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Pre-K Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Support Needed to Meet State Reading Standards

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Walden University

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Walden University

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Kwe'Shonte Mathews

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Walden University
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Abstract

Pre-K Teachers' Perspectives Regarding Support Needed to Meet State Reading
Standards

by

Kwe'Shonte Mathews

MA, Walden University, 2016

BS, Sienna Heights University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

July 2021

Abstract

Early literacy has been a topic of interest in early childhood education for centuries, but the effects of early literacy teaching practices are an ongoing and unresolved topic amongst early educational programs. The problem was that in urban areas many students read below their expected grade level, preventing them from achieving literacy success. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing Georgia Early Learning and Development (GELD) Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The conceptual framework that guided this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that specifically describes the zone of proximal development. Data was collected from 10 pre-k teachers at five different schools using one on one interviews and was analyzed using thematic coding. Six themes were revealed that included: challenges regarding implementing GELD standards, ways literacy is implemented into lessons, teachers' perceptions regarding GELD, views on students and their levels of literacy, teachers' role in improving literacy, and the teachers' views about curriculum and how it can improve literacy. Results of this study indicated that teachers felt more support is needed in the form of phonemic awareness and promoting literacy was essential inside and outside of the classroom. Implications for social change include identifying needed support to improve literacy teaching practices; thereby, increasing students' literacy rates.

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Dedication

First, giving all honor and praises to God, who without his favor and instilling patience and strength of tenacity, this doctoral journey would not have been possible. My wonderful family who knew I could and would do this before I would. My Wonderful Godmother who helped me along almost every single step of emotional frustration and advice as she went through this as well. My husband O'nes for being so understanding of the time and space I needed to complete this journey. Last, but not the least My chair, Dr. Rebeca Curtis. You were EVERYTHING during this journey, I am truly grateful for you I am in tears writing this because my words cannot express my gratitude to you. I want to say I owe it all to you; thank you for my family and friends who have been with me during this entire process. I love you all so dearly. You all are the real MVP's.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Emergent literacy skills are critical to a young child's educational accomplishments and success. Often in education, terms relating to the foundation of reading include interchangeable words such as emergent literacy and early literacy (Suggate et al., 2018); however, there is a difference in the terms as foundations in literacy have evolved. Early literacy refers to the knowledge of reading and writing before the practices are learned (Suggate et al., 2018). Emergent literacy is often referenced as the first stages of reading development that encompass knowledge, skills, and outlooks that develop in early childhood (Save the Children, 2020). As educational terms have evolved, emergent literacy now encompasses the first stages of the developmental process, and the term literacy includes all stages of development towards the goal of literacy acquisition (Save the Children, 2020).

Approximately 250 million school-aged children worldwide lack the mastery of literacy skills (Graham & Kelly, 2018). If students entering grade levels kindergarten through the third grade fall behind on literacy skills (i.e., phonological awareness, reading comprehension, or writing), this deficiency can reduce the success rates of students meeting their grade-level expectations (Fonseca, 2017). Implementing early literacy interventions, such as required state standards with an expressed concern in phonemic awareness, should be considered to help students improve their early literacy skills (Fonseca, 2017). Early educators should follow a rigorous instructional plan to ensure the effective teaching of literacy skills (Fonseca, 2017). It is important for students to have a strong literacy skills foundation, and there is a need to identify and teach emergent

literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, to support educational success (Berrill, 2018). Children who acquire these effective emergent literacy skills in primary grades are more likely to experience better educational, career, and life opportunities in the future (Berrill, 2018).

GELD standards reportedly help educators focus on a discrete set of skills to guide and improve their teaching practices (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The findings from this study may provide information and guidance to promote positive social change among educational leaders and administrators who seek new ways to support the teaching needs of pre-k educators. Instructors who have extensive knowledge regarding methods and strategies to enhance students' literacy skills are likely to be more effective teachers than those with limited experience (Markussen-Brown et al., 2017).

Chapter 1 presents the background and purpose of this study, which focuses on the importance of having an academic foundation of early literacy skills, specifically phonemic awareness. The background section presents the literature regarding the problem. The conceptual framework used definitions related to the research problem, and the nature of the study was also discussed. Assumptions, the scope of the study, delimitations, and limitations are also presented. Next is the significance of the study,

along with an emphasis on the potential of positive social change for this study. The chapter concludes with a summary and transition to Chapter 2.

Background

The foundation for literacy success is established during a child's primary years (Terrell & Watson, 2018). The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. It is essential for children to acquire a precursory knowledge of reading, to establish a foundation upon which to build their literacy skill sets (Pyle et al., 2018). Pyle et al. (2018) shared how important it is to understand educators' perspectives concerning combinations of pedagogical approaches, which have successfully enhanced students' literacy skills. Similarly, Piasta et al. (2017) expressed the educational value of teachers who use classroom practices to develop the emergent literacy skills of students.

Educators who seek to enhance their classroom lessons regarding emerging literacy skills would benefit from professional development and training in this competency area (Egert et al., 2018). Beschorner and Woodward (2019) shared how educators enhance their teaching skills to advance their practices in early education. Training can provide instructors with a more profound understanding of different methods and practices to present literacy skills (Egert et al., 2018). Professional teaching organizations have recognized the value of GELD standards (Nguyen et al., 2018) and have recommended adjusting standards to consider the successful practice of teaching

literacy (Rohde, 2015). Pyle et al. (2018) noted a need for future research concerning examining effective strategies for the integration of literacy skills into the classroom. In addition to Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory, children need to experience developmentally modeled and appropriate literacy instruction compatible with their advancement level (Hume et al., 2016).

Literature exists regarding the changing landscape of early childhood curriculum and accountability (Haslip & Gullo, 2018), and the impact of policy mandates on early childhood curriculum (Gallo-Fox & Cuccuini-Harmon, 2018). A gap in practice was identified concerning pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Toews and Kurth (2019) indicated a need to examine the influence of literacy models and mandated state standards of literacy teaching practices on educators' efforts to build strong literacy foundations in early childhood.

Problem Statement

During early preschool years, children learn basic literacy skills, which they consistently use throughout their primary grade experience (Dynea et al., 2016). Early childhood educators are generally expected to implement research-based literacy practices to ensure kindergarten readiness (Dynea et al., 2016). The State of Georgia has research-based learning measures known as GELD standards, designed to help teachers create meaningful learning experiences and assist them in writing their lesson plans (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020). Georgia's pre-k lottery programs are

required to follow these standards, which align with the Georgia K-12 system (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020). The problem was in the state of Georgia where this study takes place, 74% of students are reading below their expected grade level (Holloman, 2019); pre-k students that are behind in emergent literacy skills face challenges achieving literacy success once they reach kindergarten. Consequently, students who acquire low scores in reading face long-term repercussions, including low high school graduation rates (Whitney & Candelaria, 2017).

A study by Park et al. (2015) found students who demonstrated strong reading skills in preschool had an 88% chance of being proficient readers in primary grades. However, students who exhibited poor reading skills in preschool had an 87% chance of not excelling in primary grades (Park et al., 2015). According to the Department of Education in Georgia, only 42% of children are competent in reading by third grade (Percy, 2019). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) attested 35% of the children in fourth grade, who were tested nationwide, scored at a basic level for reading in the United States. Haslip (2018) noted that a strong foundation in reading is essential to reading competence; therefore, the language and literacy children acquire during preschool, with specific instruction, such as phonological and print awareness, are maintained through first grade. Similarly, Kaminski and Powell-Smith (2017) identified that preschoolers often have future success in literacy when provided a strong foundation of emergent literacy skills. Hendi and Aswami (2018) determined that, while monitoring preschool classroom observations, teachers did not adhere to the curriculum by implementing early literacy skill development, such as phonemic awareness. The current

study was appropriate to address a gap in practice regarding the support pre-k teachers need in meeting challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching literacy, specifically phonemic awareness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Researchers have indicated the need for a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of literacy teaching practices with a focus on early literacy success (Dyenia et al., 2016; Hendi & Aswami, 2018; Saracho, 2017). Exploring the phenomenon of this study offers an understanding regarding educators' perspectives concerning the support they need to meet the challenges associated with applying the GELD standards when implementing phonemic awareness instruction. According to Caron et al. (2017), the Georgia Planning Educational Activities for Children (PEACH) provides resources to all early childhood teachers to assist with lesson planning using GELD standards. Standard CLL.6 in GELD standards describes one of the standards located under communication, language, literacy (CLL) and focuses on phonological awareness. Although pre-k teachers are aware of these standards that support early literacy, there is still a large reading gap in Georgia's urban areas (Holloman, 2019). Therefore, a gap in practice was identified, and the findings from this study contribute to the literature to help address this gap.

Research Questions (Qualitative)

The following research question guided my study:

RQ1: What are pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?

Conceptual Framework (Qualitative)

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which supports learning in the ZPD. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory contributes to research regarding early childhood education, especially in the areas of language and literacy. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of ZPD presents a process that highlights the distance between an individual's current level of intelligence and their potential intellectual level (Saracho, 2017). Further, this theory has a focus on a child's achievement abilities, expounding upon the areas in which a child would need assistance and, perhaps, modeling from an instructor (Saracho, 2017). This type of assistance is considered scaffolding, which encourages a child's improvement and forward movement. Regarding scaffolding, a child's development expands because the task goal is halted.

Language and literacy skills emerge early in a child's life and continue to develop, which coincides with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that discusses how children learn in the ZPD (Saracho, 2017). Literacy is a skill that can be nourished with practice, including literacy-related play, shared story reading, and other relevant literacy experiences when students explore their natural environments, which may or may not require a teacher (McLeod, 2019). If pre-k teachers implemented mandated state

standards, such as the GELD standards, into their teaching practices appropriately, they could provide students the opportunity to learn socially, to learn through conversation, and to scaffold instruction while the student is in the ZPD (Ensar, 2014; Saracho, 2017).

My research question was designed to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory described the ZPD, where Vygotsky portrayed children's need to explore their environments throughout the day to learn effectively. Analyzing pre-k teachers' perspectives who used GELD standards in their daily teaching practices, I used open coding to examine and classify data into themes. During my analysis of data, I also reviewed the interviews from participants' responses for recurrent words, phrases, or statements.

According to Haslip (2018), if a pre-k program richly incorporated early literacy skills, their students may inhabit early literacy skills when they enter kindergarten. When children learn phonemic awareness skills, they learn prereading skills (Groth, 2020). Conducting thorough interviews and subsequent data analysis addressed the research question. The research question was designed to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The conceptual framework was discussed more extensively in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of the study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Using a basic qualitative approach was appropriate for this study, as it supported exploring perspectives and alternative points of view (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). The target phenomenon was pre-k teachers' perceptions. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that a basic qualitative approach could be used in myriad studies to add the value of understanding to explore the target phenomenon.

When considering literacy teaching practices for this study, it was important to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Hence, a qualitative approach helped reveal participants' views regarding an issue (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). This basic qualitative design allowed for a deeper connection and understanding of different schools' varying practices to teach early literacy skills. A quantitative approach was not sufficient to gather the participants' immersive perspectives, given the nature of this study did not lend itself to definitive and measurable variables common to quantitative approaches to studies (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, a qualitative, rather than a quantitative design, was more suitable for understanding and describing pre-k teachers' perspectives.

The research setting included five pre-k programs within a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia. Each of the five pre-k sites was comprised of two

pre-k classrooms with one teacher and an assistant teacher. Each participant was a certified educator with a child development associate credential (CDA), and at least a bachelor's degree, preferably in education. In this study, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 10 certified pre-k teachers in a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia who use the GELD standards in their instructional practices and have taught for a minimum of 2 years. Purposive sampling was most appropriate because the intent of the study was to gather data from applicable participants who can contribute to answering the research question (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I selected the first 10 pre-k teachers who met the criteria of 2 years' pre-k teacher experience in the state of Georgia using GELD standards and were currently employed fulltime at one of the approved school locations. Each participant was a certified educator with a CDA and at least a bachelor's degree in education. More than 10 people did not respond to my recruitment process, so no additional individuals were placed on a waiting list.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a small sample size is appropriate for qualitative studies if data saturation is reached. Semistructured interviews were used to gather data from 10 pre-k teachers. Data from the interview responses were analyzed and transcribed through a reciprocated consideration of phrases used within the interview transcripts. To triangulate the data and increase the validation of the study, data from the interviews, member checks, and the expert reviewer were compared. The expert reviewer examined the results to help prevent any biases that I might have had during the data analysis process. I also reviewed any notes taken before, during, and after the interviews gathered in a journal to avoid biases.

In qualitative research, reflective journals are used as a tool to encourage self-reflection and explore how one's personal experiences can affect a study's outcomes (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017). I used this journal to record the body language of the participants that were observed during the interview process. An audit trail is a qualitative approach used to confirm a research finding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As part of the audit trail, the journal was an evolving and steadily growing document that allowed me to visualize, acknowledge, and create transparency during the research process. I used a reflective journal to capture my experiences, thoughts, opinions, and perceptions during the interview process. This reflective journal also assisted me in keeping my biases in check. Several data collection and reflective strategies were employed to capture the distinct aspects of the phenomenon using multiple sources of data (Merriam, 2014), including the interview transcripts and journal notations.

For this study, a member check process was used to ensure the data collected was a true representation of the information provided by the participants. Member checking involved sending the 10 pre-k teachers a draft copy of the study's findings, following analysis, to check for the accuracy of my interpretation of the data. Also, I assessed the journal notes recorded during the interview processes and the feedback provided by the expert reviewer. Having an expert reviewer added validity to my study. Selecting an expert reviewer involved asking a professional in education who holds a doctorate degree, outside of the study participants, to review the findings from the study to ensure a correct interpretation of the data after the participants reviewed the draft copy of the results. Participants' personal information remained anonymous during this process, and

the expert reviewer only reviewed the data analysis after it was complete. The expert reviewer did not know the participants' real names, as each participant was assigned a pseudonym. All three of these processes, using member checks, an expert reviewer, and a reflective journal, created an audit trail of my data that helped increase the validation of my study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Further discussion of the data analysis process was presented in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Communication, Language, and Literacy (CLL): CLL standards of GELDS cover expectations of literacy development that support how a child understands the relationships to hear words and sentences to form a comprehension and communicate using the spoken and written language (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020).

Early literacy: Early literacy differs from emergent literacy, as this term refers to the knowledge of reading and writing before the skills are learned by the students (Suggate et al., 2018).

Emergent literacy: A coined phrase of the 1980s, Emergent literacies are skills needed for children, birth to five, to learn to read. These skills consist of recognizing print, phonological awareness, oral language, and vocabulary (Heilmann et al., 2019).

Georgia Early Learning Developmental Standards (GELD): GELD standards are a research-based set of early learning standards used by most preschools in the state of Georgia. The purpose of these standards is to promote experiences of learning in a high-quality format to encourage student success when matriculating to primary grades from a preschool learning environment (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020).

Literacy: The term literacy has evolved from the original term of emergent literacy and is used to include all stages of development towards literacy acquisition and self-sufficient reading (Save the Children, 2020).

Literacy instruction: Instruction that is strategic and involves skills and strategies to help students learn to read. Strategies and skills may include teaching phonics, fluency, and vocabulary (Oliveira et al., 2019).

Phonological awareness: Phonological awareness includes the manipulation of aspects of oral language such as syllables, rhymes, and onsets (Piasta, 2016). Phonemic awareness involves developing a child's ability to hear and manipulate different sounds through verbalization. This skill is a major predictor of future reading success. Phonemic awareness is a skill usually assessed early in a child's learning experience during school (i.e., pre-k or kindergarten), but this skillset can also be used with older children who may have trouble reading (Groth, 2020).

Scaffolding: Scaffolding consists of a sequence of steps an educator should follow to help students achieve literacy skill development (Saracho, 2017).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The ZPD involves the skills a student can achieve with or without a teacher's help (Vygotsky, 1978).

Assumptions

Assumptions are often made in scholarly research, supporting the research design and focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One assumption for this study was that all participants provided factual responses during the semistructured interviews regarding their teaching practices. This assumption was necessary because the

participant's contributions were essential to the validity of the evidence collected. A second assumption was that all teachers provide literacy activities as part of their curriculum while using GELD standards. A third assumption was that pre-k teachers work with 4 to 5-year-old children. Each participant selected for this study needed to meet the criteria of being a pre-k teacher in a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia had a minimum of 2 years' experience teaching pre-k and used GELD standards to teach literacy. As research assumptions support the focus of the study, it was necessary to assume participants had relevant interests and experiences that would help answer the research question (see Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Scope and Delimitations

There is an expectation that early educators establish the foundation of literacy practices to ensure strong literacy skills and reading success for students (Hendi & Aswami, 2018). The scope of this study involved exploring pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. There was a need for literature regarding how pre-k teachers perceive challenges implementing state-mandated literacy standards, like GELD standards, to help with the enhancement of lessons regarding literacy skills, and the support they needed to teach. GELD standards are only used in Georgia early learning centers, specifically 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds. Understanding pre-k teachers' perspectives regarding Georgia's research-based learning standards (i.e., GELD standards) may

provide information that can improve the instructional practices of pre-k teachers who teach skills to help students reach emergent literacy goals.

There were several delimitations involved with this study. The first delimitation involved the setting. The research was delimited to five specific research sites during this study, selected because of their proximity to the school district near my home. The second delimitation involved the participants. The participants were delimited to teachers of pre-k students who had a minimum of 2 years' experience using GELD standards. These delimitations prevented the generalization of findings to other geographical locations; however, as this study aimed to explore perspectives, generalization was not a priority.

To support the selected scope and delimitations of the study, transferability was necessary. In qualitative research, transferability is achieved by providing detailed information about the study findings (Amankwaa, 2016). Transferability was supported by maintaining accurate documents; however, transferability is determined by the reader. For this study, I documented detailed information supporting the transferability of the research.

Limitations

The limitations can sometimes be beyond the researcher's control (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview questions used during the data collection process were limited based on the teachers' personal views and experiences, rather than answers based on the knowledge of research. Another limitation included the specificity of the location of this study, given research was conducted at five different schools near where I live, which

narrowed the depth of the data collection. In addition, using self-reports from the participants was limited because they could be biased. According to Malterud (2001), in qualitative studies, biases can also be subjected to the researcher, and that the study is obligated by the researcher to present data evidence findings without experience, opinions, and personal biases to avoid clouded judgments. My data analysis plan was subject to direct the flow of research interviews to avoid biases.

Purposive sampling was used in this study, which limited the population outside of the local group. Selecting 10 pre-k teachers with a minimum of 2 years' experience and certification in teaching in the state of Georgia using GELD standards was also a limitation. This technique was used to focus on the attributes of a specific group of people (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, the participants, although limited, had relevant experiences that contributed to the study findings. My professional experiences in education also presented a limitation of bias. Reasonable measures to address limitations may include using an expert reviewer to check my results, which assisted me in monitoring my biases.

Significance

In this study, I attempted to address a current gap in educational practice regarding pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The GELD standards were created to provide a framework for and a holistic view of emergent literacy for preschool teachers (Nguyen, 2018). These standards served as a guide, along with the conceptual

framework, when asking questions during the interview about teaching practices. By identifying pre-k teachers' perspectives of needed support from challenges they face implementing GELD standards, early educators could use this information to enhance, modify, or make changes to their pre-k curriculum. The findings from my study could help pre-k teachers teach literacy more holistically and increase their lesson plans promoting literacy, especially phonemic awareness (see Kaminski & Powell-Smith, 2016). These changes could result in positive social change by creating more collaborations among teachers, which could lead to new standards in early literacy instruction, specifically phonemic awareness. My study results may provide early childhood educators with information that could lead to changes in lesson planning, subsequently incorporating effective strategies in emergent literacy instruction (see Kaminski & Powell-Smith, 2016). In addition, if pre-k teachers make changes to their lesson plans, this could potentially improve literacy skills in children, specifically phonemic awareness, and decrease the reading gap in large urban areas of Georgia.

Summary

The research presented in Chapter 1 identified need to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Also presented was the importance of emergent literacy skills in predicting future reading success. There is a need for pre-k teachers to exemplify effective literacy teaching practices such as phonemic awareness, which aligns with the GELD standards. In Georgia, 74% of students are reading below their expected grade

level (Holloman, 2019); pre-k students that are behind in emergent literacy skills face challenges achieving literacy success once they reach kindergarten. As a result of limited existing research regarding GELD standards and teacher perspectives, this study aimed to fill the gap in practice regarding pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to address the problem of student literacy achievement as they reach kindergarten.

Chapter 2 presents a detailed review of the literature. Information is provided regarding the conceptual framework of the study, including language and literacy skills, ZPD, applications of ZPD in the classroom, and developmentally appropriate practices. Key variables and concepts related to literacy skills are also presented. Information was presented regarding early literacy teaching practices, literacy development, professional development, and teacher qualifications. The chapter concludes with a summary that transitions to Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of literature as it relates to meeting the challenges of implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. This study was important because it allowed teachers to share their perspectives regarding the significance of literacy development in early education classrooms. Teachers play an important role to children's development in early childhood classroom environments when it comes to emergent literacy (Putman, 2017). Therefore, the study results could provide early educators with information that could lead to changes in lesson planning; subsequently, incorporating effective strategies in literacy instruction (see Kaminski & Powell-Smith, 2016).

For decades, experts have tried to determine the best way to teach reading in classrooms (Shea & Roberts, 2016). Early educators are usually expected to incorporate research-based literacy practices to ensure reading readiness when students enter primary grades (Hendi & Aswami, 2018). In the 1980s, emergent literacy evolved and became a vital component of the preschool curriculum, with research supporting its use (Meacham et al., 2019). Over many years, the educational recommendations of three professional organizations regarding emergent learning led to the establishment of literacy models or standards, which encompass all necessary literacy skills (Eke et al., 2020). Literacy models were established to help teachers demonstrate skills and strategies in different ways by providing opportunities for students, using procedural and interactive skills (Rohde, 2015).

In Chapter 2, I provided insight into the effectiveness of early literacy instruction and the GELD standards, which was used to support this study. The research presented in this literature review coincided with teachers' experiences regarding their perceptions of the effectiveness of literacy instruction and literacy models, which have been used to help guide teaching practices. I discussed Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of ZPD. In addition, I highlighted relevant topics identified throughout the literature review, including (a) early literacy teaching practices and techniques, (b) literacy development, (c) early literacy instruction, (d) professional development, and (e) teacher qualifications. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary and a transition to the next chapter.

Literature Search Strategy

Multiple databases were used during the search strategy to support this basic qualitative study. These databases included the Walden Library, EBSCO, Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), SAGE, Google Scholar, ProQuest, PsycINFO, National Institute of Early Education Research, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The literature review for this study encompassed a variety of search words and phrases correlated with the study's purpose, problem statement, and research questions. The following key terms were used to search peer-reviewed articles in the academic databases: *early literacy instruction, early literacy teaching strategies, perceptions and experiences of teachers teaching early literacy, early childhood literacy, literacy teaching practices in early education, teacher qualifications, and teachers' philosophies on emergent literacy*. These key terms were selected based on the focus and connection of the conceptual framework, the problem, and the purpose of

the study. All efforts were made to locate current and relevant peer-reviewed, full-text articles with a low percentage of articles that were written prior to 2016 and most articles published between the years 2016 and 2020. Based on the keywords used, some older peer-reviewed journals were deemed appropriate due to the historical significance for the study and were used as supporting sources.

Conceptual Framework

Saracho (2017) suggested that by using theory, purpose, and practice, young children could be involved with vigorous language development opportunities to guide them into becoming competent readers. Phonemic awareness is an essential component to the successful gains of reading and writing, allowing readers to understand how words are composed of individual sounds. These individual sounds are called phonemes, the ability to manipulate sounds (Piasta, 2016). A focus on phonemic awareness aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that defines the ZPD where children need to experience developmentally modeled and appropriate literacy instruction compatible with their advancement level (Hume et al., 2016). The heart of ZPD is allowing children to become self-regulated learners by placing instructions on the teacher's part to assist and guide the learner's intellectual developments through planned collaborative activities for phonemic awareness. McLeod (2019) evaluated the emphasis of Vygotsky's role in language development with the belief that infants can learn language skills. During a child's first year, they learn many concepts necessary for the foundation of functional language (McLeod, 2019). Children tend to obtain knowledge in an educational setting through interaction with peers and teachers. Vygotsky believed that through active

engagement, children learn the process of reading and, thus, acquire this skill. Knowledge then develops, which ensures long term academic success. Within developmentally appropriate environments, literacy instruction and development will flourish into standard literacy. As children learn through active engagement, teachers should not only engage but observe children during their interactions throughout the day to support and further expand their ZPD. When children increase their developmental skills, teachers can then slowly separate their support from the student (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory designated ZPD as the place where children can learn, the conceptual framework for this study. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory purported children learn best in the ZPD. As discussed in Chapter 1, CLL.6 in GELD describes one of the standards located under CLL and focuses on phonological awareness (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020). Phonemic awareness is just a subcategory under phonological awareness, but not listed within the GELD standards' cards. In other words, educators are expected to ensure the success of phonemic awareness via the main teaching standard of phonological awareness which is listed under CLL.6 standard. Although pre-k teachers are aware of these standards that support early literacy there is still a large reading gap in large urban areas located in the state of Georgia (Holloman, 2019). The ZPD presents a process that shows the distance between an individual's current level of intelligence and their potential intellectual level (Saracho, 2017). The ZPD is critical when determining a child's level of development when reinforced by an adult (Eun, 2019). Also, the ZPD expands a child's achievement abilities during instances when the child needs assistance and, perhaps, modeling from the

instructor (Saracho, 2017). Language and literacy skills emerge early in a child's life, and these skills continually develop, which coincide with the sociocultural theory that defines the ZPD (Saracho, 2017).

Literacy is a skill that can be cultivated with practice such as literacy-related play, shared story reading, and other related literacy experiences that explore the natural environment of children, which may or may not require a teacher (McLeod, 2019). To address gaps in literacy instruction in the early childhood setting, opportunities provided to pre-k students are needed, with a specific focus on literacy development practices (McLeod, 2019). As Saracho (2017) noted, assessment and modeling are essential functions of the educator in relation to developing literacy skills. The knowledge of a child's ZPD assists adults with scaffolding early learning activities in the educational or home environment (McLeod, 2019). Therefore, scaffolding can only be effective if teachers know and understand how to teach it properly, so the scaffolding does not hinder students' learning (McLeod, 2019). To help improve the intellect of students, Vygotsky reconstructed the method for ZPD, connecting it to scaffolding (McLeod, 2019). Saracho (2017) highlighted how pre-k teachers that understand the value of scaffolding to effectively model language and literacy skills can offer students opportunities to succeed and develop.

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978) designed the ZPD, which allows time for young children to learn a new skill or meaning (Putman, 2017; Veraksa et al., 2016). Vygotsky's ZPD is the interval between a child's current intellectual level and potential intellectual level.

According to Vygotsky, cognitive learning is a continual process that involves moving from a current intellectual level to a higher one. Teachers should encourage a child's ZPD by facilitating intellectual activities, supporting their connections to past experiences, promoting social connections, and encouraging children to be innovative (Veraksa et al., 2016). Vygotsky expressed the need for more adult guidance during the process of scaffolding the children's lessons, to produce a strong written and oral language of early literacy skills in the home and school environments. While in school, the knowledge of a child's ZPD assists teachers to scaffold early learning activities (Veraksa et al., 2016). Scaffolding and guidance can be developed by the pre-k educator offering support for developing early literacy skills in various environments.

The ZPD is part of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is an area of learning development that occurs when a student is given direct assistance from a teacher or a peer (McLeod, 2019). ZPD measures the gap between a child's competence level (the level at which a student can work independently) and their potential development level (level of development, with the help of a teacher), which leads to the need for scaffolding (Ho & Lau, 2018). Scaffolding is essential to a child's learning and development (Ho & Lau, 2018). Scaffolding is needed to help develop the student's skills (Ho & Lau, 2018), and pre-k educators are essential to ensure that lessons and activities are developed using a scaffolding approach.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a strategy used in most preschool education classrooms to modify a task based on the skills of a student (Saracho, 2017). The cornerstone of scaffolding lies

within the work of Vygotsky (1978), who theorized that a young child is more experienced and obtains more knowledge by interacting with peers, teachers, and parents. These interactions are vital components of a child's success (McLeod, 2019). Vygotsky introduced the concept of scaffolding to describe the contingency of support, which helps children improve their skills beyond their capacity (Bruner, 1981). Rohde (2015) suggested that preschool teachers may need to differentiate language instruction in their classrooms, given children with relatively low language skills would require different instructional support than children with higher language skills. Scaffolding could be used as a teaching strategy in an unbalanced skillset situation (Saracho, 2017). Many educators use educational learning standards as the basis for lesson scaffolding.

A teacher may scaffold their lessons based on students' skill levels and needs (Bruner, 1981). A child's ZPD involves a skill or proficiency that a child cannot fulfill without a teacher's or peer's support (Bruner, 1981). For instance, if a student knows all their alphabet letters but cannot read or write words (even with guidance), the student will need assistance reading and writing (Bruner, 1981). With a teacher's help, the student can learn how to read and write shorter words based on their ZPD (Bruner, 1981; McLeod, 2019). Young children learn new skills and concepts daily, so a more manageable approach for a teacher is to use instructional scaffolding inside the classroom. This could be helpful, given that students are exposed to what they learn, frequently, and through social interactions (Bruner, 1981; Saracho, 2017). If a teacher understands a student's ZPD, they can adapt the scaffolding teaching methods with the student in many subjects, including reading and writing (Bruner, 1981).

Scaffolding can be supported in many ways in the classroom to aid in student development. The benefits of scaffolding include motivating students and correcting student errors, which lead to important realizations (Saracho, 2017). Children need scaffolds to help them reach higher levels, and then assistance should be removed, gradually, so the student feels a sense of independence (Bruner, 1981). When scaffolds are well constructed, opportunities are presented for student learning to be optimized. Scaffolds facilitate student independence with the help of teachers as well as simply being in an environment surrounded by social interactions (Bruner, 1981).

Sociocultural Theory

According to Vygotsky (1978), children acquire most of their learning through social interactions with other children who are already skilled in those areas. A child can model behaviors they observe other children do or even follow verbal directions from other children (Bluiett, 2018). A child normally learns their language, actions, and instructions from parents, peers, and teachers, and acquired information is used as a guide for their behavior (Bluiett, 2018; Sheridan & Gjems, 2017). Most of a child's literacy gain is gathered by learning during their social interactions or from their home environments (Perry et al., 2018). Social interactions occur and pre-k educators can use these interactions to encourage desired behaviors.

According to Vygotsky (1978), a child is completely dependent upon the people around them until they learn to be independent. Vygotsky shared that his sociocultural theory starts through interaction and when the actual interaction starts. Children imitate behavior and information they receive and observe from others, and they transform this

input into their learning processes (Bluiett, 2018). Vygotsky noted that when students and teachers interact, they can create dynamic partnerships that encourage learning.

Vygotsky's research, regarding social interactions, asserted that exchanges of information support the learning process.

Applications of ZPD for the Classroom

Once a teacher fully understands which scaffolding approach is most appropriate for their student, they can develop a child's ZPD (Putman, 2017). There are many applications of ZPD that can benefit students during early education. For instance, teachers could use ZPD during small group sessions (Putman, 2017). All children in the classroom are typically on different levels, developmentally, and some children are skilled enough to complete tasks independently (Morrison, 2015). During small groups, a teacher can support and assist a child who needs guidance until the child can complete the task on their own (Putman, 2017). The GELD standards provide support for teachers to fully understand emergent literacy as an interactive process for skill building (Nguyen et al., 2018). Teachers can better facilitate emergent literacy in the classrooms if they have access to a model such as the GELD standards (Nguyen et al., 2018). Pre-k educators often use planning time to develop plans using standards, practices, and fundamental literacy skills that have been effectively used in the past.

Fundamental literacy skills, such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening, need to be effectively incorporated into children's language and literacy programs (Rohde, 2015). If early education teachers implement the GELD standards appropriately, educators could provide students with the opportunity to learn socially, to learn through

conversation, and to scaffold instruction (Saracho, 2017). The GELD standards present literacy in a holistic manner, which supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, highlights the need for children to explore throughout the day to learn (Guseva & Solonovich, 2017). According to Fonseca (2017), if a pre-k program is rich in early literacy skill-building, which aligns with the GELD standards, then students may acquire the necessary early literacy skills to succeed when entering kindergarten. Recognition of early learning styles has been articulated in previous research studies since emergent literacy was introduced. Copple and Bredekamp (2008) noted how, since 1966, emergent literacy had developed further into existing models of emergent literacy, focusing on discrete skills without the acknowledgment of the environment children are surrounded by developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). Emergent literacy, a phrase coined in the 1980s, helped define the different stages of literacy development (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Emergent literacy helped support the necessary preliminary skills for children birth to five, to become successful readers and writers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2008). Since this advancement, research has evolved and become more complex regarding emergent literacy; therefore, resulting in standards, such as GELD standards, that has specific definitions of CLL. Rohde (2015) revealed that a child's capability to develop emergent literacy skills depends on their gateway to literacy experiences, and the experts from whom they learn these skills. Emergent literacy was based on the theory that children acquire literacy skills before they are taught to formally read and write (McLeod, 2019). For example, literacy research supports the idea that scribbles, doodles, and drawing pictures are first steps towards reading and writing, as are recognition of signs

and symbols (Sheridan, 2009). If children birth to five are provided experiences that promote emergent or early literacy skills, a foundation that leads to building literacy skills, such as reading, can form (Save the Children, 2020). Pre-k educators can assess a child's development to determine progress and promotion.

Sometimes, literacy is promoted based on a child's knowledge (Farley et al., 2017). Educators often teach literacy skills according to what the children already know, rather than enhancing their literacy skills (Brown et al., 2015). One practice that can be implemented is developmentally appropriate practices (DAP), a model required in some early learning programs, in which teachers are required to determine daily classroom instructions based on the knowledge of the child's development (Brown et al., 2015). DAP is a fundamental model used in early childhood classrooms, relying on how children should be taught and treated as individuals (Farley et al., 2017).

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is an intentional teaching approach promoted and observed through active learning environments, such as small groups, learning centers, and recess (Brown et al., 2015). Many children develop in an anticipated manner (Bakken et al., 2017). DAP uses the knowledge of a child's development, including their age, individuality, social and cultural appropriateness, characteristics, and experiences, to make the best decisions during teaching to promote the child's learning and development (Betawi & Jabbar, 2019). By observing, documenting development, and providing an active learning environment for children, teachers can make decisions and further a child's developmental progress by resolving conflicts (Bakken et al., 2017).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009) suggested that teachers meet the needs of students by utilizing developmentally appropriate practices. DAP ensures that early learning programs uses research and evidence-based practices to effectively meet the needs of the children in the classrooms (NAEYC, 2009). NAEYC (2009) also provided educators in the early education field strategies for teaching young children developmentally appropriate practices to use as an approach to educating those children, based on theory and practice. NAEYC (2009) attested those children learn best when techniques are taught in ways that cater to their individual needs and abilities. The DAP guidelines address five key areas, including a) evaluating children's development and learning, b) teaching to intensify learning and development, c) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, d) establishing a caring community of learners, and e) cultivating mutual relationships with families (NAEYC, 2009). NAEYC highlights teaching practices presented through literacy. Merging DAP with learning theories can provide learning opportunities for children participating in high-quality early childhood programs (Colker & Koralek, 2018; Lim, 2015; NAEYC, 2009). DAP guidelines exist to promote teaching methods that cater to children's developmental needs through individual learning (NAEYC, 2009).

Teachers must arrange their classroom environments, so they provide appropriate ways to teach children according to their matched stage of development (Betawi & Jabbar, 2019). Understanding a child's strengths and weaknesses allow educators to develop ideas and learning opportunities for each child (Betawi & Jabbar, 2019). Developmentally appropriate practice supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of

cognitive development and a child's ZPD. Physical environments can help facilitate a child's prior knowledge while expanding their ZPD. This assertion supports the constructivist's belief that learners construct their knowledge through interactions within their environment, which stimulates and challenges their thinking (Betawi & Jabbar, 2019). This study was needed to address a gap in practice regarding the support pre-k teachers need meeting challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching emergent literacy, specifically phonemic awareness.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variable

This section of the literature expands on the knowledge of researchers concerning strategies, factors, and practices which provide support for early education classrooms. The viewpoints shared during this study from the teachers provides valuable insight, as early educators' perspectives relate to the purpose of my study. Key concepts guided this study through the exploration of early pre-k teachers' perspectives regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching emergent literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The key concepts also guided the exploration of how the standards affect emergent literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, in their classrooms. Pre-k teachers' perspectives helped to understand the problem of the study, which concerned literacy achievement before reaching kindergarten. The key concepts, derived from relevant topics identified in the literature review, include a) early literacy teaching practices and techniques, b) literacy development, c) early literacy instruction, d) professional development, and e) teacher qualifications. The quality of education should be a consideration for all early childhood programs (Falenchuk et al., 2017). The

following sections present information regarding the five key concepts found in the literature, which guided and supported this study.

Early Literacy Teaching Practices and Techniques

The first concept guiding this study was early childhood literacy teaching practices and techniques. Practices and techniques examined the strategies teachers use in their classroom practices to improve emergent literacy skills (Piesta et al., 2020). When informing educators of teaching practices and supporting children's literacy development, their language and literacy knowledge need to be considered (Piesta et al., 2020). An educator's knowledge of learning literacy provides support for instructional practice as a tool to relate to children's learning (Piesta et al., 2020).

Early childhood education curriculum has evolved over the years, and many modifications have been made to language and literacy skills (Saracho, 2017). Understanding which practices and techniques are effective is essential to early education. As Saracho (2017) suggested, the strategies and activities teachers use in their lesson plans can help improve children's literacy. Relevant to this study, Saracho (2017) defined what is developmentally appropriate to model in pre-k classrooms for literacy performances. Initially, teachers were not allowed to use print knowledge inside of their classrooms, given the concerns of children reading ahead of their time (Saracho, 2017). This former practice was based on Gesell's (1940) theory regarding development and maturation. It is essential for researchers and educators to be aware of these changes and to improve their own skills and knowledge for the betterment of their programs (Saracho, 2017). Saracho (2017) suggested that children's language and literacy development

mature with the practice of literacy skills, adult interactions, and a child's learning environment.

With a focus on state standards and policies, Jung and Han's (2013) research supported the exploration of the effects of mandated practices. Jung and Han considered factors related to kindergarten reading skills by investigating reading scores. These factors included teachers' efforts, students' minority statuses, and learning outside of school (Jung & Han, 2013). Findings revealed teachers who exerted more effort when teaching literacy techniques yielded better reading results from their students than students who had only read more frequently outside of school (Jung & Han, 2013). D'Agostino and Rodgers (2017), who reported reading achievement data collected in three different years (2009–2010, 2011–2012, and 2014–2015), indicated that students improved in reading literacy skills given recent shifts in instructional policies and practices.

Bassok et al. (2016) recognized that changes to instructional policies and practices had transformed kindergarten into the new first grade regarding literacy achievement. Over a 12-year period, research concerning the creation of literacy profiles for students learning to read indicated that more improvements are needed during early childhood education, as students reach kindergarten and first grade (Bassok et al., 2016). Bassok et al. used nationally represented data sets to document the comparison of students' academic levels when they entered kindergarten in 2010 to the levels for students who entered kindergarten in 1998 (Bassok et al., 2016). Bassok et al. shared new policies were

established, as findings indicated that students often entered kindergarten with more math and literacy skills than they did in the nineties.

According to Snow and Matthews (2016), there are some effective instructional methods for teaching literacy. Teachers create learning opportunities using vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonics, and phonemic awareness skills in the early grades of pre-k through fourth grade (Snow & Matthews, 2016). My study focused on phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness indicates a student's ability to employ sounds in a word (Saracho, 2017). An example of building phonemic awareness is demonstrated in the research of Bulat (2017). Children need to recognize individual sounds in one word. A teacher may ask, "What is the first sound in Red?" The children should respond with a statement such as, "the first sound in red is /r/." Educators who teach early literacy expect students to learn 26 uppercase letters and sounds and 26 lowercase letters and sounds, with equates to 104 basic associations. The goal of phonemic awareness is for all students to acquire the literacy skills needed to read and comprehend independently (Bulat, 2017). Bulat argued educators should provide direct teaching, feedback, and verbal communication to their students. Snow and Matthews (2016) suggested that children's literacy skills can improve over time by evaluating and introducing practices which can be varied and matched, rather than having a complex program implemented as a single practice.

Farrell and Ives (2014) presented a case study that reflected the classroom practices of English as a second language (ESL) teachers' beliefs about reading. The case study addressed preschool English teachers' practices in early literacy instruction (Farrell

& Ives, 2014). Results from this case study indicated that early literacy skills contributed to teachers' reflections, classroom practices, and explorations (Farrell & Ives, 2014). Participant teachers from the study built strong foundations based on their reflections and classroom practices (Farrell & Ives, 2014). As teachers reflected, they became more aware of the impact their beliefs had on their classroom practices (Farrell & Ives, 2014). Farrell and Ives shared findings regarding teachers' beliefs and noted that participants emphasized the importance of practicing early literacy instruction, using evidence-based research. The findings from this study could help-fill the gap in practice about literacy instruction.

Cress and Holm (2017) discussed the concerns of kindergarten teachers who were obligated to teach the common core standards as a part of their instructional curriculum. In their research, they shared how core standards are essential when encouraging rigor within the classroom. Standards provide a foundation for educational curriculum, and Cress and Holm (2017) stressed how, in kindergarten, core standards could help educators understand the pedagogical and developmental knowledge of writing in primary education. Kostelnik et al. (2019) acknowledged some concerns of early learning standards, which need to be considered when using the common core in early education. It was asserted that the standards should have been more thoughtfully planned, the planning for instruction and the methodology should be the focus, and support for early childhood programs, teachers, and families should be the foundation of support for implementation and practice (Kostelnik et al., 2019). Suggestions from Kostelnik et al. included recommending techniques regarding curriculum development and teaching,

ensuring all children learn. One suggested way to amplify their curriculum would be to create learning environments throughout the classroom (e.g., print words and pictures on chart paper regarding what children are learning) for children to foster and develop their skills (Kostelnik et al., 2019). In addition to the practical application of teaching standards, teachers should understand the concept of scaffolding. The use of the scaffolding technique can help students develop their writing skills and guard their learning by teaching them what they know then building their confidence level by incorporating new skills (Cress & Holm, 2017; Kostelnik et al., 2019).

Another practice teachers could use to educate young children regarding literacy development is the organization of technology (Sofkova et al., 2017). Sofkova et al. explained how transforming the traditional approach to print-based instruction into digital formats could provide supportive literacy instruction. In Sofkova et al.'s research, teacher participants reported positive developments when incorporating both the traditional style and the digital method of teaching literacy (Sofkova et al., 2017). In a similar study, Bianchi (2019) examined information and communication technology used within the primary classroom. Bianchi (2019) noted a strong connection had been found in the Swedish school system between the use of technology in the classroom and improved student skills. Similarly, Lyngfelt (2019) studied digital text used in primary grades among multilingual classrooms. In their study, Lyngfelt found that digital tools used to enhance literacy improved student comprehension and communication skills.

It is vital for teachers to explain to students the concepts of emergent literacy to help them grasp the content (Dunks, 2018; Humphries et al., 2018). Humphries et al.

conducted a qualitative study that explored early childhood teachers' perceptions of integrating social-emotional skills into classroom-based literacy instruction. In this study, Humphries et al. shared that many of their participant teachers had little or no training in classroom-based literacy instruction and the integration of social-emotional skills. The researchers also shared that teachers' attitudes about classroom instruction and curriculum affect teaching practices (Humphries et al., 2018). In a similar study, Dunks (2018) explored the perceptions of primary teachers regarding how they perceive literacy instruction. The researcher expressed that increased literacy instruction preparation is necessary to support primary grade educators. Relevant to my study, the findings of Humphries et al. and Dunks supported the notion that there is a problem with the techniques and practices relevant to how teachers educate young children in literacy.

Literacy practices inside the classroom can include alphabet recognition, phonological awareness, learning to write, and oral language (Maureen et al., 2018; Rohde, 2015). Maureen et al. attested the development of literacy skills should begin at an early age. The researchers supported literacy practices, including traditional and digital storytelling, to encourage learning reading skills such as print knowledge, alphabet recognition, and phonological awareness (Maureen et al., 2018). Tunmer and Hoover (2019) also supported establishing literacy skills in early childhood. They shared educators need a conceptual framework that includes cognitive development milestones. Understanding children's capacities help educators plan appropriate lessons. Establishing a strong foundation in literacy is vital to a child's future success. This section of early literacy instructional methods briefly summarized how educators incorporate teaching

practices and effective techniques to ensure literacy development success through classroom practices, curriculum, and early learning standards.

Literacy Development

The second concept guiding this study, literacy development, explored several theorists' and teachers' views regarding how to improve early literacy skills (Maureen et al., 2018; Walker & Carta, 2019). Children are considered young, active literacy learners who develop knowledge of emergent literacy by observing and participating in meaningful literacy-related activities (Piasta et al., 2020). These activities could include storytelling, alphabetic games, listening stations, interactions with peers, and journal writing. Literacy development is a learning process for children beginning at birth and continuing as an ongoing process throughout a child's life (Maureen et al., 2018). In this section of literacy development, research expands on the discussions of teachers' beliefs and their roles in literacy instruction and development.

Children's perceptions and understandings of literacy are influenced by the instruction they receive, as well as personal experiences (Kinkead-Clark, 2017). In the study conducted by Kinkead-Clark (2017), the experiences of six children were explored regarding how they relied on literacy skills. The researchers concluded that these kindergarten children acquired skills through connection and participation with their teachers and peers (Kinkead-Clark, 2017). Sometimes, an effective literacy environment is incorporated into the child's everyday environment (Baroody & Diamond, 2016). Bluiett (2018) found that students' engagement with literacy activities was more prominent during free play and large group time. Bluiett (2018) also noted that students'

phonological, letter-word knowledge, and expressive vocabulary were assessed and were associated with large group activities and free play.

According to Bassok et al. (2016), there have been significant changes devoted to teachers' beliefs concerning kindergarten readiness. Based on their results, kindergarten teachers' responses increased over the years, from 30% to 80% believe students should learn to read before entering kindergarten (Bassok et al., 2016). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2015), students who progressed to fourth and fifth grades had to demonstrate their knowledge of words used in a literacy text form to indicate reading, vocabulary, and comprehension skills. Results from the school vocabulary reading assessments indicated a 75 to 79% increase from the fourth through eighth-grade students (NAEP, 2015). Having a strong literacy foundation to build upon in the early years is essential (Maureen et al., 2018), and the increase in knowledge presented in the NAEP study reflects why early literacy is essential to young learners.

Zhang et al. (2015) discussed how circle time is one of the best ways to support literacy development in early learners. Zhang et al. also noted that teachers had more positive results in literacy development when they introduced vocabulary and phonics from stories instead of solely reading to the children. Zhang et al. further analyzed literacy instruction during two different large group activities. In one group, the activity involved solely book reading, and in the other group, there was a nonbook reading activity component introduced before a story was shared. During the nonbook reading time, the teacher elaborated on literacy knowledge by introducing vocabulary and letters.

Over the course of the semester, changes occurred in the teacher's literacy instruction, and results indicated that in the nonbook reading group, teachers were more engaged in the process of literacy development than the teachers in the other group who had book reading only (Zhang et al., 2015). The teacher in the nonbook reading group developed a literacy knowledge base to help students navigate scaffolding. Also, more vocabulary words were taught to the students during the nonreading activity (Saracho, 2017). The findings from this study added value to my conceptual framework using Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which supports learning in the ZPD, demonstrating a need to use effective literacy practices in early childhood settings.

Park et al. (2015) focused on the importance of mastering literacy in early childhood education through the development of literacy skills. These researchers conducted a large case study of 42 third-grade students in the Northwestern states (Park et al., 2015). Park et al. presented the importance of students mastering reading skills during the early grades and explained that this mastery had long-term effects, which progressed through their school years. In their study, the literacy development of students was assessed using a reading and comprehension skills test. The results indicated that students who mastered reading fluency demonstrated early language development success in primary grades, and this mastery could be viewed as a positive predictor for student benchmarking (Park et al., 2015). Reutzel (2015) conducted a study to expand research findings regarding handwriting, phonemic awareness, and print. Reutzel outlined his findings using the National Early Literacy Panel. Reutzel further discussed and updated the earlier findings using research questions regarding literacy development from

his colleagues (Reutzel, 2015). Reutzel summarized key points in areas of literacy development such as handwriting, phonemic awareness, alphabet letters, print content, textual structure, and writing workshops. Within the responses and research given, Reutzel felt that, by addressing the key points of literacy development, teachers would be better equipped to provide students a framework of literacy concepts and skills. The extended research findings could help teachers implement better practices vital to literacy development (Parecki & Slutzky, 2016).

In another study focused on literacy development, Lerner and Lonigan (2016) examined the patterns of bi-directional relationships between alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. They found that letter acknowledgment and phonological awareness were related to the development of reading skills (Lerner & Lonigan, 2016). However, Lerner and Lonigan found vocabulary was not related to the growth of phonological awareness. These bi-directional relationships begin early in the developmental process when children begin preschool. Literacy relationships can be used as an alternative option when considering general growth in letter knowledge and phonological skills (Lerner & Lonigan, 2016). This information regarding literacy components that improve reading helped extend the research of my study by providing a holistic understanding of early literacy and the elements that effectively develop literacy skills.

According to Cebolla-Boado et al. (2016), preschool is considered highly beneficial in educational achievement. Early literacy development is often discussed among educational researchers and stakeholders (e.g., administration and school boards)

concerning ways to help extend literacy improvements globally (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2016). Literacy development is often discussed among educators and administrators concerning the implementation of instructional improvements, awareness, achievements, early intervention, and further research. Cebolla-Boado et al. indicated that preschool is a beneficial time to develop a literacy foundation for students matriculating to primary grades. The research was collected using the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, which provides data regarding fourth-grade students and their reading literacy measures. Despite this, data indicated the positive benefits of preschool education and early literacy development on the fourth-grade students who were tested using standardized reading tests (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2016). If educators can understand the positive effects of early literacy development, they can better promote children's early literacy skills (Baroody & Diamond, 2016).

Early Literacy Instruction/Emergent Literacy

The third concept guiding my study, early literacy instruction, explored the multitude of instructional methods teachers use in a classroom to help achieve reading goals, including early intervention to prevent reading failure in primary grades (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). The success of early literacy performances depends on the instruction and intervention strategies implemented (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Effective literacy instruction includes appropriate environmental settings, experiences, and socialness from peers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). Early literacy instruction should be embraced using research and by practice (Outlaw & Grifenhagen, 2020).

Literacy instruction is discussed in this section, as well as learning approaches and literacy predictors by research analysts.

Phonemic awareness is an essential skill and a reading predictor for achievement (Kaminski & Powell, 2017). Many schools subscribe to the three-tier model of reading and behavior for guidance and student support. Dougherty Stahl (2016) explained how the three tiers are divided. Tier 1 is a school's core reading program designed for the majority school population (Dougherty Stahl, 2016). Tier 2 recognizes students that are struggling and offers supplemental reading instruction with the focus on bringing students back to grade-level expectations. Tier 3 is more intense support for students not making progress in Tier 2 and may include students with learning disabilities. Dougherty Stahl explained how interventions are necessary to provide support and evaluate a student's progress towards literacy goals.

A research study on phonological awareness interventions was done by Kaminski and Powell (2017), discussing the lack of early literacy skills at kindergarten entry. The authors of this study used three interventionalist who were previous teachers that were educated and held early childhood education classroom experience. Training was provided during two-three-hour small group session on assessments of how to examine and place children in a Tier 3 phonemic awareness intervention for early literacy skills. The participants were provided support and feedback on how to assess children with early literacy learning needs. (Kaminski & Powell, 2017). The interventions were conducted for ages five to 10 with results concluding that there were gains in phonemic awareness for most of the children; however, results seemed to be more effective for

some of the students than the general population. Although educators had training on assessing and placing students for phonemic awareness, there were still other factors that contributed to why all students did not fully succeed such as behavior, attendance, or special education status (Kaminski & Powell, 2017).

Md-Ali et al. (2016) explored the effectiveness of instruction in literacy and numeracy characteristics, which teachers perceived as important in guiding their students. As educators teach their students, they should also interact with them to help improve their school readiness (Hatfield et al., 2016). Hatfield et al. conducted a multi-site case study of 222 teachers and 875 preschool children using a scoring system of children's literacy and inhibitory control. Using the classroom assessment scoring system (print knowledge and phonological awareness), greater outcomes were demonstrated when a teacher's instruction methods involved interacting with their students (Hatfield et al., 2016). Reflecting on the discussions of teachers' experiences with early literacy instruction, the results of Hatfield et al.'s study are relevant to my study's problem and purpose statement concerning the effectiveness of literacy instruction.

Janssen et al. (2019) shared that early literacy instruction and intervention were the bases for early predictors of school success. When intervention is implemented early, preschool programs could improve the outcomes of their students' reading skills and possibly reduce their need for special education services (Beecher et al., 2017). Austin et al. (2017) developed a response to the intervention (RTI) framework to screen students based on their levels of need, by placing students in proportioned groups with their peers, indicated as Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3, to help produce high-quality instruction for

students who may fall behind in skill development (Austin et al., 2017). All Tiers represented layers of instruction used to match students' instructional needs to support their academic performances (Austin et al., 2017). The researchers pinpointed children who could be identified as needing instructional literacy and language support while using RTI measures (Austin et al., 2017). Successful RTI measures, along with other fundamental instructional practices, can help address problems in early language and literacy practices (Austin et al., 2017). This approach can facilitate collaboration amongst early educators to make educational decisions that develop well-integrated instruction for students who struggle.

Using effective instruction, teachers can help students comprehend reading and writing skills in numerous ways with familiar activities to help children reach their expected literacy potential in correlation to their age (Connor, 2016). There is a need for consistency with instructional practices of literacy development. The more teachers know about effective literacy instruction and development, the more they can motivate students to get excited about literacy (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016). This section regarding early literacy instruction compiled research concerning social support from teachers to help students develop and flourish in literacy. Students' academic performances benefit and flourish when schools employ teachers who nourish their education and skills using appropriate professional development opportunities (Brown et al., 2015).

Professional Development

The fourth concept guiding my study, professional development, considered the importance of how teachers should conduct themselves and how enhancing their

education and experience could promote better achievement in children (Brown et al., 2015). Based on the 2019 NAEYC standards for initial and advanced early childhood professional preparation programs, professional development was suggested for teachers to prepare these literacy programs using their knowledge and skills regarding young children's needs to influence their learning and development (NAEYC, 2019). Teachers must consider key elements and standards when creating environments that are interactive, healthy, respectful, challenging, and supportive (NAEYC, 2019). Professional development in early education prepares teachers, using a vision of excellence, by providing essential learning tools that benefit both teachers and students (Egert et al., 2018).

Early literacy skills are critical to a child's development in reading-related activities; therefore, understanding how teachers can support early literacy development is equally important (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019). Findings from their study indicated that classrooms with multiple literacy skill implementations were negatively associated with effective teaching and learning (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019). Early Reading First, which provides consistent coaching to teachers who serve lower-income students in early childhood programs with a focus on language and literacy, was one of the implementation programs assessed (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019). This initiative supports the use of professional development opportunities to assist schools in search of learning models to assist with students' reading performances.

Ottley et al. (2015) examined how professional development could enhance educators' knowledge and beliefs regarding language and literacy. Although professional

development is ideal for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills, conducting further, substantial research has been recommended to gauge the production of higher outcomes from children based on this professional development (Brown et al., 2015). Ottley et al. (2015) found that when using a growth model, teachers improved their knowledge after professional development opportunities were provided.

Professional development helps improve the self-efficacy of teachers, which changes their outlook on literacy instruction. When examining the potential relationship between a teacher's level of education and impact on instruction, Lin and Magnuson (2018) noted that professional development training could affect children's learning outcomes, considering teachers' experience as well as their education. Joo et al. (2020) investigated the positive effects of promoting early literacy in preschool classrooms, using professional development. Teachers who received professional training received higher gains in literacy performances by their students than teachers who did not complete the training (Joo et al., 2020). Milburn et al. (2015) investigated the results of teachers being coached as a part of a professional development requirement in emergent literacy. In their study, there were 31 educators and four children from each of the educators' classrooms, and all participants were placed into experimental groups with five coaching sessions (Milburn et al., 2015). The five coaching sessions encompassed in-service workshops regarding how to incorporate and discuss phonological literacy and print during a post-story writing activity. Results from the study concluded there were no significant differences in print and phonological awareness results during individual interactions with children. However, due to professional development trainings, teachers

and students did engage more in phonological awareness activities during small groups, revealing literacy achievement among those students. This result indicated that interactions in small group settings encouraged more engagement in conversations between the students and educators concerning literacy (Milburn et al., 2015).

As educators enhance their ongoing teaching experiences to advance their work in early childhood education, they develop deeper understandings of upholding professional development practices (Beschorner & Woodward, 2019). The knowledge and skills a teacher may acquire from professional development trainings help determine how much young children learn and experience in the classroom (Beschorner & Woodward, 2019). Professional development and educational training enhancement opportunities are important as early educators establish a foundation for young learners to succeed during primary grade levels (Piasta et al., 2017). When educators participate in professional development and educational trainings, they become more qualified teachers and can contribute more fruitfully to the field of education (Lin & Magnuson, 2018).

Teacher Qualifications

The final concept guiding this study, teacher qualifications, deliberated factors which may play a role in a young learner's academic gains, based on a teacher's level of education (Lin & Magnuson, 2018). When observing how teachers instruct and measure the quality of early education classrooms, teachers' educational experiences must be considered (Falenchuk et al., 2017). In Falenchuk et al.'s study, students were assessed by their developmental domains such as cognitive, math, and language, and the teacher's education was measured based on the children's academic outcomes. Results concluded

that, although teachers' education levels had some impact on their students' educational outcomes (specifically in language and vocabulary), it was recommended that more research be done to discuss further and future issues to improve the quality of early childhood education settings (Falenchuk et al., 2017). Falenchuk et al. also suggested the need for teacher assessments regarding how educators interact with their students for literacy development purposes, and further professional development trainings concerning literacy practices in early childhood settings is necessary.

Lin and Magnuson (2018) examined teachers' levels of education regarding school readiness childcare centers. The researchers wanted to determine if a teacher's education reflected their students' educational outcomes. Lin and Magnuson synthesized data from 189 childcare centers and 661 children, and they considered educational experiences, including teacher training, education degrees, and credit-based training in early childhood education. The results from the linear model software they used indicated that having a degree does not predict student success in early academic skills (Lin & Magnuson, 2018). In a research study by Madhawa et al. (2017), the goal was to examine the educational levels of preschool teachers as they might relate to classroom practices. The researchers concluded that teachers who were educated at a higher level demonstrated better classroom practices (Madhawa et al., 2017). Madhawa et al. suggested that teachers with educational degrees exhibit more effective classroom practices.

Schacter et al. (2016) evaluated teachers' beliefs, education degrees, and knowledge in relation to language and literacy instruction. Using the quantile regression

method, results indicated that teachers with an early childhood degree encouraged language and literacy interactions in the classroom (Schacter et al., 2016). Conversely, teachers with some early childhood teaching experience and no degree negatively impacted early language and literacy instruction (Schacter et al., 2016). It is also believed that educators' attitudes are impacted based on what they do in the classroom, regardless of them having a teaching degree or certification. Despite education, this belief further attests educators create positive outcomes related to instruction by encouraging peer interaction, facilitating small group instruction with literacy activities, and managing large group activities that incorporated literacy skill-building (Janssen & Lazonder, 2016). This belief has been discussed among researchers of early education in numerous ways, and Schacter et al. shared mixed findings of educators' beliefs related to this subject matter.

In addition, Setiawan (2017) explored students' levels of education in early childhood based on teachers' creativity levels. Setiawan's findings revealed that teachers who obtained a bachelor's degree or higher possessed higher self-efficacy and instructional support, thus enhancing students' skills, cognitive development, and language in the classroom using feedback and communication. Setiawan noted having a highly qualified teacher in the classroom is a clear indicator of achievement. Teachers' qualifications are significant to emergent literacy because their teaching practices could either positively influence or hinder a child's development based on the teacher's educational qualifications and or experiences (Setiawan, 2017). Understanding how higher levels of education can improve classroom instruction and learning outcomes

could persuade teachers to further their education and acquire more teaching skills in the various areas of emergent literacy development (Lin & Magnuson, 2018). My research could encourage positive social change by presenting findings that encourage collaboration among pre-k teachers and lead to more effective approaches to literacy development that could result in decreasing the gap in reading.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter included an overview of the study, including focus, problem, and purpose. Information regarding my literature search strategy was presented along with my conceptual framework. The literature review included information on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that specifically described the ZPD and the Georgia pre-k standards (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020), which framed this study. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) and Georgia's pre-k standards model (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020) provided supporting information regarding the findings of this study. The conceptual framework and literature presented essential data for researchers and early educators. The literature review focused on key concepts of the study, which encompass early literacy teaching practices and techniques, literacy development, early literacy instruction, professional development, and teacher qualifications. Kaminski (2017) mentioned there is evidence that a lack of kindergarten language and literacy skills exist. Early literacy skills set the foundation for literacy success; therefore, an educator's role is crucial to ensure there is effective literacy instruction inside of the classroom and integrated into the curriculum (Hendi & Aswami, 2018).

The literature review was a compilation of past, and current research which supports the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. After a thorough review of information regarding early language, literacy skills, key variables, and concepts to literacy instruction, it was concluded that early childhood teachers might have insufficient skills regarding the effectiveness of their literacy instruction. Therefore, this study was needed to address a gap in practice regarding the support pre-k teachers need meeting challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Finally, the findings from this study contributed to the existing literature concerning early literacy instruction and help create positive impacts in classrooms.

Chapter 3 presents the research design and methodology. A basic qualitative design is described and why this methodology best suits my study to pursue possible answers to my research question. This chapter begins with an introduction, a description of the research design, the role of the researcher, the methodology, data collection, and the data analysis plan. Next, information includes issues of trustworthiness, the ethical procedures, and concludes with a summary that transitions to Chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. There was little research concerning pre-k teachers' views on the effectiveness of state standards of literacy; therefore, this topic must be further investigated. In Chapter 3, information about the research design, rationale, and methodology of the study is presented. Information is also provided including instrumentation, procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and concludes with a chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

Given early educators are expected to establish research-based literacy practices to ensure practical reading foundations (Hendi & Aswami, 2018), qualitative researchers deem exploring the experiences of early educators concerning early literacy instruction as essential. Research is needed to provide an understanding of educators' limited literacy knowledge concerning the significance of literacy development in early education classrooms (Rohde, 2015). A qualitative study involves exploring the perspectives and experiences of participants; whereas quantitative research is used to generalize findings based on numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of this study was not based on a generalization of data; therefore, a quantitative methodology is not suitable. Qualitative research is often used to explore the experiences of participants (Merriam &

Grenier, 2019). As this research study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of early educators, a qualitative method was more appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The following research question guided this basic qualitative study:

RQ1: What are pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?

This study used a basic qualitative design. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that using interviews in qualitative research provides valid data and helps the researcher better understand the phenomenon through personal experiences and interactions from the persons being interviewed. Considering the recommendations of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), this basic qualitative study could help the researcher understand the perspectives of early childhood educators using semistructured interviews. Although a questionnaire could be used in a qualitative study, a questionnaire would not have provided an in-depth explanation of the problems concerning literacy instruction relative to the purpose of this study (Miles et al., 2014). A qualitative research design more appropriately met the needs of the study because interviewing participants can help the researcher understand teacher perceptions regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching emergent literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. A qualitative study allows for a research narrative and detail-rich data to emerge, whereas a quantitative study would result in statistical results without consideration of the human perspective (Miles et al., 2014).

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative study, the focus was on understanding the exploration of pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The role of the researcher in qualitative research involves more inquiry-based questioning and communication with participants than in quantitative research (Taj & Ajjawi, 2016). To address the purpose of this study, I conducted semistructured interviews and observed the participants during their interview processes to see if they displayed any body language that might have relevance to their answers. During the semistructured interviews, open-ended questions were asked to encourage participants to provide detailed answers, which can lead to in-depth discussions (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Given I am knowledgeable in early childhood education, I was aware of my personal biases, which could influence the interview process as I am a pre-k teacher in a private learning academy. My educational background and teaching practices as a pre-k teacher concerning phonemic awareness and GELD standards could present personal biases towards the practices of other teachers I interviewed. Personal biases included preconceived opinions concerning mandated state standards and how they influence literacy instruction. Kalayc and Serra-Garcia (2016) explained that expert biases could be hard to separate from the investigation. To avoid biases, my data analysis plan followed through an organization, and interpretation of data collected (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I also used a reflective journal before, during, and after the interview processes to keep track of my thoughts to mitigate any personal

biases I may have as a pre-k teacher. This journal allowed me to track what I observed during the interviews, such as body language or other nonverbal cues participants displayed during the interviews (see Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The focus of this study was relevant to my field of work as, currently, I am a pre-k educator at a private learning academy. This study was conducted at schools different from my place of employment to help mitigate any biases I had at my school, and the selected learning academies did not employ any educators I knew, directly or indirectly. I did not use participants who were personal acquaintances, former subordinates, or former professional colleagues. I was also not the supervisor of any participants. The schools selected were in a southeastern state in the United States. Purposive selection ensured every potential participant had the same shared experiences relative to the study (see Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ten pre-k teachers were chosen from five local schools that host pre-k programs. Participants were chosen based on their responses to my email request with the recruitment flyer. There were no incentives provided to the participants.

Methodology

This basic qualitative study was used to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. In this section, aspects and applicability of the selected methodology are presented. Information is included concerning the participant process regarding participant recruitment efforts. Data collection and instrumentation are described, along with information regarding plans to analyze the data.

Participant Selection

With a focus on early education, the target population for this study was certified pre-k educators from the state of Georgia. Sampling allowed me to collect and analyze data from pre-k teachers who had knowledge and experiences relevant to the research study (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Also, purposive sampling ensures every participant is part of the target population with experiences that are relevant to the study focus (Johnson & Christensen, 2020). So, participants were recruited based on their roles in early educational pre-k grades, and I used purposive sampling. Criteria for participation was met before data collection began. To be selected for this study, pre-k teachers needed to be certified in early childhood with a minimum of 2 years' experience teaching in a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia using GELD standards. Each participant was a certified educator with a CDA and at least a bachelor's degree in education or a related field. Many large urban school districts in the state of Georgia have a large population of teachers and early educational programs, which creates an ideal potential participant pool for recruitment. Teachers were recruited by an email sent to the school administrators at schools with a pre-k program within a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia, to request permission for this study. The recruitment process began with contacting the school administrators, and multiple public and or private schools were used within the same county for participant recruitment. I conducted research in five different schools. The study sample consisted of 10 pre-k teachers. Since more than 10 pre-k teachers met the criteria and were willing to participate in this study, they were placed in a waiting pool. Just in case data saturation had not occurred with 10

pre-k teachers, I began conducting semistructured interviews with participants on the waiting list until I was sure that data saturation was reached, which did occur at 10 participants.

Prior to institutional review board (IRB) approval, a letter requesting permission was sent to the school administrators and included a summary of the study, contact information, and a copy of the recruitment flyer for teacher participants. After obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB and the school district, school administrators were contacted to discuss email recruitment flyers and to help elicit potential participants. A recruitment email was appropriate as many schools were not opened due to COVID-19. The recruitment flyers briefly explained the study, including its purpose, how the participants' feedback could contribute to the field of early education, participant criteria, and participant confidentiality. The flyer included my contact information, including a school email address, and phone number. There are 114 schools encompassed within the Georgia lottery that uses GELD standards (Georgia Department of Early Learning, 2020). However, only five schools were selected in a large urban school district in Georgia. All schools with a pre-k program were contacted for potential participation. The first five public and or private schools that responded were the focus schools of the study. Each of these schools were contacted for permission to recruit participants using the site letter requesting permission and each school administrator was asked to return written approval before the study can began. Criteria for participants included (a) state educator certification and (b) being currently employed as a full-time pre-k teacher at one of the identified schools with at least 2 years of teaching experience using GELD standards.

Once granted permission from the schools' administrators, the first five schools that responded received flyers by email. The selection of participants was achieved through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allowed me to collect data and examine it from participants who shared similar experiences and knowledge. After I received site permission from the school administrators, the recruitment process began, and each potential participant received a copy of a consent form. The consent form was separate from the recruitment flyer. Once I verified, they met the criteria, I required the potential participants to reply with an "I consent" statement to document their agreement to participate. Participants were also informed they may exit from the study at any time for any reason, without penalty.

As this study was a basic qualitative design, a sample size of 10 pre-k teachers were appropriate. In qualitative research, a small sample size is appropriate if the saturation of data is achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saturation of data occurred when information became repetitive, and no new information was gleaned from the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that in qualitative research when conducting interviews, a small sample size is appropriate as meaningful data can be gathered from the participants. As more than 10 pre-k teachers qualified for this study and wanted to participate, I kept them in a waiting pool in case they were needed for data saturation to be reached.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, a variety of instruments can be used to gather detail-rich data (Houghton et al., 2013). The instruments for gathering data in this study included the

researcher and the interview protocol. The researcher is often viewed as the main instrument for gathering data (Houghton et al., 2013). Castillo-Montoya (2016) recommended that qualitative researchers take a systematic approach to the data collection process to ensure a valid interview instrument is used. Castillo-Montoya (2016) recommended utilizing four phases to develop an interview protocol, including (a) research question alignment, (b) constructing inquiry-based conversations, (c) feedback on the validity of questions, and (d) piloting the interview protocol. Interviewing participants in a qualitative study provides the researcher with detailed information regarding experiences and perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Instrumentation considerations were made with a focus on the recommendations of Castillo-Montoya (2016) and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that defines ZPD, where children need to experience developmentally modeled practices. The interview questions were based on answering the research question regarding exploring pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness.

Interviews

Qualitative data collection requires instrumentation that supports interview questions, observations, and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, semistructured interviews using open-ended questions were used with each of the participants to gather data. The instrumentation of this study was interviews. Using semistructured interviews ensured continuity among the participants (see Oplatka, 2020).

I also used a journal to write down information on factors that might be worth notation (i.e., interview environment, body language). A journal assisted with keeping my thoughts on track to mitigate any personal biases I had as a pre-k teacher.

Due to the global pandemic COVID-19, interviews were not conducted face-to-face. I had to change my plans and each of the interviews was completed via Zoom. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience by emailing them to schedule a date and time they were available. Participants were interviewed one time, and audio recordings were conducted using an Apple iPhone Xr. Recording interviews with each participant allowed for accuracy during the data analysis process (Siedman, 2019). Each interview took approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. Information collected from the participants was used for data analysis.

Interview Protocol

To answer the guiding research question, an interview protocol helped with interview questions that were created using the following question as a basis: "What are the pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?" With this question as the basis of the study, I created the interview questions. The interview guide was used to ensure that each participant in each interview was asked the same questions in the same order. Thematic coding was applied to the resulting data to answer the research question in my study.

Ensuring the validity of a study involves conducting a pilot study in which I elicited volunteers (unrelated to participant volunteers) who were subject matter experts.

Pilot study volunteers reviewed the research question for clarity and relativity. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that using a pilot study can help ensure interview questions are clear, concise, and will result in feedback which will answer the research question. No recommendations were given by the pilot study reviewers; therefore, the interview protocol questions remained unchanged and were facilitated during the participant interviews.

Sufficiency

Using open-ended interview questions from the interview guide, I collected information concerning pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was designed to support gathering research that supports the focus and framework of the study. Participants were asked to honestly share their perspectives and experiences when responding to interview questions. Interview responses were audio-recorded with the participant's knowledge and using an audio recorder ensured accurate data was collected.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment

The primary method of recruitment for this study was an emailed recruitment flyer, which included a summary of the study, how it could benefit the field of early education, and my contact information. Once Walden University's IRB approved the study (01-19-21-0528148), site consent was sought from five identified schools from a

large urban school district located in the state of Georgia to distribute recruitment flyers. The flyers were posted in public workspaces where potential participants could view the study information (i.e., mailroom, breakroom, or workroom). Due to school closure from COVID-19, recruitment flyers were sent to school administrators. After requesting permission from the school administrators, I waited until I received written permission from each school administrator before distributing recruitment flyers. The COVID-19 pandemic required many businesses to close, including schools. However, given this study occurred amidst continued restrictions, permission to distribute study recruitment flyers by email was deemed the most appropriate approach.

Participation

The recruitment flyer listed my contact information, including my Walden University email and phone number. Educators who were interested in participating in the study contacted me through email to express interest. Each participant was a certified educator with a CDA and at least a bachelor's degree in education or related field. The participants had a minimum of 2 years' pre-k teacher experience in the state of Georgia using GELD standards, and they must be currently employed fulltime at one of the approved school locations. Recruitment was gathered through emailed flyers distributed by the school administrator; therefore, this was not a snowball sampling technique, as that would include participants passing the information along to other potential participants. If the participant was eligible, I scheduled a time to conduct the interview with them and sent them a consent form by email to review and sign. I required the potential participants to reply with an "I consent" statement to document their agreement

to participate. Information was also provided in the consent form that ensured participants had the right to exit the study at any time for any reason, without penalty.

Data Collection

Once the researcher received the consent form from the participant, an interview time was scheduled at the convenience of the participant. The interview was conversation-driven by the semistructured questions created, based on the research question. Given the COVID-19 social distancing requirements, the interview took place using online video communication (i.e., Skype, Zoom, or Facetime). I conducted one interview per participant until 10 participants had been interviewed. I conducted the interviews in a quiet office space in my home. Each interview lasted between approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded using an Apple iPhone Xr to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered. The audio-recording was transcribed using a transcription service. The transcriptions were reviewed to identify codes and themes relevant to the research question and focus of the study.

Another form of data collection included the use of a reflective journal. Taking notes in my journal included observations made during the interview to make a note of body language I felt was displayed during the interview, which could affect the answers. Bashan and Holsblat (2017) shared that keeping a journal helps researchers record experiences, thoughts, and observations in a chronological order that can be used to identify a theme or focus of the information provided during the interviews. The frequency of data collection using a reflective journal occurred before, during, and after each of the 10 interviews. The duration of all data collection took place within 1 month.

Data Analysis Plan

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), data analysis is inductive and used to develop themes and patterns. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also noted data analysis are used in research to organize and interpret the data collected, which can help answer the research question. Once the data was collected, it was transcribed, and the transcripts assisted me with coding and organizing the data to become more aware of participant responses (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). By using a coding process, I could understand different theoretical directions from the data collected (see Saldana, 2016). Interviews were used as a form of data collection, and the interview protocol (see Appendix A) included semistructured questions that helped guide the interview conversation. The semistructured questions were created using the guiding research question as a basis. Findings from the data analysis process were organized according to the research question. Information gathered during the interviews were organized and separated based on the guiding research question. Organizing data by the guiding research question helped me identify themes and helped me gain an understanding of how educators' perspectives related to the focus of the study. Data gathered was organized by the research question and by participant code (PK-1, S1. PK-2, S1.PK-3, S2.PK-4, S2). Pre-k teachers were labeled PK1-10, and the schools were named but labeled as Schools 1-5.

Transcriptions are often generated from interviews in qualitative research. Using an online transcription service along with Microsoft word helped me code the data and helped analyze the transcribed interviews. The service Nvivo is a reliable option for many novice researchers. This service was used to transcribe the recorded interviews. Analysis

software is also commonly used to import data for the organization, coding, and analysis processes. Using the qualitative analysis program Nvivo helped me analyze the data gathered from the transcribed interviews. This software helped sort, code, manage, and better understand the data. Nvivo assisted in identifying certain phrases, words, and relationships distinguished amongst the data. The analysis software also helped create codes that represent the meanings gleaned from the interviews. Afterward, I used the program to group codes that shared similarities in meaning (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After using Nvivo, highlighted similarities in words and phrases helped me develop categories then themes.

Microsoft Word 2016 was used to record notations regarding study participants and details about the interview sessions. There was a record of relevant notes kept from the interviews, and the results are further elaborated in Chapter 4. Chapter 4 presents the findings in organized sections based on the research question and themes, along with participant responses, which provides insight regarding their perceptions. Finally, after spending adequate time collecting data, I looked for discrepancies in the content. Patton (2015) argued that credibility could link to the integrity of a researcher, and the researcher must look for data that can support other explanations for the study. If credibility became an issue, I planned for an additional review of the responses from the participants to note the discrepancies of the patterns and themes determined during the data analysis process.

One process used in qualitative research involving interviews is member checking. This process consists of summarizing the findings of each participant and

providing the summary to each participant for review (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, participants could review the summary for accuracy and had 2 weeks to respond for clarification, questions, or additions. If the participants did not respond, their member check summary stood as accurate, and participants were considered finished with the study. At the end of the 2-week member check period, participants were thanked for their participation and time.

An expert reviewer was recruited to review the codes, themes, and findings of the data analysis. An expert review was completed by a professional educator with an Ed.D. or Ph.D. in education. The expert reviewer assisted voluntarily and was required to sign a letter of confidentiality. I communicated with the expert reviewer using social media to ask a professional colleague or recommended education professional to participate as an expert reviewer. The expert reviewer agreed to the task, and they did not have any previous relationships with any of the participants. Once the expert reviewer checked the data for potential bias, the reviewer returned the findings to me and was expected to delete the research study files from their computer. I provided my steps for analyzing the transcripts to identify codes, and I also provided the research question and interview questions to the expert reviewer. The feedback from the expert reviewer was used as a second check against my analysis. The feedback provided from the expert reviewer was stored electronically with the other research documents in a locked folder on my computer, as required. After 5 years, research data and respective consent forms will be deleted from the locked and secure file on my laptop computer. If there are any hard

copies, I will store them in a locked file drawer in my home office. After 5 years, I will shred the hard copies.

Trustworthiness

Establishing trustworthiness and validity can depend on what is heard and seen while conducting a study. Establishing a systematic process for data collection and data analysis helped ensure the trustworthiness of the data. However, Ravitch and Carl (2016) mentioned that transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability are vital to creating trustworthiness. This section presents information regarding establishing trustworthiness within this research study.

Credibility

Credibility establishes the results of the qualitative material presented, which would be credible to the perspectives of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described that a researcher tends to seek feedback regarding their preliminary findings from some of the participants interviewed. Credibility was established by using a member checking process and including an expert reviewer to inspect the analysis. To validate the findings, a member check was conducted. For member checking, a draft summary of the findings was shared with the participants after the data analysis was complete to help the credibility of my study. During the interview I kept a journal and took notes. The notes and presumptions provided information about the phenomenon. Keeping a reflective journal allowed me to present a form of reflection and allowed me to review my reactions and thoughts, helping me keep personal bias in check. An expert-reviewer signed a confidentiality form before receiving findings and

analysis. Also, the expert reviewer reviewed the codes, themes, and findings from the data analysis to check for any biases that may have occurred during the data analysis process.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability (external validity) involves having an organized plan and process which can be replicated by future researchers to achieve similar results. When referring to the results of a basic qualitative study with transfers to other settings or contexts, it results in transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Based on the settings, participants, and context of the study using a thorough explanation, other researchers can analyze and transfer the results to future research studies (Creswell, 2013). To ensure transferability, I established detailed descriptions of the research processes, which are included in the study design and methodology. My semistructured interview questions and journal notes provided in-depth descriptions to the expert reader so they could easily connect to the elements of the study (see Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Transferability, in most research studies, is considered plausible if the findings from the research provide a detailed description (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In my study, transferability was determined by the expert reader and is presented in the findings as thick, rich details. The goal of transferability is to allow readers to make comparisons between this study and other research contexts by gathering as much information as possible. Readers can consider other factors of a study's findings instead of replicating the entire study (Creswell, 2013). For my study, the interview protocol, consent forms,

and detailed data collection information provided future researchers with information regarding how similar studies can be duplicated to yield similar results.

Dependability

When data is consistent, it is deemed dependable (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Miles et al. (2014) described qualitative research as dependable if it is stable over time. A qualitative researcher seeks to explain the world from the perspectives of those who perceive and experience it. Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted reliability as having a reasoned argument for how data is collected as well as the data needed to be consistent with the argument. This research study presented a reasonable argument for collecting data.

To establish reliability, I ensured the data drawn from the interview questions was reliable, considering its relevance to the research question. My research was conducted in an appropriate and professional manner and aligned with the questions asked in the interviews. Thick, rich descriptions from the interviews supported the narratives, and information participants felt necessary to share concerning the subject matter regarding early literacy support and effective strategies. The dependability of this study was fulfilled based on the data collection processes, my report of the findings, and the conclusions drawn based on results. Participants were shown a draft of the summary of the results to check the accuracy. After the participants returned their responses, I sent a draft of my findings to the expert reviewer.

Confirmability

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), a way to support confirmability is to explore the ways a researcher uses their data to interpret their personal biases. One way to

ensure confirmability is to determine the researcher has no personal biases. I interpreted what participant data demonstrated to readers in an unbiased way. Using an online transcription service assisted with coding data to ensure an understanding of the participants, and their interview responses were established. For further confirmability, a reflective journal was kept, and my notes were recorded after each interview to mitigate any biases I had during the interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Confirmability allowed me to substantiate the findings of my study. Participants expressed their unique perspectives during the study to help validate it. Confirmability was dependent on the data collected from the participants and if their responses could be corroborated. Findings were presented in themes and were organized by the research question. With confirmability, a researcher can have confidence during the interview process and during data analysis to understand the findings are representative of the participants and are free of researcher bias. This was supported by establishing credibility, which was determined by recording each participant's interview and instructing the participants to confirm what was recorded during the interview. Piloting interview questions was another way to establish confirmability. For this study, a pilot study, conducted first, helped ensure the interview questions were clear and concise. A pilot study also provided the opportunity to practice conducting an interview and plan for data collection.

Ravitch and Carl (2016) noted that maintaining a reflective journal during the interview and data analysis processes helps determine confirmability. I adhered to this insight, and during the data analysis process, I used an expert reviewer to examine the

data. I also showed all participants a draft of the summary of the findings to help relieve any biases. I used a reflective journal to consider my interactions with the participants, how listening was involved with the interview process, and how openness and attention were projected to contribute to confirmability (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Finally, my self-reflection continued throughout the data analysis process. During this process, close attention was paid to the data collected to ensure it did not conflict with my expectations and opinions. Careful consideration was taken and were included in the reflective journal. All the processes noted above contributed to the trustworthiness of the study and helped establish transferability, credibility, confirmability, and dependability.

Ethical Procedures

As this basic qualitative study explored the perspectives of pre-k educators, ethical considerations needed to be established. When working with participants during a qualitative study, potential ethical concerns must be considered to ensure the privacy and safety of the participants. Yin (2009) suggested planning some steps to guarantee the ethical protection of participants. Once teachers expressed their interest in participating in my study by contacting me through email, I emailed them the consent form individually to ensure confidentiality. Interviews were conducted individually in a private setting, such as my home office via Skype, Facetime, or Zoom. To ensure the privacy and protection of participants, I identified them through pseudonyms using identifiers such as P1. All teachers volunteered to be a part of this research, and all of them were given a consent form from Walden University to sign. A section in the consent under the risk and benefits reassured the participants that they could recant their decision to participate in

my study at any time. To establish ethical procedures, a request to conduct the study was submitted to the Walden University's IRB for review. Approval from the IRB was obtained prior to conducting the study. Feedback from the IRB helped guide me regarding the forms and other documentation needed for the study's data sources or sites used. Meeting the IRB standards has ensured the study follows ethical procedures and policies. Once approval from the IRB was met, the study proceeded, using the approved and appropriate protocols.

Ethical considerations were also made concerning recruitment materials. The recruitment flyer emailed to participants offered information regarding the study that was clear and provided confidentiality assurances as well as contact information to use for clarification concerns. Ethical considerations also included assurances to participants that withdrawal from the study was allowed at any time and for any reason. To maintain the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, personal and identifying information was not shared. Each participant was coded using a pseudonym of PK# and S# (i.e., PK-1, S1 equals Pre-k Teacher 1 for School #1) to protect participant privacy. Participant privacy and confidentiality was stressed in the research summary and on the participant consent form. The electronic data and respective consent forms will be secured for 5 years in a locked folder on my laptop computer, as required. After 5 years, the electronic research data and consent forms will be deleted from the locked and secure file on my laptop computer.

Responses from the participant's interviews were kept confidential. Only the research committee and I have access to the data pertinent to the study; however, I am the

only one who knows the participants' true identities. Data has been saved on a personal computer that is password-protected, and only I have access to the information. The data is secured for 5 years in a locked folder on my computer, as required. After 5 years, research data is to be deleted from the locked and secure file or shredded if there are hard copies.

Summary

This research study addressed the existing gap in practice regarding pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards, while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The role of the researcher was defined, and the methodology was presented. The methodology included information regarding the instrumentation, data collection processes, and participant recruitment. Information concerning the data analysis methods was also included, as well as information establishing trustworthiness. Ethical considerations were presented, as well. Following this chapter, Chapter 4 presents the findings from the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The research question for this study is presented below.

RQ1: What are pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?

I developed the research question for this qualitative study to help attain a deeper understanding of pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Data were collected by conducting interviews with 10 pre-k teachers. In prior chapters within this study, I discussed the problem, purpose, research question, and conceptual framework that guided this study. I also outlined the importance of early literacy development.

In Chapter 4, I present the research data and the results of this study. The chapter includes the setting, methods for data collection, a description of data analysis techniques, and results. Evidence of trustworthiness within the study will also be included. The purpose of this chapter is to present the analysis of data and the procedures for data collection and analysis.

Setting

Due to the global pandemic COVID-19, interviews were not conducted face-to-face. I had to change my plans and each of the interviews was completed via Zoom. A group of pre-k teachers located in a large urban school district in a southeastern state in the United States provided data for this study. To the best of my knowledge, there were no personal or professional organizational conditions that may have influenced the teachers or their experience at the time of the study that could have affected the data collection or interpretation of the study results. The 10 participants were all women who currently teach pre-k in the urban school district of the target state. The participants represented five different schools within the same school district.

Data Collection

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I began working on the recruitment process for pre-k participants from the selected schools. Site consent was sought from five identified schools from a large urban school district located in the state of Georgia to distribute recruitment flyers. After requesting permission from the school administrators, I waited until I received written permission from each school administrator before distributing recruitment flyers. Each school administration team submitted their approvals via email, approving me to interview teachers for this qualitative study. Educators who were interested in participating in the study contacted me through email to express interest. Criteria for participants included teachers needed to have (a) state educator certification and (b) be currently employed as a full-time pre-k teacher at one of the identified schools with at least 2 years of teaching experience using

GELD standards. Each participant was a certified educator with a CDA and at least a bachelor's degree in education or a related field.

Data collection involved interviewing pre-k teachers that met the criteria. The interview was conversation-driven by the semistructured questions created based on the research question. Given the COVID-19 social distancing requirements, the interview took place using online video communication. The interviews were completed via Zoom. Ten pre-k teachers located in a large urban school district provided data for this study. The data were audio-recorded using Zoom services for transcription. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded using an Apple iPhone Xr to ensure the accuracy of the information gathered. Also, another form of data collection included the use of a reflective journal. Taking notes in my journal included observations made during the interview to make a note of body language I felt was displayed during the interview, which could affect the answers.

The audio recordings were transcribed using a transcription service. I reviewed the transcriptions to identify codes and themes relevant to the research question and focus of the study. Member checking was used, and participants had the opportunity to review the transcriptions for accuracy and had 2 weeks to respond for clarification, questions, or additions. After 2 weeks, with no objection or requests for changes, the accuracy of the transcriptions and interpretations was deemed accurate.

Data were then sorted by school and teacher. Participant names were removed, and data was assigned a code to represent the teacher and school. For example, Teacher 1 at School 1 would be T1S1; see Table 1. All data was stored and saved on a password-

protected computer. No additional interviews (outside of the ten pre-k teachers) were needed, and no concerns arose during the interviews. Data collection procedures were outlined in Chapter 3, and each procedure was followed for this study.

Table 1

Demographics

School	Teacher
School 1	T1S1
	T2S1
School 2	T1S2
	T2S2
School 3	T1S3
	T2S3
School 4	T1S4
	T2S4
School 5	T1S5
	T2S5

Note. Each participant was given a pseudonym for anonymity.

Data Analysis

Once this data was received from the semistructured interviews, I began transcribing using a transcription service. I began coding and organizing the data after using Nvivo and highlighted similarities in words and phrases. After importing the data, all the interview files were created as cases. The cases, according to Quick Service Restaurant international (QSR- developer of the software), are the units of observation that can show a representation of different variables and that a researcher may want to further examine and differentiate (Clarke & Braun, 2019). These cases facilitated the process of comparison between research participants and provide useful insights into the data. In the first step (familiarization), once interviews were imported, they were read and

highlighted to gain familiarity with the data. In this step, according to Braun and Clarke (2019), the researcher should fully analyze the data to make sense of the data and gather a compelling narrative about what the statistics mean.

After getting familiarization with the contents of the data, initial codes were generated in the second step to capture the important features within the data. These codes were the recurring patterns (themes) across the data that were developed during this process of familiarization. During this process, coding stripes were made visible alongside the source. This source has allowed me to see that how the content was being coded and which codes were being used in the process.

In the third step, after all the data were coded and all the relevant extracts were highlighted, nodes were collated and examined to identify broader patterns of meaning (themes). Themes are different from codes as it consists of a sentence or a phrase and sometimes a combination of different codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019). After developing the potential themes within the data, all relevant information was organized under their respective themes. In the next step, all the themes, through the iterative process, were refined, organized, and categorized meaningfully into subthemes to develop a thematic framework. Similar themes and ideas were clustered in groups and organized in the thematic framework. In the last step, all these themes and sub-themes were explained and described in detail. All the steps of thematic analysis were employed during the analysis of the data.

Themes

Themes were developed and analyzed by comparing and combining codes and categories that appeared from the semistructured interviews. One theme that quickly emerged was the challenges teachers faced implementing the GELD standards. All participants shared how they integrated literacy across their lessons and through play. Approximately 15 categories emerged from the data (see Table 2). From the approximately 15 categories that emerged, I consolidated them into six major themes. The themes along with the corresponding categories are outlined in Table 2.

The research question that was the basis for this study was “What are pre-k teachers’ perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?” Participants shared their experiences and perspectives that were relevant to the research question. Six themes emerged from the coding of the transcripts. The six themes include: (a) challenges of implementing GELD standards, (b) ways literacy is incorporated into lessons, (c) teaching perceptions of GELD standards, (d) views on students and levels of literacy, (e) the teacher’s role in improving literacy skills, and (f) teacher views about the curriculum that has an emphasis on incorporating emergent literacy. Table 2 presents a list of the categories and themes.

Table 2*Categories Listed by Theme*

Themes	Categories
Challenges of Implementing GELD Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ineffective or lack depth • Lack of phonemic awareness • Not specific enough
Views on Literacy Incorporated into Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading activities • Through songs and videos • Through sounds • Vocabulary related tasks
Teaching Perceptions of GELD Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar with standards • Not familiar with the standards • Focuses on improving skills • Standard for improving literacy
Views on Students and Levels of Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can read words • Know letters and sounds
Teacher's Role in Improving Literacy Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration with families and teachers • Research • Use of different activities to challenge students
Teacher Views about the Curriculum with Emphasis on Incorporating Emergent Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not follow any structured curriculum • Frog street curriculum • Other curriculum

Note. Themes and categories derived from data analysis.

Results

The following sections present the themes that emerged from the data and include descriptions and quotes that support each of themes. Each of the themes that emerged supports the study focus and the research question Each of the teachers shared their perspectives regarding the research question. The categories and themes that emerged are listed in Table 2.

Theme 1: Challenges of Implementing GELD Standards

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data analysis was the challenges of implementing GELD standards. All 10 participants offered information concerning how the GELD standards can present challenges to teaching literacy skills. Challenges included a lack of phonemic awareness among the standards, standards were not specific enough, and standards were perceived as ineffective and lacked depth. Most of the participants expressed the same thing on the standards and its lack of activities on phonemic awareness.

Six of the pre-k teachers believed a lack of phonemic awareness existed among the GELD standards. Participant T1S3 noted a lack of consistency in the presentation of GELD literacy standards. T1S3 shared, “they [GELD] don’t have a category for phenomenal awareness, but they’ll show something for phonological awareness, and they’ll say, okay, teach the letter A.” Comments such as this one presented a perception that GELD needs more clarity and consistency in promoting teaching standards. Like the thoughts of T1S3, T2S2 shared,

I would say I don't really think they [GELD standards] align together; I think that the standards are little low-end capacity, phonemic awareness, and knowledge, and the children being able to learn, understand, learn to read and understand what they're reading.

These two educators highlighted a need for alignment among the GELD standards to promote effective lesson planning. However, alignment was only one of the challenges pre-k teachers shared concerning using GELD standards.

Six participants expressed the GELD standards were not specific enough. T1S2 expressed,

It's hard to use a GELD standard because of its form. My lesson is in my plans for the day for the students because I don't feel like those standards really embody what it means when you're trying to teach children their sounds.

Similarly, other participants noted a lack of specification among the GELD standards.

T1S4 shared a need for more clarity on expectations of standards and delivery of practice.

T1S4 also noted:

Honestly, it [GELD standards] could be a little bit more specific. Like, for an example, before 48 to 60 months, it [GELD] says lessons differentiate sounds that are the same and different. There is also noticing isolating the initial and the end sound, which is, you know, all good and great. But there's not really any specific examples of that is what this looks like, this is what you know, this is how you can get from here to here, it's kind of is open to interpretation.

Overall, six of the 10 participants discussed a need for GELD standards to have more specific guidelines and instructions.

Four participants perceived GELD standards as ineffective, lacking depth. For example, T1S1 shared:

It's difficult when you have kids who can tell you the sound of each letter and blend, forming words compared to children who just simply aren't there yet. I don't have an issue with a structured curriculum, but I feel that any curriculum should provide the opportunity for creativity and allow teachers to adapt.

This is like the participants that expressed a desire for more specific guidelines; however, depth involves more. T1S5 shared:

I'm just trying to find a balance. I'm trying to go along with gels but at the same time trying to challenge the students at the same. At the same time, it's not easy when they [GELD] don't offer a lot of opportunities within that, within those standards. They don't have a lot of suggestions. So, we [teachers] just have to think of ways to extend learning.

Many participants shared that the lack of depth to the GELD standards left a gap in interpretation, and many teachers filled that gap of understanding with their own lessons and ideas they felt met the given standard.

Theme 2: Views on Literacy Incorporated into Lessons

Another prominent theme that emerged from the data analysis was participant views on how literacy was incorporated into lessons. All 10 participants offered information concerning differing views on effective means to incorporating GELD

standards into lesson plans. The practice of developing lessons based on standards is common in public education. For this study, participant views on standard incorporation included lessons that centered on reading activities, songs and videos, sounds, and vocabulary-related tasks.

Seven participants supported the incorporation of literacy skills into reading activities. For many of the participants, the incorporation of literacy skills involved interpreting the standards to match a reflective practice. For example, T1S4 shared, “a lot of times what I do is with literacy, I use project-based learning. And I also do author studies.” T1S1 gave more examples of how literacy skills are incorporated, sharing “we also do daily messages, questions, and answers, read aloud. We try to incorporate in every area of the classroom.” Literacy was also incorporated into other teaching aspects, such as through visual and musical components.

Six participants supported lessons of both songs and videos or sound. T1S1 shared that in the classroom, “we do a lot of silly songs writing game, rhyming games, really loud word building with blocks and daily journals.” Similarly, T1S2 shared how certain videos are used to demonstrate phonetics. Concerning the Jack Hartman videos, T1S2 explained, “I like his phonics videos because a lot of times you can see him moving his mouth to show the kids how to, you know, produce letter sounds and what different letters sounds sound like.” T1S5 offered similar lessons noting, “Oh, we sing songs. We sing songs. We play games. We read every day. And we do early morning messages where I try to encourage the children to sound out words that should be familiar to them.”

Along with reading, music, and visuals, other tasks were mentioned as helpful in incorporating literacy skills.

Three participants shared literacy skills that could be incorporated into vocabulary-related tasks. Sight word cards are often used to reinforce common vocabulary words. T1S3 shared using sight words to incorporate literacy skills. T1S3 shared:

Even if we go outside, we are trying to find things that are relatable to what the topic is or what the theme is for that week or that month. So, we do like a lot of vocabulary picture cards. So, each lesson we have, they come with a different set of cards, vocabulary cards as we this week we're talking about animals.

Games can also be used as an extension of what is being learned in the classroom. T1S5 shared how they reinforce learning and incorporate literacy skills into take-home activities. T1S5 explained, "I always go back to author studies because that's what I really, really like to deal when it comes to literacy. This was a [top] 10 brain activity, where we had different words on the bingo sheet." These games offer parents and guardians an overview of what lessons children are learning and provide opportunities for learning reinforcement at home.

Theme 3: Teaching Perceptions of GELD Standards

Another theme that emerged from the data was teaching perceptions of GELD standards. All 10 participants offered perceptions about levels of awareness concerning the GELD standards. Levels of GELD standard awareness ranged from familiar to not familiar with the standards. Nine participants shared they were familiar with GELD

standards, while one participant was unfamiliar. Of the teachers that were familiar with the standards, some shared that training on the GELDs was required. T2S3 explained:

It's required that you have [GELD] training ... So, the Georgia GELD standards are like a set of standards that are supposed to be supposedly researched-based early learning standards for children's birth through the age of five. ... It helps teachers follow a set of standards to help further develop or develop skills in children of the age group.

Noting how GELD standards are similar to other state standards, T1S4 explained that "they're all pretty much the same. I was in [another state], where I received most of my education and most of my background. And so, a lot of that crossed over." T1S4 continued by sharing,

Yes, GELD standards are what, in my personal opinion, is a guiding point, definitely appropriate standards that guide teachers to teach children specific skills that they need to know, or they need to be able to grasp follow, show various examples in their own way.

Five participants shared their knowledge of GELD standards as focusing on improving literacy skills. For example, T1S2 explained looking at "GELD standards to make sure that I am, you know, keeping up with a pace and ensuring that my students are getting skills, physical development and motor skills and things like that, cognitive development." T1S2 summarized sharing, "If I'm 100 % honest, I just feel like those GELD standards are there more so to help develop." T1S4 shared thoughts on how GELD standards are helpful to educators. Concerning the GELDs, T1S4 noted they are

“appropriate standards that guide teachers to teach children specific skills that they need to know, they need to be able to grasp follow, show various examples in their own way.”

Three participants noted GELD standards provide a standardized means to improving literacy skills. T1S3 explained how GELDs help through...

Music movement literacy, small group centers, phonological awareness, GELD standards are implemented throughout your whole entire year. Emergent literacy is something that we do on a daily basis ... it's incorporated only, to an extent, in the GELD standards. I don't feel like it's, supposed to be age-appropriate because your standards are implemented for most age groups. But I don't feel like it aligns.

Most participants were familiar with the GELD standards and shared how the standards can be used as a basis or guide for knowing which literacy skills to incorporate into lessons.

Theme 4: Views on Students and Levels of Literacy

Views on students and their levels of literacy were another theme that emerged from the data. All 10 participants offered opinions on what determines a measure of the level of literacy. Students enter pre-k programs are various stages of literacy development. For example, T1S1 shared how some students come to pre-k

With a very rich literacy background. They understand that each letter has a sound, and others [students], like I said, are just learning. Some of them don't even recognize every letter in the alphabet, so to speak. So, we're [pre-k educators] dealing with different levels of foundation.

Five participants shared reading words determined achieved levels of literacy.

Identifying the level of literacy typically comes in the form of assessments. For example,

T1S5 shared:

In the beginning of the year, we assess the children to see what they know so far, a lot of the children already know their alphabet. But we go through the letter sounds with them and try to figure out where they are at. And we go from there.

Assessments can help pre-k teachers with developing future lessons and activities that reinforce essential literacy skills. Many of the participants considered reading words and sentences as demonstrating preparedness for entering kindergarten. T2S3 shared:

I have a total of 22 students in my class, and 16 of them are reading. Some of them are reading full-page books, age-appropriate books, and some of them are reading words off the books, which is still considered reading, whereas others are just sounding out the words on the page.

Five participants shared knowing letters and letter sounds determined achieved levels of literacy. T1S5 explained:

When we did our assessment, most of the children knew all the sounds to the letters, and we've actually started going on over prefix sounds. So, what does it sound like when you blend the T and H together? Or a C and L or a G and an R? So, GELDs do not tell you to do that necessarily. But, um, like I said, we go past and beyond those recommendations.

Feedback like this presents how pre-k educators are assessing children to determine what levels of literacy have been achieved. Educators can also identify areas of weakness or areas that may need reinforcement in the classroom or at home.

Theme 5: Teacher's Role in Improving Literacy Skills

The teacher's role in improving literacy skills was another theme that emerged from the data. All 10 participants offered feedback concerning a teacher's role in teaching literacy skills. Some of the roles of an educator that were discussed included collaboration with teachers and families, research, and the use of different and challenging activities. Promoting literacy is essential in the classroom and is a responsibility of pre-k educators. Stressing the role of improving literacy skills, T1S1 explained:

I feel as though when I teach class, most of the time it's at least half of the children have a strong foundation or at least have been introduced to some form of literacy on a regular occasion. Yeah. Okay. So, I feel like teachers need to be as creative as possible, as long as they're staying within state guidelines. And what they're doing is developmentally appropriate. And I feel that they need to use every opportunity to incorporate literacy, not just in the reading center or in the library, but all out the classroom.

Similarly, T1S5 shared the importance of using every opportunity inside and outside of the classroom to improve literacy skills. T1S5 explained:

I feel that teachers can use every opportunity, and every center throughout the classroom throughout the day, to incorporate literacy, it does not matter where

you are, if you're in the math learning area, or the science learning area. They also need to collaborate with parents and caregivers, so that they can get them involved as well, because it's also it's important that it's not just happening at school, that they understand this, and your child is learning to read.

These ideas on working with other teachers, caregivers, and parents were also supported by other participants. Five participants stressed the importance of collaboration between the teacher and the families of the students. For example, T2S3 talked about how "teachers should share more ideas together. They should collaborate. They should be on the same page of understanding what it is that students need in areas of awareness." Other participants also talked about working with others to promote and improve literacy skills.

T1S3 shared:

I feel that teachers need to collaborate more, especially with kindergarten teachers, so that the transition is manageable and easier. Because I'm friends with kindergarten teachers, I've worked with kindergarteners, and I see that some pre-K students or teachers are not on the same page.

Three participants noted that research was essential to improving literacy skills among students, and four participants shared using challenging activities could improve literacy skills. For example, T1S1 shared:

I feel like teachers need to be as creative as possible, as long as they're staying within state guidelines. And what they're doing is developmentally appropriate. And I feel that they need to use every opportunity to incorporate literacy, not just in the reading center or in the library, but all out the classroom.

T2S2 also emphasized the importance of using various learning opportunities to promote literacy. T2S2 explained, “I think by just pushing it out more, pushing off for phonemic openness ... more throughout the day. Speaking to the kids more, breaking down their words, reading or ... just seeing words.” Many participants noted how the teacher’s role is to recognize opportunities that can be used to incorporate and improve upon literacy skills.

Theme 6: Teacher Views about the Curriculum with Emphasis on Incorporating Emergent Literacy

The final theme to emerge from the data was teacher’s views on curriculum with an emphasis on incorporating emergent literacy skills. Six participants shared views on topics such a problem of following structured curriculum, Frog Street curriculum, and other curriculums. Some of the participants shared a set curriculum was not always necessary to help children learn essential literacy skills. For example, T1S2 shared:

I am not in public school, and I have been teaching early literacy for students for the last 5 to 10 years. And like formally teaching as but to 10 years and so I have a pretty good idea of what I’m doing, and I do not have a formal curriculum that I follow, I just kind of go off of past experience and students. So, just kind of, you know, assess the students, see where they are and meet them there, and move them forward.

Another participant explained how one specific curriculum might not be a solution for all schools, or every pre-k program. T1S3 explained:

Every school uses something different, or some schools don't use curriculums that often in schools where we have not used the curriculum. We use Frog Street curriculum, and I think it does a pretty decent job teaching emergent literacy or phonemic awareness to the students. It provides great examples that challenges the students, and I think it readies them. It teaches them big words, words of the week, it teaches us how to show how to break down the word, or word throughout the week teaches the meanings of the words. And it also provides small group exercises so that the students can go into their groups and complete tasks on their own, in relation to that phenomenal awareness, exercise activity, or activity.

At a different school, another participant shared thoughts on Frog Street curriculum and using a set curriculum in general. T1S5 shared:

We have a Frog Street curriculum, but I'm not necessarily following a structured curriculum all the time. Okay, because like I said, we do make adaptations, and we extend learning beyond that because the issue that I spoke about with GELDs, it's pretty common, and most pre-k curriculums as well. They don't extend the knowledge beyond.

Although many pre-k teachers were familiar with set curriculum, such as Frog Street, not every educator had the same experiences. T2S4 explained how standards were the driving force of teaching, not set curriculums. T2S4 explained:

We don't really have a set curriculum. If we do. I don't know about it. But our directors or not, our director is not strict on a curriculum ... So just making sure we complete our lesson plans and implement the GELD standards because it's

required by to have GELD standards listed in your lesson plans. I don't know of any curriculums; I would say that specify that they have a detailed focus on phonemic awareness. So, I can't say that I would know one that would actually align well with the GELD standards or that would incorporate or have a specific section in awareness.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were all critical to this study. Full descriptions, peer review, and triangulation were all used in matters of trustworthiness, validity, and credibility (see Creswell, 2012). I presented a detailed description of the data to describe my findings (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through my detailed description, other readers will be able to evaluate the appropriateness of transferring my findings to future research on The GELD standards, curriculums, and early literacy activities. The context of the study was described to assist the reader in determining the transferability of the results from this study.

Credibility

Credibility was established by using a member checking process and including an expert reviewer to inspect the analysis. After having an expert reviewer sign the confidentiality form, she was elicited to review the codes, themes, and findings from the data analysis to check for any biases that may have occurred during the data analysis process. My notes and presumptions provided information about the phenomenon. Journaling presented a form of reflection and allowed me to review my reactions and thoughts, thus helping me keep personal bias in check.

Transferability

Transferability is a common method used to assess trustworthiness in qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability is achieved when the reader, not involved in the research, can identify, and see what is being read (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The initial themes and thematic data were reviewed through an expert reviewer for understanding. The expert reviewer helped to establish credibility and trustworthiness in the data analysis process. There was a clear audit trail with a defined process for data gathering and incremental thematic analysis procedures to support the transferability and confirmability of the study.

Dependability

To address dependability, I ensured the data drawn from the interview questions was reliable, considering its relevance to the research question. The interview questions were aligned with the research questions. Member checking was used to address the accuracy of the reported findings based on participant interviews. An expert reviewer reviewed and examined the findings, establishing research dependability.

Confirmability

I established confirmability in this study, creating an audit trail by detailing the research process and recording interviews. I practiced reflexivity by keeping a journal, which was helpful in identifying codes and emerging themes and analyzing the data. I also ensured confirmability by interpreting the results from the responses of the participants, avoiding biases to understand how the participants' responses aligned with the research question.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I discussed the setting, data collection, and methods for data analysis. Also discussed are the results of the study, as well as evidence of trustworthiness. This qualitative study addressed an existing gap in educational practice regarding pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district concerning the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The research setting included five pre-k programs located in the state of Georgia. Each participant was a certified educator with a CDA, a bachelor's, or a master's degree in education. Interviews were conducted with 10 participants, two from each of the five schools. This chapter presented the findings from the interviews and presented the six themes that emerged from the data analysis. Results of this study showed that teachers feel more support is needed in the form of phonemic awareness. In Chapter 5, I will discuss an explanation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, and the potential of social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Applying early literacy interventions, such as state standards, with an expressed concern in phonemic awareness can help pre-k educators help students improve early literacy skills. The problem this study focused on was how some pre-k students behind in emergent literacy skills face challenges achieving literacy success once they reach kindergarten. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. I explored educators' perspectives using the research question "What are pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?" Using a basic qualitative approach supported exploring educator perspectives and alternative points of view. This chapter presents a discussion of the findings, limitations to the study, recommendations for future practitioners, recommendations for future research, implications of the findings, and a conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

Saracho (2017) showed that strategies and activities educators use in lessons can improve children's literacy. A basic qualitative approach using semistructured interviews helped with understanding the perspectives of early childhood educators. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, highlighting the use of the ZPD, is operationalized as pre-k teachers incorporate GELD standards into teaching. The ZPD model was evident in the

findings as educators identified children's needs to experience developmentally modeled and appropriate literacy instruction (Hume et al., 2016). Hume et al. (2016) explained the focus of ZPD involves allowing children to become self-regulated learners by teachers assisting and guiding the learner's intellectual developments through planned collaborative activities for phonemic awareness. Findings aligned to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and the ZPD model by educators facilitating educational activities, supporting student connections to past experiences, and encouraging social connections (Veraksa et al., 2016). All participants noted using and incorporating learning standards for phonemic awareness activities.

The research interviews offered insight into the views of pre-k educators concerning implementing teaching standards. The semistructured interview responses were transcribed and analyzed. Six themes emerged from data analysis: (a) challenges of implementing GELD standards, (b) ways literacy is incorporated into lessons, (c) teaching perceptions of GELD standards, (d) views on students and levels of literacy, (e) the teacher's role in improving literacy skills, and (f) teacher views about the curriculum that has an emphasis on incorporating emergent literacy. Themes from the data analysis were presented in the findings (see Chapter 4); however, a summary and interpretation of the findings are presented below.

Theme 1: Challenges of Implementing GELD Standards

Challenges to implementing standards emerged as a theme and was supported by the findings from the interviews. Berrill (2018) stressed the importance for students to have a strong foundation of literacy skills. Berrill also noted a need for educators to

identify and teach emergent literacy skills, such as phonemic awareness, to support educational success. In the current study, participant findings reflected the challenges of implementing GELD standards, including a lack of phonemic awareness among the standards, standards were not specific enough, and standards were perceived as ineffective and lacked depth. This disconfirmed those ideas of Nguyen et al. (2018), who noted educators can better facilitate emergent literacy with access models such as the GELD standards.

Saracho (2017) noted the importance of implementing standards that support phonemic awareness. Just as Saracho emphasized vigorous language development opportunities are needed to guide students into becoming competent readers, participant educators of my study noted a lack of depth to the GELD standards preventing the implementation of cultivated lessons. Phonemic awareness, a subcategory under phonological awareness, is not specifically listed within the GELD standards. Therefore, pre-k educators are expected to ensure the success of phonemic awareness under the CLL.6 teaching standard. This lack of defining phonemic awareness standard was reflected in the data provided by the study participants. Eight participants shared they filled that gap of understanding with lessons and activities that reflect the given standard. Findings of pre-k educators filling the gaps among GELD standards with reflective lessons confirms the research of McLeod (2019), who noted the educator's knowledge of a child's ZPD (the distance between an individual's current level of intelligence and their potential intellectual level) assists with scaffolding early learning activities in the educational setting.

Theme 2: Views on Literacy Incorporated into Lessons

Research findings highlighted pre-k teacher views on literacy incorporated into lessons. Piesta et al. (2020) shared that when educators teach and support children's literacy development, student's language and literacy knowledge should be considered. In my study, participants shared various views on how literacy should be incorporated into lessons. All participants shared differing views on effectively incorporating GELD standards into lesson plans. Considering the influence of state standards and policies, Jung and Han's (2013) research supported recognizing the guidance implications of mandated practices. Jung and Han reported teachers, guided by mandated practices, who applied more effort when teaching literacy approaches yielded better reading results from their students. Similarly, participants from the current study shared examples of lessons centered on reading activities, songs, and videos, sounds, and vocabulary-related tasks.

Teachers create learning opportunities using vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, phonics, and phonemic awareness skills (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Similarly, Farrell and Ives (2014) shared effective educators recognize the importance of practicing early literacy lessons from evidence-based research. Snow and Matthews (2016) noted that effective teachers use various recommended instructional methods for teaching literacy and providing opportunities for learning reinforcement at home. In my current study, two participants explained how some lessons and activities were presented to parents to demonstrate lessons their children were learning. Participants also shared the importance of providing parental opportunities for educational reinforcement activities at home. The

results of this theme confirm the findings of Vygotsky (1978), who theorized a young child can obtain more knowledge by interacting with peers, teachers, and parents.

Theme 3: Teaching Perceptions of GELD Standards

Teaching perceptions of GELD standards emerged as a theme from the data. According to the NAEYC (2019), educators should be aware of key elements and standards when creating learning environments that are interactive, challenging, and supportive. Often, educators participate in professional development to learn about standards and essential learning tools that benefit both teachers and students (Egert et al., 2018). Awareness of teaching standards is important for every educator to gauge the progress and learning expectations of students. For my study, only one participant shared little knowledge and awareness concerning the GELD standards. Levels of GELD standard awareness ranged from familiar to not familiar. Participants referenced knowledge of the GELD standards as a guide for incorporating literacy skills into lessons. These findings extend the research of Perry et al. (2018) who explained a child's literacy gain is gathered by learning during their social interactions or from their home environments.

Theme 4: Views on Students and Levels of Literacy

Views on students and their literacy levels were a theme that emerged from the data of the current study. Past researchers, such as Setiawan (2017), highlighted how students' education levels in early childhood were related to a teacher's creativity levels. All 10 participants offered opinions on what determines a measure of the level of literacy. Like the feedback provided by the study participants, Hume et al. (2016) explained

students need lessons that are developmentally modeled and offer appropriate literacy instruction compatible with a student's level of learning. The findings also support the framework of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory that defines the ZPD. The ZPD supports a learning process presenting the distance between a student's current level of intelligence and potential intellectual level (Saracho, 2017). When determining a child's level of development (Eun, 2019), educators are essential to reinforcing appropriate literacy instruction. The ideas of Eun (2019) and Saracho (2017) are supported by the data from my study, as participants shared various methods that could be used to check for understanding and assess for growth in literacy levels. The results also contribute to the findings of Vygotsky (1978), who noted when students and teachers interact, they can create dynamic partnerships that encourage learning.

Theme 5: Teacher's Role in Improving Literacy Skills

Early childhood literacy teaching practices and techniques used by teachers in the classroom helps improve emergent literacy skills (Piesta et al., 2020). Teaching standards provide a foundation for educational curriculum (Cress & Holm, 2017). In their research, Cress and Holm (2017) stressed the importance of using core standards, as implementing standards could assist educators with improving the pedagogical and developmental writing and literacy skills in primary education. Supporting the ideas of Piesta et al. (2020) and Cress and Holm (2017), the research findings support the teacher's role in improving literacy skills. The findings of the study did support collaboration between parents and educators was beneficial to student learning. Five participants stressed the importance of collaboration between the teacher and the families of the students.

Although parental involvement and support was not a focus of this study, all the pre-k teachers shared how promoting literacy was essential inside and outside of the classroom. The results contribute to the findings of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory concerning the ZPD, where children need to experience developmentally modeled and appropriate literacy instruction (Hume et al., 2016).

Theme 6: Teacher Views about the Curriculum with Emphasis on Incorporating Emergent Literacy

Teacher's views on curriculum emphasizing incorporating emergent literacy skills was another theme highlighted by the participants. Views were shared on topics such as following structured curriculum, licensed curriculum, and other curriculums. Humphries et al. (2018) explained how teachers' attitudes about classroom instruction and curriculum could affect teaching practices. Tunmer and Hoover (2019) also supported establishing literacy skills in early childhood. There are various curriculum products and resources that are state-supported or research-based that educators use to present lessons. Tunmer and Hoover shared how educators should have access to a curriculum based on a conceptual framework, including cognitive development milestones. Seven participants shared a view on using a curriculum, supporting the importance of incorporating teaching practices and practical approaches to ensure literacy development through practices, curriculum, and early learning standards. The findings on educator support of literacy development using curriculum and standards confirm Vygotsky's (1978) cultural theory presenting that through active engagement, children learn the process of reading and knowledge then develops, ensuring long term academic success.

Limitations of the Study

Research design and careful planning are essential to a successful research study; however, limitations occur as part of every research process. Based on this qualitative research study, some limitations justified consideration. Limitations for this study included the type of study, methods, and participants. According to Malterud (2001), in qualitative studies, biases may present a limitation obligating the researcher to present data evidence findings without experience, opinions, and personal biases. To reduce the potential for bias in this basic qualitative study, I used a reflective journal to generate transparency through documenting my experiences, thoughts, opinions, and perceptions during the interview process.

In qualitative research, limitations are often beyond the researcher's control (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this research, the design limitations included a small sample size and time constraints. One limitation was that the study was limited to one rural area of early childhood centers in the southern region of the United States, making the number of available teacher participants low. Another limitation was the capability to conduct interviews with participants. As the study had to be altered from the original plan for data collection due to COVID-19, face-to-face interviews were not conducted. Concerning the sample size, the study sample consisted of 10 pre-k teachers and was specific to pre-k teachers in a particular geographical location. Based on the sample size, a specific population, and the research design (qualitative), findings from this study may not be generalized to a larger population or locality.

Recommendations for Future Research

After conducting this study, I have four recommendations for future researchers. First, future researchers could explore assessment tools and implementation of literacy skills outlined in teaching standards. Saracho (2017) shared how the early childhood curriculum has evolved, presenting many language and literacy skills modifications. Saracho suggested that children's language and literacy development should mature through literacy skills practice, adult interactions, and a supportive learning environment. Using the ideas of Saracho, future research studies could focus on examining assessments of literacy skills to identify points of maturation and growth using implemented literacy skills.

Another recommendation for future research includes identifying strategies used by educators to address potential barriers to standards implementation. With a focus on state standards and policies, Jung and Han's (2013) research supported exploring the effects of mandated practices. Based on the findings from this qualitative study, further research studies could focus on how teachers might overcome potential challenges faced while implementing learning standards, and how educators could make phonemic awareness more relevant through using standardizations. Additional research regarding the support teachers need to implement learning standards successfully would be beneficial to early childhood education.

Another recommendation for future researchers includes examining the support pre-k teachers need to meet challenges implementing GELD standards for teaching literacy. Specifically, future studies could identify pre-k educator needs that support

learning by standards. Considering the research design and population, future researchers may conduct similar qualitative studies with different sample sizes, populations, or teaching standards. A quantitative study could also identify pre-k educator measures that would address the teaching needs to implement standards of practice. To generalize findings, future researchers could conduct a longitudinal study or increase the sample size of educators implementing teaching standings to promote literacy skills. The data from the current study offers original contributions to the field of early childhood education and existing literature. The study provides information relevant to pre-k educators and implementing learning standards. This study presents a basis for future research recommendations considering data, research design, and population.

Implications

Results from this basic qualitative study indicated pre-k teachers follow Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory and ZPD model when implementing GELD standards to teach phonemic awareness. The findings provided meaningful insights concerning how pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. The study findings may be useful to pre-k administrators, pre-k teachers, and educational support staff. The findings revealed that most pre-k educators are knowledgeable and aware of knowledge the GELD standards. The themes that emerged from the participant interviews indicated that pre-k educators recognize the importance of implementing literacy skills lessons, understand how utilizing teaching standards (GELD) can be beneficial, and identified barriers to

utilizing specific standards. Implications highlight the findings on the support educators need to meet challenges implementing GELD standards. The following sections provide a presentation of theoretical and practical implications.

Literacy skills, along with language development, emerge early in life, and these skills continue to develop, which corresponds with the conceptual framework (Vygotsky's [1978] sociocultural theory) defining the ZPD (Saracho, 2017). McLeod (2019) explained how literacy is a skill cultivated with practice, such as literacy-related play, read-alouds, and other literacy experiences that explore a child's natural learning environment. Considering the concepts of ZPD, the pre-k educator participants shared instances of literacy-related activities and lessons that support the cultivation of literacy skills. Using the basic ideas of ZPD, educators can recognize the value in scaffolding early learning activities.

Professional development for pre-k teachers benefits both teachers and students (Egert et al., 2018). Results from this study indicated that pre-k educators would benefit from professional development and training that identifies and clarifies essential GELD standards. Professional development could improve the self-efficacy of pre-k educators, changing their outlook on literacy instruction. Having access to training and other educational support resources could help pre-k educators engage more in phonological awareness activities, prompting higher literacy achievement among students.

Conclusion

In early childhood, emergent literacy is one of the first stages of reading development, encompassing knowledge, skills, and outlooks (Save the Children, 2020).

Pyle et al. (2018) shared how essential understanding educators' perspectives is concerning pedagogical approaches, successfully enhancing the literacy skills of students. This study helped explore pre-k teachers' perspectives in a large urban school district regarding the support needed to meet challenges implementing GELD Standards while teaching pre-k students literacy, specifically phonemic awareness. Through an analysis of interview data, themes emerged relevant to understanding pre-k educators' perspectives concerning the support educators need to meet the challenges associated with applying the GELD standards when implementing phonemic awareness instruction.

Challenges to implementing standards emerged as a theme, and participant findings reflected the challenges of implementing GELD standards which disconfirmed the ideas of Nguyen et al. (2018), who noted educators could better facilitate emergent literacy with access models such as the GELD standards. Research findings emphasized pre-k teacher views on literacy incorporated into lessons, the second theme. The results of this theme confirm the findings of Vygotsky (1978) concerning how a young child obtains knowledge through interactions with peers, teachers, and parents. Teaching perceptions of GELD standards was the third theme that emerged from the data analysis. Pre-k educators shared the importance of using GELD standards as a guide for incorporating literacy skills into lessons, and these findings extend the research of Perry et al. (2018), who explained that a child's literacy gain is gathered by learning during their social interactions or from their home environments.

Views on students and their literacy levels was another theme that emerged from the data analysis, and participants shared various methods that could be used to check for

understanding and assess for student growth in literacy levels. The results confirm the findings of Vygotsky (1978), who noted that when students and teachers interact, they can create energetic partnerships that encourage learning. The fifth theme concerned the teacher's role in improving literacy skills. The findings of the study support how a collaboration between parents and educators is beneficial to student learning, confirming Vygotsky's sociocultural theory concerning the ZPD of children's learning needs to experience developmentally modeled and appropriate literacy instruction in various settings (Hume et al., 2016). Teacher's views on curriculum emphasizing incorporating emergent literacy skills was the final theme stressed by the participants. Participants shared a view on using a curriculum, supporting the importance of incorporating teaching practices and practical approaches to ensure literacy development. The findings on educator support of literacy development using curriculum and standards confirm Vygotsky's cultural theory presenting children learn through active engagement.

All pre-k teacher participants shared how promoting literacy was essential inside and outside of the classroom. Incorporating teaching practices and practical approaches can ensure literacy development through practices, curriculum, and early learning standards. Pre-k educator participants noted the importance of implementing literacy skills lessons based on a thorough understanding of the required teaching standards (GELD) and highlighted the essential benefits of incorporating teaching practices and effective approaches to ensure literacy development.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview questions for teachers

Teachers will have 45-60 minutes of interview time, with an additional 30 minutes to review the interview transcript of their answers.

1. How many years have you worked in the field of early childhood education, and in what capacity?
2. How many years have you worked at your current position as a pre-k teacher?
3. What is your level of education?
3. How do you incorporate literacy into your classroom?
4. How familiar are you with GELD standards in the state of Georgia? How do you feel GELD standards align with your pre-k standards in areas of emergent literacy, specifically phonemic awareness?
5. Can you explain what the GELD standards are used for?
6. What are some challenges you may be facing implementing GELD standards into your daily lessons?
7. Describe some exercises you use with your students on phonemic awareness.
8. What challenges do you face in teaching phonemic awareness?
9. What structured curriculum do you use that has an emphasis on incorporating emergent literacy since most of your pre-k students come right from preschool programs? If there is not one, please explain what your opinions are on following a model to help align literacy teaching practices to the pre-k GELD learning standards.

10. Considering the students that enroll in your pre-k classroom, explain their levels of literacy performance. In what ways do you feel they are prepared to read basic words based on phonemic skills learned in pre-k following the GELD standards?
11. What can teachers do to help improve literacy skills, specifically phonemic awareness?

Thank the interviewee for their time and participation.