, Christ, Gibbons, & Coolong-Chaffin, 2016; Watts-Taffe,

Fisher, & Blachowicz, 2017). This information should be used to guide instructional

decisions that meet the learning needs of all students and guides them towards success

(Riley-Ayers, 2014; Watts-Taffe et al., 2017). Methods of vocabulary assessment can be

either informal or formal. The most common method of informal assessments used in the

early childhood field are observations (McLachlan, Fleer, & Edwards, 2018). Educators

should observe children interacting in different context and note their use of vocabulary

throughout the learning environment (LeeKeenan, & Ponte, 2018). These notes can then

be used to plan for instruction and to determine if students are grasping the vocabulary

that has been taught.

Formal vocabulary assessments may also be used to gather information about

student's vocabulary knowledge. According to (Riley-Ayers, 2014; Wortham & Hardin,

2015), there are three types of formal assessments that are commonly used to identify

student's vocabulary levels throughout the school year; screening, diagnostic, and

progress monitoring. Screening assessments are usually completed at the beginning of a

school year and provide the teacher with information regarding each students' beginning

vocabulary level and their ZPD (McLachlan et al., 2018). Diagnostic assessments allow

the teacher to learn about specific areas of strengths and weaknesses that students exhibit

and provides the teacher with a complete picture of each child. Progress monitoring

assessment types should be used to inform teachers of students' progress over time.

Teachers' Acquisition of Their Knowledge About How to Teach Vocabulary

There is an abundance of knowledge in the early childhood field regarding

language and vocabulary development (Schachter et al., 2016). This knowledge has been

used to inform educators of the learning environment and teaching strategies that best

assess vocabulary development and acquisition in young children. However, researchers

have suggested that early childhood educators do not commonly utilize their knowledge

regarding language and vocabulary development to provide adequate vocabulary

instruction (Hindman et al., 2016; Logan & Kieffer, 2017; Nelson et al., 2015; Phillips et

al., 2017). Other studies related to this topic have shared that early childhood educators,

regardless of their teaching background, displayed inadequate knowledge in reading areas

such as vocabulary development (Cash, Cabell, Hamre, DeCoster, & Pianta, 2015;

Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). Cash et al. (2015) conducted a study that examined the

relationship between early childhood educator's knowledge of vocabulary development

and student learning. They noted that early childhood educators' knowledge of various

literacy concepts including vocabulary was generally low. However, teachers who were

knowledgeable of vocabulary development and instructional strategies had students who

exhibited growth in their expressive vocabulary. Cash et al. (2015), attributed teachers'

knowledge of vocabulary development and acquisition to in-service professional development courses.

Markussen-Brown et al. (2017) and Schacter et al. (2016), also noted the important role that professional development plays in teachers' acquisition of knowledge related to vocabulary development. Professional development (PD) is commonly used to increase educators' knowledge and skills in providing a quality education for all children (Markussen-Brown et al., 2017). PD has specifically been identified as one of the key elements of bridging the gap between vocabulary development research and teacher classroom practices (Cash et al., 2015; Markussen-Brown et al., 2017; Schacter et al., 2016). Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), identified important features that all PD should possess to be considered effective and for teachers to grasp the presented concepts. They include content focused topics, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, utilizes models of effective practices, offers feedback and reflection, and is of sustained duration. Kennedy (2016) noted different components that are necessary for effective PD. The one similar component that was highlighted by both was that effective PD provides coaching and expert support after the face-to-face course is completed. This idea was expanded by Markussen-Brown et al. (2017) as they explained that coaching after the course should be a gradual release concept. After the teacher has learned new information, they should be supported by an expert until the skill is fully and effectively implemented in the classroom.

Summary

In summary, this chapter included a review of research related to the importance of vocabulary and the vocabulary gap, practices of vocabulary instruction, and teachers' acquisition of their knowledge about how to teach vocabulary in the early childhood setting. Researchers have previously highlighted the importance of vocabulary instruction while in the early childhood grades and how the importance is heightened when working with students from low SES homes. Experts in the early childhood field have identified best practices regarding vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom that should be used to promote vocabulary development. Unfortunately, not all early childhood educators implemented research-based strategies into their classroom instruction. This study filled one of the gaps in practice regarding some low SES schools, students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in early childhood classrooms, whereas, other students were performing poorly. This information will be extended to other early childhood educators and leaders so that they can implement recommendations for improving the vocabulary scores of low performing low SES schools and encourage more teachers to implement the vocabulary acquisition strategies.

Chapter 3 of this study explains the research design and methodology. A qualitative exploratory case study was conducted to seek the answers to the research question. Chapter 3 includes the introduction, the research design, the role of the researcher, the methodology, and the data analysis plan. Issues of trustworthiness related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as well as the ethical

procedures were addressed. Chapter 3 concludes by the researcher presenting a summary and conclusion.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to investigate the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. To accomplish the purpose, I outlined the importance of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom with the literature. In this chapter, I present the research design, research rationale, and the role of the researcher. I also include specifics regarding the methodology section. Finally, I conclude by addressing issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures related to this study.

Research Design and Rationale

In this section, I restate the research question as described in Chapter 1, define the central concept of the study, identify the research tradition, and provide the rationale for the selected methodology. The problem, purpose, and research question presented in this study were grounded by components of the sociocultural theory of cognitive learning. The research question that guided this study was:

> RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs?

The research question supported a qualitative approach because it was an open-ended question designed to explore the phenomenon being studied (see Creswell, 2014). I considered but rejected a quantitative design for this study. Quantitative research designs examine the relationship between variables and seek to confirm or deny a hypothesis

using numerical data (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2018; Creswell, 2013). A

quantitative research design was not appropriate for this study because numerical data

were not determined as needed to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in

low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on

their ZPDs. Furthermore, I was not seeking to confirm or deny a predetermined

hypothesis. A qualitative methodology was best suited for this study because I was

seeking to explore a problem and develop an understanding of the phenomenon (see

Creswell, 2012).

The qualitative research design for this study was an exploratory case study. Yin

(2017) noted that case study research is an approach where the researcher investigates a

real-life situation in which there are many more variables of interest than data points.

Therefore, I selected an exploratory case study design, which specifically allowed me to

gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (see Creswell, 2014). An exploratory

case study approach was not only useful to explore a phenomenon in-depth, but also to

explain the phenomenon while remaining open to new discoveries (see Streb, 2010).

This design allowed me to collect rich, in-depth data from multiple sources.

Other qualitative research designs that I considered for this study included

grounded theory and ethnography. However, differing aspects of these designs did not

align with the purpose of this study. Grounded theory allows the researcher to switch

between data collection and analysis so that theories may be constructed (Charmaz,

2017). The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood

teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they

teach students based on their ZPDs. Therefore, a grounded theory approach was not applicable.

Ethnography is described as a qualitative approach that focuses on studying an entire cultural group in their natural setting with the purpose of identifying and describing patterns (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this study was not to identify or describe the patterns of vocabulary instruction over time, but to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. Furthermore, participant selection was based on prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers for whom at least 85% of students in their classes showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. The selected participants might not be in the same cultural group. Therefore, ethnography was not an appropriate choice.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this qualitative exploratory case study was as observer. As an observer, I served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This role involved planning the research design and method, selecting participants, and conducting interviews. As the sole researcher in this study, I also created an interview protocol for the in-depth interviews. When publicizing the data gathered from the in-depth interviews, I communicated the themes that emerged from the descriptions of the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs.

As an administrator in this small school district in Southeast Texas, I am familiar

with many of the elementary campuses and some of their early childhood teachers.

However, I did not select any participants for this study whom I currently or previously

have supervised. I did understand that my current supervisory position in the school

district may present bias because my role as an administrator is to evaluate teacher

performance. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), qualitative researchers must

manage researcher bias so that the portrayed perspectives of participants are not

influenced. I mitigated the above-mentioned bias by excluding early childhood teachers

who had worked in a school where I was either a teacher or an administrator. I also

managed my bias by using open-ended interview questions during the in-depth interviews

so that participants could give their uncensored responses regarding their vocabulary

instructional practices. I used audit trails to ensure trustworthiness and transparency

throughout the study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used reflective journals to monitor

my own biases of vocabulary growth in the early childhood setting. I also provided

member checks as each participant reviewed the draft results to confirm the accuracy of

my interpretation of their own interview data, which also reduced my personal biases and

established creditability (Connelly, 2016). Finally, I also utilized a peer reviewer to

check the data for logical development of codes, themes, and findings in order to increase

the validity of the data and reduce any biases that may have occurred during the

collection process (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To further minimize bias, I remained

neutral and refrained from analyzing the data based on my prior knowledge of the

elementary schools' state accountability rating or the schools' early childhood program vocabulary growth status.

Methodology

According to Maxwell (2013), qualitative studies have the following main components: the research relationship established with the selected participants; selection of the setting, participants, and other sources of information; data collection; and data analysis. In this study, I explored the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs by conducting interviews with eight participants. I collected data from prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. The remainder of this section is organized in alignment with the components mentioned above.

Participant Selection

After I was granted permission from Walden Internal Review Board (IRB; approval number 11-18-19-0621992), I contacted the district's director of professional growth and the deputy superintendent of the school district to explain the purpose of this study. After receiving their approval, I contacted the Department of Early Childhood Education in the district to obtain prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers' vocabulary ISIP data beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. Once this data was received, I began highlighting the prekindergarten and kindergarten teachers for whom at least 85% of students in their classes showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP data for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. This data was

not used for teacher evaluative purposes. Teachers who were identified in the 2014-2015

school year as meeting these criteria must also have met the same criteria for the next two

consecutive school years. Teachers who did not meet these criteria in the subsequent

years were not considered for participation in this study. I selected eight participants to

take part in this study. According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017), qualitative

researchers should utilize a small sample size so that they can obtain rich, detailed data.

Participants of this study were early childhood teachers in grades prekindergarten

and kindergarten working in Title 1 elementary schools in a Southeast Texas school

district. I used a purposive sampling strategy to select three prekindergarten and five

kindergarten teachers. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately select

participants who could assist with getting the data needed to answer the research question

(Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Creswell (2014) expanded on the use of purposive sampling by

adding that this sampling strategy allows the researcher to gain in-depth insight into the

phenomenon being studied.

The specific purposive sampling strategy employed was a homogeneous sampling

strategy. In a homogeneous sampling strategy, the researcher can select participants that

are like the study characteristics (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I used this sampling type for

this study because I sought to explore vocabulary instruction of early childhood teachers

in low SES schools with ISIP used to assess vocabulary growth. Furthermore, the

research question was specific to the characteristics of this group.

Participant selection was based on the following criteria: participants must work

as either a prekindergarten or kindergarten teacher, participants must work in a Title 1

school in the school district that the research is being conducted, and participants must have had at least 85% of students in their classes who showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. Participants who met the following criteria were e-mailed a letter of interest informing them of the study purpose and participant criteria. I asked potential participants to respond to the e-mail if they were interested in participating. I then used purposive sampling to select eight participants, three prekindergarten teachers and five kindergarten teachers, for a total eight early childhood teachers in Title 1 schools from one school district to participate in this study.

According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017), qualitative researchers should utilize a small sample size so that they can obtain rich, detailed data. Blaikie and Priest (2019) added that sample size in qualitative research should not only be small, but also large enough to acquire a representation of varied perspectives. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) noted that sample sizes ranging between six to 12 participants are enough to reach saturation. In this study, eight early childhood teachers in Title 1 schools from one school district participated. Saturation occurred when I noticed the same responses during the interviews. For me to notice that saturation occurred, I analyzed the data during the data collection process (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If saturation did not occur, I planned to recruit more teachers.

Participant recruitment occurred via an email invitation. In the invitation, I introduced myself, the purpose of the study, and asked for informed consent to participate. Selected participants were emailed a consent form to take part in the study.

If teachers agreed to participate, they were asked to reply to my email with the words "I Consent." Individual participants were given 24 to 48 hours to review the study requirements before consenting to participate. This time allowed potential participants an opportunity to ask any questions they may have. I then contacted each of the participants by email and phone to thank them for participating and to schedule a ten-minute meeting. The purpose of this brief meeting was to explain their rights as a participant and to review the interview questions. Sharing the interview questions prior to the interview added clarity for the participant to ensure they knew the interview questions (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2018).

Instrumentation

For this study I developed one data collecting research instrument, an interview guide (Appendix). The interview guide was used to gather information about the studied phenomenon from: three pre-kindergarten teachers and five kindergarten teachers, for a total eight early childhood teachers working in Title 1 schools from one school district. According to Yeong, Ismail, Ismail, and Hamzah (2018), an interview guide increases the effectiveness of the interview process by ensuring that information obtained in the appropriate time frame. The interview guide also assisted me with developing interview questions that are aligned with the research question, the conceptual framework, and in conducting systematic interviews (Yeong et al., 2018).

For this research, the interview guide consisted of two parts: questions pertaining to the participants demographics and in-depth interview questions. A semi-structured format was selected, so that I could ask open-ended questions regarding the perspectives

of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores perspectives

regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. According to Creswell (2012),

open-ended interview questions allow the participants of the study to provide answers

that are based on their experiences and unconstrained by perspectives. The interview

questions were designed based on the following: interviews should be rich, specific,

relevant, and open-ended so that the interviewee can freely express themselves (King,

Horrocks, & Brooks, 2018).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development guided the

design of the interview questions by informing the researcher of key components of

vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom. Specific components of this

theory that were utilized to create the interview questions were: MKO, social interactions,

and the ZPD. Prior to conducting the interviews, the interview questions were reviewed

by a peer-reviewer with an advanced degree to ensure that the content of the interview

questions are valid and aligned with the research question guiding this study.

The data from this study was triangulated during the data collection process. Data

triangulation is used by researchers to enhance the validity of the study (Ravitch & Carl,

2016). In this study, data triangulation was achieved by looking for similarities and

differences from the in-depth interviews and using the member checking strategy. After

the data were analyzed member checking was conducted. A summary of the data from

their individual interview was shared with the interviewees so they can review a

summary of the draft findings to check my interpretations of their individual interview

data to confirm the accuracy and viability of the draft findings. I also asked a peer-

reviewer to read through my data analysis to check for the logical development of codes and themes, and to increase the validity of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Prior to beginning the recruitment process, I contacted the district's Director of Professional Growth and Deputy Superintendent of the school district to explain the purpose of this study. After receiving their approval, I contacted the department of Early Childhood Education in the district to obtain pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers vocabulary ISIP data beginning with the 2014-2015 school year. Once this data was received, I began highlighting the teachers who have had at least 85% of students in their classes who have showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. Teachers who were identified in the 2014-2015 school year as meeting these criteria must also meet the same criteria for the next two consecutive school years. Teachers who do not meet these criteria in the subsequent years were not considered to participate in this study. If ample recruits were not obtained from the original recruitment plan, I planned to expand the participant pool to include first grade teachers who meet the participant selection criteria. According to the NAEYC (2019), the early childhood grades includes pre-kindergarten through third grade.

Participant recruitment occurred via an email invitation. In the invitation, I introduced myself, the purpose of the study, and asked for informed consent to participate. Selected participants were emailed a consent form to take part in the study. If teachers agreed to participate, they replied to my email with the words "I Consent."

Individual participants were given 24 to 48 hours to review the study requirements before consenting to participate. This time allowed potential participants an opportunity to ask any questions they may have had. I then contacted each of the participants by email and phone to thank them for participating and to schedule a ten-minute meeting. The purpose of this brief meeting was to explain their rights as a participant and to review the interview questions. Sharing the interview questions prior to the interview added clarity for the participant to ensure they know the interview questions (King, Horrocks, & Brooks, 2018). Once participants were selected, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant to promote confidentially.

One interview was held face-to-face in a private classroom at the school districts central administration office and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded using Voice Memo to ensure that all the details shared were documented. Each participant was notified at the beginning of the interview of the recording and permission was obtained. During the interview, I took notes to highlight responses that may need clarification or elaboration by the participants as well as the participants' body language during the interview. Participants exited the interview by receiving a debrief in which I reviewed the purpose of the study and elicited any questions pertaining to the study.

After completing each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings from Voice Memo using the Hyper Transcribe software. Each recording and transcription were saved on my personal computer that is password protected. Once I completed the interviews and transcribed the audio recordings; I uploaded all transcriptions from Hyper

Transcribe to the ATLAS.ti software. Transcriptions and coding were stored on my

personal computer that is password protected for confidentiality and stored in my home.

Follow-up procedures, such as additional interviews will not be provided.

Data Analysis Plan

As the sole researcher for this qualitative case study, I was responsible for

analyzing data collected from the interviews. I used manual coding, as well as ATLAS.ti

to assist with managing and analyzing the collected data. The ATLAS.ti software

allowed me to easily organize and summarize the data collected from interviews. This

software also assisted with being able to systematically code each transcription.

Interview transcripts and notes from this study were analyzed using a combination of *a*

priori, open coding, and axial coding. Patterns, categories, and themes from the data was

identified and organized. The use of discrepant cases was outlined and explained.

I began analyzing the data using *a priori* coding to develop broad themes and

categories. Through the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive

development a predetermined set of *a priori* codes that aligned with the research question

were used to begin analyzing the collected data. Interview transcripts were initially

coded individually using this set of predetermined codes. These *a priori* codes include

social interactions, MKO, and ZPD. These codes were selected because they align with

the conceptual framework guiding this study which posits how young children acquire

vocabulary. After coding each interview transcript and identifying broad themes based

on the predetermined codes, I went through each interview transcript again.

During the next cycle of coding, I added to, and broke down the *a priori* codes using open coding. Open coding allowed me to label the information collected for topics and features that stand out in the data. Finally, axial coding was used to develop themes and focus on the study's research question. During this cycle of coding the data, I reviewed each interview transcript several times, each time creating new codes that focus on the study's research question. After coding each interview transcript individually, I analyzed the entire set of interview transcripts and their codes, themes, and categories inclusively. This was completed by reviewing the entire data set, combining similar codes, and then labeling each group with a descriptive code. *A priori* codes that were not utilized were deleted.

Once all codes were found, member checking was used to establish credibility of my interpretation of the data. Member checking was conducted by having each participant review a draft of the findings to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interview. Participants were emailed a copy of the draft findings. Feedback was asked to be returned via email. All transcripts, coding, response from the peer-reviewer, and participant responses to the member checking was saved on my personal computer which is password protected and stored in my home.

The synthesizing process occurred after the member checking process was completed. The synthesizing process included reviewing the extracted codes, categories, and themes identified; and summarizing the found information. The extracted codes, categories, and themes assisted with forming the key findings and results for this study, were analyzed according to the research question, and summarized according to

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development which describes how young children acquire vocabulary. This information provided insight into the vocabulary instruction of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores.

In addition, I considered all discrepant cases. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), discrepant cases are common in qualitative research. By reviewing the data collected from the semi structured interviews, I was able to check for contradictions and discrepancies. All discrepant cases, such as unexpected themes, were included in the results and identified as outliers

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a paramount component in qualitative research that should be approached with careful attention during every aspect of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Trustworthiness can be established in a qualitative study by achieving complexity in a systematic manner and assessing the rigor of the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The trustworthiness of a study can be assessed by establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These constructs in relation to this study were discussed in the following sections.

Credibility

Credibility is the condition in which the research findings are aligned with the real world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Credibility can be established by implementing various strategies such as: triangulation, member checks, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review. Credibility in this study was established using triangulation and member checks.

Data triangulation occurred by looking for similarities and differences from the in-depth

interviews. Member checking was completed by having each participant review a draft

of the findings to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their

individual interview.

Transferability

Transferability is the way that the findings of a study can be applicable or

transferred to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Qualitative researchers can establish transferability by including thick descriptions of the

found data so that readers can make comparisons to other contexts (Ravitch & Carl,

2016), and by having a variation in participant selection. To strengthen the transferability

of this study, I provided a thick description of the school district, the participants, and

their individual school settings once participant selection is completed. Participants

included pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers working in Title 1 settings from

different elementary schools.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and stability of the

data collection and analysis portions of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Merriam and

Tisdell (2016) suggested using the following strategies to strengthen the dependability of

a qualitative study: triangulation, member checking, audit trails, researcher reflexivity,

and peer review. The dependability of this study was strengthened by using the

following strategies: triangulation, audit trails, member checks, and researcher

reflexivity. Audit trails were accomplished by maintaining the original documents of all

interview transcripts, notes, and audio recordings. Member checking was conducted once the data were analyzed by having each participant review a draft of the findings to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interview. In addition to audit trails and member checking, I achieved reflexivity by maintaining a reflective journal to record my personal beliefs regarding vocabulary instruction.

A peer-reviewer was also used to assist with the credibility of this study. The peer-reviewer used in this study was another person with an advanced graduate degree in education and has worked in the early childhood field for 18 years. The peer-reviewers' years in education consisted of being an early childhood teacher in grades pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, and as a district leader in the elementary education department. The peer-reviewer was emailed a draft of the findings after all participants completed the member checking process. The peer-reviewer did not have access to participants names. Questions that arose from the peer-reviewer pertained to the clarity of one of the themes that emerged. I then explained the data that supported the theme and why I labeled it in that manner. They then reviewed the study and findings again and concluded that there were no biases found and that the study was clear and concise.

Confirmability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) described confirmability as the extent to which the findings can be confirmed and corroborated. They continue by stating that for a research to have confirmability in their study, the researcher must acknowledge and explore how personal biases can play into data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl). Miles et al. (2018) suggested several strategies to achieve confirmability, which include:

implementing triangulation strategies, reflexivity, external audits. All of which will assist with the confirmability of this study.

Ethical Procedures

Specific steps must be taken prior to beginning a study using human subjects. Steps to ensure that all research follows Walden University's ethical standards and United States federal regulations are outlined by Walden's Center for Research Quality. The first step in ensuring that ethical procedures comply, is to gain IRB approval prior to the collection of any data. Once I obtained approval from Walden's IRB, I began recruiting participants. An invitation letter was then sent to potential participants via email using purposive sampling. In the invitation letter I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the study. The first eight participants, three pre-kindergarten and five kindergarten teachers, who responded to my email were selected to participate. According to Onwuegbuzie and Weinbaum (2017), qualitative researchers should utilize a small sample size so that they can obtain rich, detailed data.

After selecting participants, I addressed ethical concerns related to informed consent by asking all participants to review and sign a consent form. All participants were made aware of the procedures, voluntary nature, risk and benefits, and privacy of the study. The consent form also outlined procedures to ensure trustworthiness. All participants were informed of their right to opt out at any point during the study.

To ensure that all the face-to-face interviews were coded correctly, I used Voice Memos to audio record all interviews. Recordings were then downloaded from Voice Memos, transcribed using Hyper Transcribe software, and stored on my password

protected personal computer at home. ATLAS.ti was the program used to assist with

manual coding. Pseudonyms were used to protect each participants confidentiality,

which included their names and the school they work at. No personal information was

presented in the final dissertation document. Stored data will only be accessible to me

and my doctoral committee. All electronic data was stored on my password protected

personal computer at home. All hard copies were shredded, and all electronic data will

be deleted after five years as required by Walden University's IRB. Consideration of

these aspects of this study provided a study that met the high ethical standards of

qualitative researchers.

Summary

This chapter of the study outlined the research method for this study. The

research design and rationale supporting the design were explained. Details were

provided regarding my role as the researcher of this study, the methodology,

trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. In Chapter 4, I will review the results yielded

from the research.

Chapter 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to investigate the

perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores

regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. The research question for this

study was:

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools

with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they teach students based

on their ZPDs?

To address the research question, I collected data by conducting interviews using open-

ended questions. In previous chapters, I discussed the introduction to the study, which

included the problem, purpose, research question, and the conceptual framework that

guided this study. I also outlined the importance of vocabulary instruction in the early

childhood classroom with the literature.

In Chapter 4, I review the setting in which the study occurred by presenting the

participants' demographics and characteristics that were relevant to the study. Secondly,

I review a description of the data collection process, the methods used for data analysis,

the results, and discrepant cases. Thirdly, I describe evidence of trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the answers to the research question.

Setting

Participants of this study were early childhood teachers in grades prekindergarten

and kindergarten working in Title 1 elementary schools. All participants were employed

in one Southeast Texas school district and were from six different Title 1 schools. There

were three prekindergarten and five kindergarten teachers participating in this study. All

participants were female, possessed a bachelor's degree in education, and had a Texas

Educators Certification. One of the participants was working on her master's degree in

education. The participants teaching experience ranged from seven to 20 years.

I reviewed participants' yearly classroom vocabulary ISIP growth data with them

prior to the interview. The participants' demographics information is listed in Table 1.

All vocabulary ISIP growth data is listed in Table 2 beginning with the 2014-2015 school

year and ending with the 2018-2019 school year. The percentages were based on the

number of students in the class each year and how many of them made 1 year's growth in

the vocabulary domain of ISIP. There were no personal or organizational conditions that

influenced participants' responses or their experience at the time the study was conducted

that may have affected the interpretation of the study results.

Table 1

Participants Demographic Information

Participant	Grade	Years of service	Level of education
A	PK	17	Masters
B	KN	11	Bachelors
C	KN	9	Bachelors
D	KN	8	Bachelors
E	PK	20	Bachelors
F	KN	7	Bachelors
G	PK	16	Bachelors
H	KN	8	Bachelors

Table 2

Participants ISIP Growth Data

Participant	14-15 ISIP Growth	15-16 ISIP Growth	16-17 ISIP Growth	18-19 ISIP Growth
A	96%	100%	95%	100%
B	86%	91%	85%	93%
C	88%	85%	91%	87%
D	92%	87%	95%	95%
E	89%	100%	86%	93%
F	100%	91%	88%	100%
G	88%	85%	86%	88%
H	85%	88%	85%	95%

Data Collection

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I began working with

the site's early childhood department to select participants for the study. The director of

the site's early childhood department provided me with a copy of ISIP data beginning

with the 2014-2015 school year. The data was sorted by school, grade level, and teacher.

Once this data was received, I began highlighting the teachers who have had at least 85%

of students in their classes who have showed at least 1 year's growth in vocabulary

according to the ISIP for 3 consecutive years beginning in the 2014-2015 school year. I

identified a total of 14 early childhood teachers as being eligible to participate in the

study.

I sent an e-mail invitation to the 14 potential participants in which I introduced

myself, stated the purpose of the study, and asked for informed consent to participate.

Within the first week, I received 12 responses to my e-mail invitation indicating consent

to participate in the study. I then used the date and time stamped on each participants'

consent e-mail to determine the first three prekindergarten and five kindergarten teachers

who replied. These participants were selected to participate in the study. I then

contacted each participant by e-mail to thank them for participating and to schedule a 10-

minute phone meeting. In the e-mail, I asked each participant to send me three dates and

times that they could speak with me via phone. Once I received the e-mails, I scheduled

a time to meet via phone and informed them of the time via e-mail. During the brief

meeting, I explained their rights as a participant and reviewed the interview questions.

Once participants were selected, I assigned a pseudonym to each participant to promote

confidentially. Four of the potential participants were e-mailed a return response

indicating that the study was full.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I e-mailed the interview questions to a peer

reviewer to ensure that the content of the interview questions was valid and aligned with

the research question guiding this study. The peer reviewer used in this study was

another person with an advanced graduate degree in education who has worked in the

early childhood field for 18 years. The peer reviewers' years in education consisted of

being an early childhood teacher in grades prekindergarten and kindergarten and as a

district leader in the elementary education department. Within 4 days, the peer reviewer

responded to my e-mail indicating that the content of the interview questions seemed

accurate.

In collecting data, I used an interview protocol (Appendix). A single interview

was held face-to-face with each participant in a private classroom at the school district's

central administration office. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Prior to the date of the interview, I notified each participant by e-mail of the interview

location and the time that the interview would take place. At the beginning of each

interview, I had a brief conversation with each participant in which I reviewed their ISIP

vocabulary growth data. The purpose of this was to get the participant relaxed and

focused on the topic of our interview. I then reminded each participant that the interview

would be recorded using Voice Memos and of their privacy as outlined on the consent

form. During the interview, I took notes and highlighted responses that needed

clarification or elaboration. If there were responses that needed clarification or

elaboration, I asked about them prior to the next question.

Participants exited the interview by receiving a debriefing in which I reviewed the

purpose of the study and elicited any questions pertaining to the study. I explained that I

was going to transcribe the interview, code it, and e-mail a copy of the draft findings. I

then explained to each participant that they needed to review the draft findings and

confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their interview. In the case

that my interpretations of the interview were inaccurate, they needed to immediately

notify me via e-mail of the specific corrections that needed to be made. All participants

confirmed that my interpretations of their interviews were accurate. Recordings of each

interview were saved on my personal computer that is password protected for

confidentiality and stored in my home. Follow-up procedures, such as additional

interviews, were not needed. All data collection procedures were followed as outlined in

Chapter 3 of this study. There were no unusual circumstances that were encountered

during data collection.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process included transcribing the data collected from the semi

structured interviews, coding the data collected, organizing the data into broad categories

and themes, identifying specific themes that stood out, and then completing the member

checking process. I transcribed each interview once it was completed using Hyper

Transcribe software. Each transcript was saved on my personal computer that was

password protected. I used manual coding as well as ATLAS.ti, which assisted with

managing and analyzing the collected data. Once the interview transcripts were completed, I uploaded each one into ATLAS.ti. The ATLAS.ti software allowed me to easily organize and summarize the data collected from interviews. Once all transcripts were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, I began reading over them multiple times to gain an understanding of what each participant was saying. While reading over each sentence, I highlighted and underlined any words that gained my attention such as: *important, teach, whole group, small group,* and *differentiate*. I then analyzed the data using a priori coding. To accomplish this, I went through each transcript and highlighted the sentences that were aligned with the a priori codes previously selected. These a priori codes included social interactions, MKO, and ZPD.

During the next cycle of coding, I added to and broke down the a priori codes using open coding. To accomplish this, I combined all the participants responses related to each a priori code. Then I began to circle and highlight categories that emerged. For example, categories that emerged from the a priori code of ZPD included: whole group instruction, small group instruction, questioning strategies, use of pre-assessment data, vocabulary growth, scaffolding, direct vocabulary instruction, and assessment. Open coding allowed me to label the information collected for topics and features that stood out in the data and to create categories.

Finally, I assigned axial codes that focused on the study's research question. During this cycle of coding the data, I reviewed each interview transcript along with the codes and categories previously determined several times to develop themes. This was completed by reviewing the entire data set, combining similar codes and categories, and

then labeling each group with a descriptive theme. For example, *peer conversations, group games, singing songs, and home-school connections* were all combined under the theme of social interactions. All *a priori* codes that were identified were included into a theme.

To triangulate the data, I used the participants' interviews and the member checking process as data sources. Once all codes were found, member checking was used to establish credibility of my interpretation of the data. Member checking was conducted by having each participant review a draft of the findings to confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interview. Participants were emailed a copy of the draft findings and feedback from the participants was returned via email. All participants acknowledged that accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interview was correct. All transcripts, coding, and participant responses to the member checking process were saved on my personal computer which was password protected and stored in my home.

The synthesizing process occurred after the member checking process was completed. The synthesizing process included reviewing the extracted codes, categories, and themes identified; and summarizing the found information. The extracted codes, categories, and themes assisted with forming the key findings and results for this study, were analyzed according to the research question, and summarized according to Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development which described how young children acquire vocabulary.

After completing the data analysis phase, I asked my peer-reviewer to read through the data analysis to check for the logical development of codes and themes, and to increase the validity of my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer-reviewer was emailed a draft of the findings after all participants completed the member checking process. Questions that arose pertained to the clarity of one of the themes that emerged, Adequate Vocabulary. I then explained the data that supported the theme and why I labeled it in that manner. They then reviewed the findings again and concluded that there were no biases found and that the study was clear and concise. All responses from the peer-reviewer were saved on my personal computer which was password protected and stored in my home.

Themes were developed by analyzing, comparing, and combining codes and categories that emerged from the semi-structured interviews. One theme that quickly emerged was the importance of an adequate vocabulary. Furthermore, all participants shared how they integrated vocabulary across the curriculum and through play. Approximately 20 categories emerged from the data (Table 2). From the approximately 20 categories that emerged, I consolidated them into four major themes. The themes along with the corresponding categories are outlined in Table 2.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), discrepant cases are common in qualitative research. Discrepant cases are data that are inconsistent with the themes (Gast & Ledford, 2014). By reviewing the data collected from the semi structured interviews, I was able to check for contradictions and discrepancies. This was accomplished by continually comparing the findings to the emerging themes and participant interviews. I

carefully went through each interview sentence by sentence to ensure that my

interpretations were accurate and that I did not miss any important details that were

relayed by the participants. Each participant also reviewed a draft of my interpretations

of the findings to ensure that I did not miss anything that was portrayed. There were no

contradictions or evidence of discrepant cases that emerged from the data collected.

Results

Interviews conducted with early childhood teachers working in Title 1 schools

provided the data for exploring the research question guiding this study. The research

question asked, what are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools

with high vocabulary scores perspectives regarding how they teach students based on

their ZPDs. There were 10 interview questions used to explore the participants

perspectives regarding the research question. This section of the chapter included a

discussion of the findings organized by the major themes that emerged.

The research question asked the following: What are the perspectives of early

childhood teachers in low socioeconomic schools with high vocabulary scores regarding

how they teach students based on their ZPDs? Each participant shared in detail their

perspectives regarding the research question. The categories and themes that emerged

are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Categories Listed by Theme

Themes	Categories
The Importance of an Adequate Vocabulary	• Success factor for life • Adequate vocabulary to be successful • Ramifications for inadequate vocabulary
Explicit Vocabulary Instruction	• Direct instruction • Develop specific lesson plans • Word selection • Assessment data • Whole group instruction • Small group instruction • Questioning strategies • Use of pre-assessment data • Vocabulary growth • ZPD • Scaffolding
Vocabulary Integration	• Play • Academic content • ELL strategies
Social Interaction	• Peer conversations • Games • Songs • Home-school connections

The Importance of an adequate vocabulary. Within the data collected, there were several themes that surfaced. One theme that consistently emerged from all the interviews conducted was the importance of an adequate vocabulary. Participant A described an adequate vocabulary as "the student has enough vocabulary to be able to participate in activities that are presented in whole group, without me having to stop and describe each word." Participant B explained "When my students enter school, they usually have little to no foundation for vocabulary. By the time the school year is over, they have enough vocabulary to go on to the next grade if they have increased their vocabulary between 200 to 500 words. Which usually makes it closer to the recommended amount of words that a five-year old should possess." Participant D described an adequate vocabulary as "students fall within tier one, two, or three on their ISIP test throughout the school year. These students are usually in a place where they have enough background knowledge to connect new words to."

All participants discussed the importance of vocabulary instruction within their classrooms and the purpose that it serves for their students now and in their future. Participant B shared "In our school there has been an increasing number of students entering kindergarten with limited vocabulary and oral language that is needed to be successful in school. So, we found that it is extremely important to build on the oral language that they are coming to us with to help them produce and understand words that they encounter on an everyday basis at school and at home. If we do not start focusing on it now, they will continue to get further behind and will not fully understand what is read to them or what they read on their own." Many of the participants of this study

clearly articulated that students need to have adequate vocabulary knowledge to be successful in their future academics as well as in their lives. Participant E shared that "vocabulary and language development is a profound predictor of health and wealth." Participant H expressed a similar belief system and expanded by stating "Well, if a child, or person does not understand the words that they are reading or that are being spoken to them, they will not be able to comprehend what is going on. This is in conversation as well as in their reading." This participant continued by sharing "I mean, how can we clearly express ourselves if we do not know the words to articulate what we are feeling."

Explicit vocabulary instruction. Participants articulated that they provide direct vocabulary instruction in their early childhood class. While the strategies of how they directly provided instruction differed, all participants had time in their schedule in which they explicitly taught vocabulary. Several participants shared that they select the vocabulary that will be taught from books that are going to be read throughout the week. Participant G stated " I preplan the words that I am explicitly teaching by going through the literature that I am going to use and selecting the words that I think might be the most unknown as well as words that may or may not be commonly used by my students." Participant H shared that "I introduce the words that I am teaching and provide the definition. I then incorporate a movement activity with it so they will remember. We review and try to connect with something the kids know and understand."

All modes of explicit vocabulary instruction provided included the teacher selecting words based on students' levels as well as words that related to the skills being taught. Participants A, B, and G explained that they select their vocabulary words from

the books that they are going to read aloud. Participant G specifically stated, "I select the book that I am going to teach from and then make a list of the tier two words that are present in the book and then I select the most beneficial words to teach directly during whole group time." It was further explained that tier two words included those most found in text and that played a big role in verbal functioning. Participant G stated, "Two tier two words that we learned this week included feast and amuse."

Participant B shared that "the I-Station program provides us with a list of words that they categorized in each tier; I use this as a baseline when determining tier levels." I-Station is a program used to teach and assess reading and reading skills. This program was utilized by the state as a universal screener in grades Pre-Kindergarten-third grade and given to students three times per school year. The universal screener assessed student ability and determines student growth in the following areas: vocabulary, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and alphabet knowledge (Imagination Station, 2018). Participants C, D, and F shared that the vocabulary that they specifically teach is aligned with their students current reading and oral language levels. "I use the beginning of the year data from I-station along with other data such as their oral language proficiency scores and reading levels to begin to plan for vocabulary instruction."

Vocabulary integration. Another theme that emerged was that all participants integrated the vocabulary that was explicitly taught into other content areas or dramatic play. While the participants shared different ways in which they integrate vocabulary, they all addressed the importance of integration. For example, Participant E shared that she integrates academic and conversational vocabulary into her dramatic play themed

stations, "Every month I introduce a different dramatic play center that has a lot of vocabulary that is directly tied to the theme." Participants H and D also shared that they integrated vocabulary instruction with play by including various play activities which include games, singing rhyming songs, acting out the words in a scene, and using puppets to have conversations.

While other participants did not share that they integrated vocabulary with play, they did share that they integrated vocabulary with other content areas. Several stating that the best way to have students learn and make connections with vocabulary is through literature. "I love to use literature from various content areas to introduce vocabulary and have students make connections." Four participants shared that they encourage students to use vocabulary that they have learned into their writing and conversations. Many participants had word walls in their classrooms with the words that have been explicitly taught in whole group for students to recall. Participant A explained that they use an interactive word wall that includes a picture, that was drawn in a whole group setting. "I have students go refer to the word wall if they have gotten stuck when speaking or when I want them to use a more advanced word such as excited instead of happy."

Social interactions. The data collected from the semi structured interviews showed that all participants had students interact with each other regarding the vocabulary words that had been taught. All participants described several ways that they have their students interact with others. One strategy that was consistently described by all participants was having peer conversations. Peer conversations included having students discuss the meaning of words and use in sentences with others while in whole

group or with a partner. The most common strategy that was used for partner discussions was turn and talk. Participant C explained turn and talk as, "turn and talk is when the students find the person next to them or an assigned partner and they discuss whatever was posed to them." They continued to explain how they integrated the new vocabulary with turn and talk, "When learning about a new or unfamiliar word, students in my class work with a partner or a group to discuss the word and come up with an illustration. My students also discuss with different partners through think-pair-share the meanings of words and the connections that they have made." A similar strategy that was used was *think-pair-share*. The benefit of these activities was that they allowed students time to process the vocabulary taught and then practice using it in context. One participant explained think-pair-share as, "students are able to process, then share their thinking which allows students to retain and understand the meaning of the words better."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a paramount component in qualitative research that should be approached with careful attention during every aspect of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The strategies that related to trustworthiness were implemented as outlined in Chapter 3 of this study. I used the research question and the conceptual framework that guided this study to direct the data collection process. The results yielded from this study may inform other teachers' practices within the early childhood field. Numerous strategies were used to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of this study. These constructs in relation to this study were discussed in the following sections.

Credibility

Credibility is the condition in which the research findings are aligned with the real world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To ensure creditability, I audio-taped all interviews using Voice Memos. I then transcribed and coded each interview. Data triangulation was another method used to ensure credibility. I analyzed the data from all the participants' interviews looking for similarities and differences in the codes and categories that emerged. During the coding process, I developed *a priori* codes to initially code the individual interviews. To accomplish this, I went through each transcript and highlighted the sentences that were aligned with the a priori codes previously selected. These a priori codes included: social interactions, MKO, and ZPD. I followed the a priori coding with open coding in which I combined all the participants' responses related to each a priori code and then circled and highlighted categories that emerged. Finally, axial coding was completed by reviewing the entire data set, combining similar codes and categories, and then labeling each group with a descriptive theme. I used these codes cautiously and consistently throughout the data analysis process.

To triangulate the data, I used the participants' interviews and the member checking process as data sources. Member checking was conducted by emailing all participants a copy of the draft findings. I then asked each participant to review the draft findings and confirm the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their interview. In the case that my interpretations of the interview were inaccurate, participants were informed to notify me via email of the specific corrections that needed to be made. All

participants were pleased with the process and confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interviews with no changes.

A peer-reviewer was also used to assist with the credibility of this study. The peer-reviewer used in this study was another person with an advanced graduate degree in education and has worked in the early childhood field for 18 years. The peer-reviewers' years in education consisted of being an early childhood teacher in grades pre-kindergarten and kindergarten; and as a district leader in the elementary education department. The peer-reviewer was emailed a draft of the findings after all participants completed the member checking process. Questions that arose from the peer-reviewer pertained to the clarity of one of the themes that emerged. I then explained the data that supported the theme and why I labeled it in that manner. They then reviewed the study and findings again and concluded that there were no biases found and that the study was clear and concise.

Transferability

Transferability is the way that the findings of a study can be applied or transferred to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Procedures for data collection were discussed in the Data Collection section of this chapter and were followed as previously outlined. This study was limited to three pre-kindergarten and five kindergarten teachers working in Title 1 schools. The selected participants were from six different elementary schools within the same school district. I emailed all eligible participants an invitation to participate in the study. A total of 14 early childhood teachers were identified as being eligible to participate in the study. I received 12

responses to my email invitation to participate in the study. The first three pre-kindergarten and five kindergarten teachers that replied to my email were selected to participate in the study. Four of the potential participants were emailed a return response indicating that the study was full. A thick description of information about each participant was provided at the beginning of this chapter. I conducted interviews in a private meeting room within the district's administration building at the participants convenience. All participates were actively engaged in the interview process and provided a detailed account of their vocabulary instruction.

I also provided a thick description of the steps taken to analyze and interpret the data collected in this study. All the descriptions provided in this chapter in relation to the participant selection, data collection process, and data analysis process, assisted with making this study transferrable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Information from this study that can be transferred to other Title 1 schools and districts include the themes that were outlined regarding using the ZPD to provide instruction within the vocabulary domain. Transferrable information from this study will be applicable for other early childhood teachers working in Title 1 schools.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the consistency and stability of the data collection and analysis portions of a study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). To ensure dependability in this study, I used the following strategies: triangulation, audit trails, member checks, and researcher reflexivity. Member checking was conducted once the data was analyzed by having each participant review a draft of the findings that

confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interview. All participants were emailed a draft of the findings that confirmed the accuracy of my interpretations of the data from their individual interviews. Triangulation was completed by comparing the data collected from the pre-kindergarten teachers' interviews, kindergarten teachers' interviews, and the member checking process. I triangulated the data to substantiate the findings. I included direct quotes from the participants' interviews which were based on open-ended interview questions. The direct quotes outlined in the study assisted with supporting the findings.

Audit trails were accomplished by maintaining the original documents of all interview transcripts, notes, and audio recordings. In addition to audit trails and member checking, I utilized strategies for reflexivity. This was completed by maintaining a reflective journal to record my personal beliefs regarding vocabulary instruction. Since I am an administrator within the same school district, I continually reflected on my personal biases throughout the instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis processes by taking notes in my personal journal that was designated for the use of this study only. As an administrator in this small school district, I was familiar with many of the elementary campuses and some of their early childhood teachers. While I was familiar with some of the early childhood teachers and their elementary campuses, I did not select any participants for this study that I currently or previously have supervised. I did understand that my current supervisory position in the school district may present bias since my role as an administrator is to evaluate teacher performance.

Confirmability

Ravitch and Carl (2016) described confirmability as the extent to which the findings can be confirmed and corroborated. To ensure confirmability, I replicated the interview process in the same manner with each participant. I also explored how my personal biases could play into data collection and analysis (Ravitch & Carl). I used a personal journal to notate my own thoughts and beliefs after each interview prior to leaving the interview room so that that they would not interfere with the data collected or analyzed. I also took notes during each interview that ensured each participants' experiences and perspectives were accurately documented.

Other strategies that were used included: implementing triangulation strategies, and audit trails. Triangulation was completed by comparing the data collected from the pre-kindergarten teachers' interviews, kindergarten teachers' interviews, and the member checking process. Audit trails were accomplished by maintaining the original documents of all interview transcripts, notes, and audio recordings. All strategies used assisted with the confirmability of this study.

Summary

Chapter 4 included a rich, thick description of the setting, participant demographics related to this study, data collection process, and the data analysis process. The results of this study were also presented in this chapter as they aligned with the research question. The research question that guided this study was answered through the collected data and organized into four major themes. The data showed that the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores

regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs included the following: participants believed that an adequate vocabulary was a success factor for life, explicit vocabulary instruction is an essential element of teaching vocabulary, vocabulary instruction should be integrated across the curriculum, and students need to have social interactions with their peers and teacher to acquire vocabulary.

Chapter 5 will conclude this study. In chapter 5, I will present an interpretation of the findings of this study as related to the literature review described in chapter 2. I also analyzed and interpreted the findings in the context of the conceptual framework, as appropriate. This was followed by a description of the limitations to trustworthiness that arose from the execution of this study. Recommendations for future research and an explanation of the potential impact for positive social change that could come from this study will also be outlined.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative case study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs. The problem is a gap in practice regarding some low SES schools where some students were performing well on vocabulary assessments in early childhood classrooms and other comparable students were performing poorly (Fiester, 2010; & Zauche et al., 2016). Exploring the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs provided insight for other educators on the instructional practices that should be used when working with students from low-income homes.

The findings emphasized that early childhood teachers' in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores do teach students based on their ZPDs. While all participants used different terminology to describe how they taught vocabulary, the strategies used were similar to each other and aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development. Through data collection and analysis, I found that the most important strategies used by all of the participants included (a) integrating learned vocabulary into other content areas as well as through play, (b) providing explicit vocabulary instruction either in a whole or small group setting, and (c) providing students with opportunities to interact with each other and with the teacher.

The remainder of Chapter 5 includes an interpretation of the findings of this study in relation to the literature review described in Chapter 2. I address limitations of

trustworthiness that arose from the execution of the study. I also include recommendations for further research, implications for social change, and recommendations for early childhood teachers and school leaders. I conclude this chapter by providing a "take-home" message.

Interpretation of the Findings

There are several studies in the early childhood field that describe strategies that assist with promoting oral language and vocabulary in a low SES setting (Chen & Kim, 2014; Gorski, 2018; Hindman et al., 2016; & Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; van Steensel et al., 2016). The findings from this study confirmed the information outlined in the peer-reviewed literature that was discussed in Chapter 2. Findings confirmed that vocabulary instruction should be taught explicitly (Neuman & Wright, 2014). Another finding confirmed that word selection should be specifically performed by the teacher (Nelson et al., 2015; Neuman & Wright, 2014). Wright and Cervetti (2017) found that teachers should provide opportunities for repeated exposure and incorporate socially meaningful activities.

Wang et al. (2014) developed a "comprehensive model for vocabulary instruction" (p.1076) based on their findings regarding vocabulary practices. This study identified major components of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom. The major components found were guided by the beliefs that social interactions are critical elements of vocabulary instruction, thematic units support vocabulary acquisition, and vocabulary learning should be multifaceted (Wang et al., 2014). The findings of this study were similar. This study also confirmed that social interactions are a critical

element of vocabulary instruction. While the inclusion of thematic units into vocabulary instruction was not specifically outlined in this study, vocabulary integration was. Vocabulary integration included the use of academic and conversational vocabulary based on the thematic unit being taught. The findings of this study did support that vocabulary instruction should be multifaceted. This study supported this finding by outlining the various strategies that teachers used to promote vocabulary development.

Recent research highlighted the importance of including vocabulary instruction during the early childhood grades (Bowne et al., 2017; Dashiell & DeBruin-Parecki, 2014; Lerner & Parlakian, 2014; Marulis & Neuman, 2013; Neuman & Wright, 2014; Snell et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2014). This concept was confirmed in this study. All participants explained the importance of vocabulary instruction in early childhood grades and when working with students from low-income homes. While they described different implications for not having an adequate vocabulary, all participants seemed to have some knowledge of current research that outlined the importance of vocabulary. During the interviews, participants indicated that having an adequate vocabulary is an indicator of a learner's future success. Some participants shared that the importance of having an adequate vocabulary was a campus focus. This finding is aligned with previously cited studies that indicated that most early childhood teachers have some knowledge regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction for children from low-income homes (Hindman et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2015; Wright, 2011).

The sociocultural theory of cognitive development operationalized the topic of vocabulary development during early childhood because it addressed the context in

which young children acquire language and practices that should be used in the classroom to support vocabulary development and growth (Lin, 2015). Two components of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of cognitive development that specifically guided this study were the ZPD and the MKO. Both components outlined the role that teachers have in providing the appropriate levels of support and instruction towards promoting vocabulary growth (Lin, 2015; Shabani, 2016). Another component outlined in this theory that is relevant to vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom is the role that social interactions have in young children acquiring vocabulary.

The research question asked the following:

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their ZPDs?

The findings are aligned with the theory that young children best learn vocabulary when MKO, in this study the teacher, has knowledge of the information being taught. The MKO is then able to provide targeted guidance for the learner using the learner's current vocabulary levels or the ZPD. Teachers' perspectives of using these components of Vygotsky's theory were evident in all interviews. I outlined strategies that corresponded with these components under the Explicit Vocabulary Instruction theme. All participants noted that they use some sort of preassessment tool to determine student's vocabulary levels and then provide explicit instruction in either a whole or small group setting.

This study also confirmed the important role that social interactions have in learning new information. According to Vygotsky, social interactions play a leading role

in development and cognition (Lin, 2015). This is attributed to the belief that learning first takes place while interacting with others at the social level, and then independently (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this concept, educators should provide conscious and unconscious opportunities for students to use language to interact with each other, the teacher, and their environment so that learning occurs at both levels. Participants' perspectives of using this component of Vygotsky's theory were also evident in all interviews. Participants reported that they use a variety of strategies to get students to interact with each other regarding learned vocabulary.

Vygotsky (1978) explained that cognitive skills in young children can be supported when the skill is introduced and reiterated through a variety of learning experiences (Clarà, 2017). This study confirmed that young children practicing learned vocabulary while engaging in other content areas and in play promoted vocabulary acquisition. While the participants shared different ways in which they integrate vocabulary, they all addressed the importance of integration and how vocabulary is integrated into other areas. Some participants shared that vocabulary is taught explicitly during whole group and then reiterated in a small literacy group setting. While others shared that they explicitly taught vocabulary according to a theme and then had students use the learned vocabulary while in the themed dramatic play station.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations related to this qualitative, exploratory case study revolved around the type of study, participants, and the research methods used. This study was conducted in six different elementary schools within one school district located in the southeast part of

Texas. The number of participants was small: three prekindergarten teachers and six

kindergarten teachers. I was familiar with this district and its elementary campuses

because I had worked in this district for 16 years, nine of the 16 years as an administrator.

I did not include any participants who were at schools where I was a teacher or

administrator. I used audit trails and reflective journals to ensure transparency and

monitor my own biases of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood setting. Audit

trails were accomplished by maintaining the original documents of all interview

transcripts, notes, and audio recordings. I used reflective journals to monitor my own

biases of vocabulary instruction in the early childhood setting by taking notes regarding

my experiences, opinions, and thoughts throughout the data collection phase of this

dissertation.

According to Yin (2017), the researcher is the primary instrument in data

collection and analysis and must have an in-depth understanding of the purpose and

processes of case study research. I had a basic understanding of conducting research and

had no previous experience in conducting a case study. To mitigate these limitations, I

regularly consulted with others more experienced in conducting case studies regarding

participant selection and data analysis. I also provided member checks as each

participant looked at a summary of data from their individual interview, which reduced

my personal biases and established creditability (Connelly, 2016). I utilized a peer

reviewer to assess my data analysis to limit any biases and to increase the validity of my

study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer reviewer utilized in this study was a

person who has a graduate degree in education and has worked in the early childhood field for 18 years as an early childhood teacher and as a district leader in the same field.

Recommendations

The participants of this study were from six different elementary schools in one school district. I recommend that future research replicate this study in a different geographical region to better understand early childhood teachers' perspectives regarding how they teach students vocabulary based on their ZPDs. Different teachers may yield different information. A replication of this study in a different geographical region will allow other early childhood teachers and school leaders to be able to compare the strategies used to teach students vocabulary based on their ZPDs. I also recommend that future research be conducted to measure students' vocabulary knowledge during early childhood and when they exit the early childhood grades to determine the effectiveness of the strategies used over time. Longitudinal research can be used to follow a group of students to determine if vocabulary has been retained.

When analyzing the data, I noticed that a few participants shared that the strategies identified were also used to promote vocabulary growth with English language learners (ELL) as well. A few participants shared that the strategies they identified were learned from professional developments that were geared towards ELLs. They further explained that ELLs greatly benefited from the strategies used. Therefore, it is recommended that a replication of this study be used to determine if early childhood teachers' perspectives regarding how they teach students vocabulary based on their ZPDs is relevant to ELL's.

Implications

Results from this study indicated that students in the early childhood grades may benefit from implementing various strategies aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory when teaching vocabulary based on students ZPD. Bowne et al. (2017) stated that it is essential for early childhood teachers to understand and learn how to support vocabulary growth during everyday routines, as well as how to provide direct instruction in this area. This study may promote positive social change by providing all education stakeholders with insight regarding the importance of vocabulary instruction, as well as recommendations for improving vocabulary scores in low performing low SES schools. Which may lead to more early childhood teachers and teacher leaders to attend professional development courses that are directly related to vocabulary instruction in the early childhood classroom. This study may also lead to the implementation of the outlined strategies for teaching vocabulary instruction based on students ZPD in early childhood classrooms.

Vocabulary is an important topic in the early childhood field as well as to society because the risk factors associated with young children not developing or acquiring adequate language can be detrimental to a child's' future (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). The long-term effect for society is the "30-million-word gap" which posits that children from lower-income families may have less vocabulary than those from professional and higher-income families (Hill, 2017; Phillips et al., 2017). Utilizing this research could ultimately result in young children leaving the early childhood years with a solid language foundation (Lerner & Parlakian, 2014). This solid foundation might promote

positive social change by helping young children learn to read and, eventually, read to learn.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory qualitative case study filled a gap in practice and in the literature about practice. Children who do not have a strong vocabulary foundation during their early childhood years will most likely have difficulty with reading and comprehension skills in the future (Hindman et al., 2016). Researchers have also indicated that there is an approximate "30-million-word gap" between children who come from economically disadvantaged homes and their more fortunate peers by the time they enter kindergarten (Neuman & Wright, 2014; Phillips et al., 2017). This wide gap in vocabulary knowledge between students from different SES groups indicated that young children entering kindergarten from disadvantaged homes need a teacher who is equipped with teaching techniques that will begin to close the vocabulary gap (Neuman & Wright, 2014).

The results from this study further outlined that early childhood teachers in low SES schools with high vocabulary scores teach students based on their ZPDs by using various strategies. Participants described that they implemented the following strategies into their vocabulary instruction: understanding that young children need to have an adequate vocabulary to be successful in their future academics, providing explicit vocabulary instruction, integrating vocabulary into play and other content areas, and by providing young children with opportunities to interact socially. Information gathered from this study may inform elementary school leaders, district personnel, and the early

childhood community of the role that vocabulary plays in a child's academic success and how early childhood teachers in low SES schools teach vocabulary to their students based on their ZPDs.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Part 1: Participant Demographics

1. Name

2. Number of students in your classroom

3. Current grade taught

4. Please provide a brief description of your teaching experience

Part 2: Interview Questions

First, I would like to express my gratitude to you for participating in this study. The purpose of the questions that I am going to ask is to explore the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low socioeconomic schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their zones of proximal development. The information collected from this study will be confidential and solely used for research purposes. This interview was recorded and annotated. A copy of the annotations will be reviewed with you once completed.

RQ: What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers in low socioeconomic schools with high vocabulary scores regarding how they teach students based on their zones of proximal development?

1. How do you perceive vocabulary development while in the early childhood grades?

2. What specific teaching model or strategies do you use in your vocabulary instruction?

3. Tell me what you know about the Zone of Proximal Development by Vygotsky?

4. When, where and how were you trained in using the ZPD?

5. Discuss any learning and trainings that you have had regarding vocabulary instruction?

6. How do you assess student growth in the area of vocabulary?

7. How do you plan for the different vocabulary learning needs of the students you teach?

8. Do you integrate social interactions into your vocabulary instruction? If so, how?

9. What resources within the school and district support the vocabulary instruction in your classroom?

10. Is there anything that you would like to add regarding vocabulary instruction or the practices that you utilize to assess vocabulary that was not covered in this interview?