

4-21-2026

Early Childhood Educators' Experiences Teaching Literacy Acquisition Skills

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Gardenia Renee Crews

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2026

Abstract

Early Childhood Educators' Experiences Teaching Literacy Acquisition Skills

by

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MA, Walden University, 2003, 2016

BS, Francis Marion University, 2000

BA, Francis Marion University, 1994

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

The problem investigated through this study was that early childhood educators struggle to help students with literacy acquisition skills in a Title 1 elementary school. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills and their suggestions for improving resources and training for teaching literacy acquisition skills. The study was grounded in Clay's emergent literacy theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. For this basic qualitative design, semistructured interviews with 14 participants were conducted with the following themes emerging: Early childhood educators were challenged due to (a) students' background and foundational learning gaps (b) restrictive curriculum requirements that do not allow for flexibility to meet students' needs (c) a lack of parental support (d) instructional support and resources that were not aligned to students' instructional needs and (e) the need for professional development and training that was focused on one instructional resource. Based on these findings, a 3-day professional development workshop was developed which focuses on teaching and practicing specific literacy acquisition skills. The implications for positive social change are that when educators are equipped and empowered with the skills to teach effectively, they drive transformative change within their classrooms and beyond. In addition, students gain strong literacy skills which are the essential foundation for lifelong achievement, expanded opportunities, and the power to shape their own futures.

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Dedication

This project study is dedicated to my ancestors, my great grandparents who instilled love of God, love of family and the value of education in me. This work is dedicated to Reverend Lewis Reed, Deaconess Leler Reed, Thomas Washington, Jeremiah Taylor, and Edell Taylor.

To my husband, Russell, who encouraged me to start and finish this program, I thank you. To my mother, Valerie, who always supported my educational endeavors, I thank you. This work is also dedicated to my family who celebrated all my educational milestones – George, Gemari, Andrea, my aunts, uncles and cousins.

In addition, I dedicate this work to the next generation, Caleb, Diamond, Sy'Tier, Sohlar, Gabriel, Dashia, Kadia, Juelz, Gabriel Jr., Isabella, Giovanni, Vanessa and Aayden – may the work in this study make things better for you as you begin and/or continue your education.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Ryan Theroux (Dr. T.), who has been a great supporter in this process.

I would like to thank my committee members, past and present Dr. Jack Billings and Dr. Don Yarosz. Also, Dr. Shereeza Mohammed, gave guidance with my work and encouraged me to push through.

In addition, a special thanks to my past advisor, Lindsay for always listening and giving advice with wisdom and compassion.

I give a special thanks to Dr. Ernest McNealey for checking on me and guiding me in the process.

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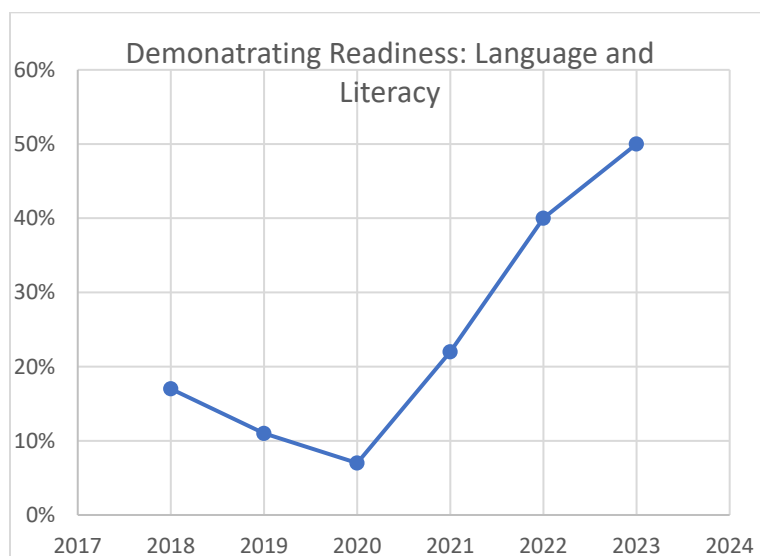
Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

The problem investigated through this study was that early childhood educators struggle to help students with literacy acquisition skills in a Title 1 elementary school. The figure below shows the percentage of students demonstrating readiness in the areas of language and literacy in the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). While there was an increase from 2018 to 2023, 50% of students were not demonstrating readiness in this area. It is also important to note from 2021 to the present, the KRA has been given a month after students have been in school. In South Carolina, demonstrating readiness is students having the behavior and foundational skills that will allow them to participate in their kindergarten curriculum fully (South Carolina Department of Education, n.d.).

Figure 1

KRA Demonstrating Readiness: Language and Literacy



Note. The figure shows the percentage of students for each year for KRA.

The Early Learning and Literacy section of the South Carolina Department of Education's website says the KRA is developmentally appropriate to determine students' readiness for kindergarten. The assessment provides kindergarten teachers with information to best meet student needs (n.d.). The four domains assessed are social foundation, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical well-being.

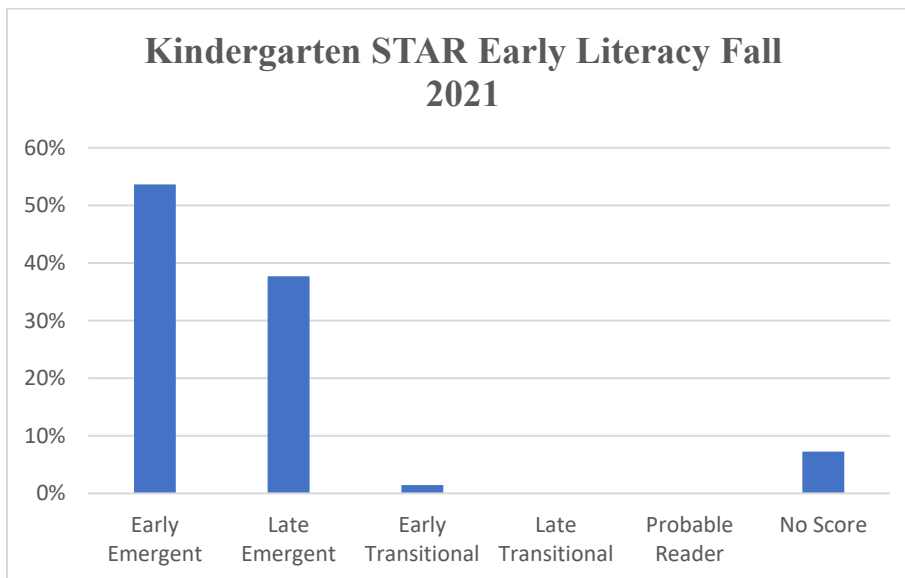
In addition to KRA, kindergarten students were given an assessment named STAR Early Literacy. The computerized assessment measures early literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers received student data on print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition fluency, and vocabulary (Renaissance, 2022). The three stages of literacy development for STAR Early Literacy are: Emergent Reader, Transitional Reader, and Probable Reader. Students who score in the Late Emergent Reader stage would likely meet end-of-the-year performance goals (Renaissance Learning, 2021).

In the Fall of 2021, kindergarten students took the STAR Early Literacy. As depicted in Figure 2, 54% of kindergarten students scored as Early Emergent Readers. These students are beginning to identify numbers and letters and learn that printed text has meaning (Renaissance Learning, 2021). For the spring testing, 7% of kindergarten students scored as Early Emergent Readers and 41% as Late Emergent Readers (Renaissance Learning, 2021); 48% of kindergarten students still need to meet end-of-the-year performance goals, as depicted in Figure 3.

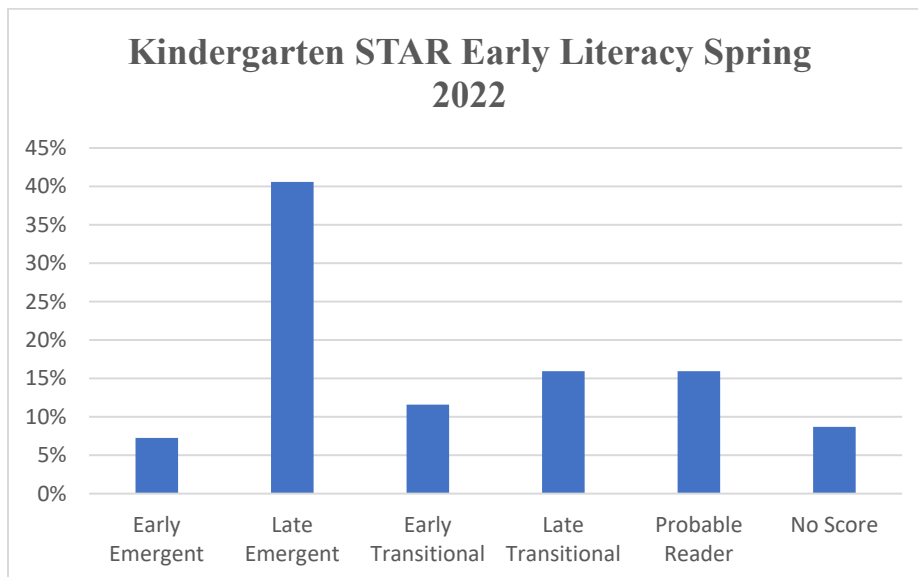
The data for KRA and STAR Early Literacy support the need for more students to be probable readers; therefore, instructional support is needed for teachers to help students meet end of year performance goals in reading.

Figure 2

Kindergarten STAR Early Literacy Fall 2021



Note. The figure shows the percentage of students for each category of STAR EL.

Figure 3*Kindergarten STAR Early Literacy Spring 2022*

Note. The figure shows the percentage of students for each category of STAR EL.

Rationale

In a survey of five kindergarten teachers at the local site, 100% of the teachers indicated that kindergarten students were entering school less prepared than in previous years and were deficient in language and literacy skills (Kindergarten Survey, August 22, 2022). The data from Figure 1 supported the concerns of kindergarten teachers. From 2018-2020 when the KRA was administered prior to the school year, less than 20% of students demonstrated readiness for language and literacy skills. Once teachers began assessing a month after the school year began in 2021, there was an increase, but less than 50% of students, after having a month of instruction, demonstrated readiness in language and literacy. In addition, Figure 3 shows less than 50% of kindergarten students

are probable readers after having almost a year of instruction in early literacy skills, showing educators need support in teaching literacy acquisition skills.

Across the United States, reports showed that 25% of students were entering kindergarten ready for math and literacy (Ansari et al., 2021). In addition, students were entering kindergarten without expected skills to be successful in kindergarten (Macy et al., 2022). There was an increased focus on academic skills in primary grades; 80% of teachers felt children should come to kindergarten knowing their letters and corresponding sounds (Mosley Wetzel et al., 2020).

Early childhood educators need differentiated instruction strategies in literacy acquisition or preliteracy skills for students to become readers (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). Differentiating instruction is beneficial for students with low skills to grow in reading; teachers' instruction meets their initial skills (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). However, early childhood educators need support in understanding the skills required for reading acquisition, identifying when students are missing those skills, and providing differentiated instruction to teach the skills (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). In addition, early childhood educators do not understand the components of reading – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension (Ramzy & Bence, 2022). Teachers also need support in prioritizing skills and determining how to teach the skills (Ramzy & Bence, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills and explored their suggestions for improving resources and training for teaching literacy acquisition skills.

Definition of Terms

The following section defines the terms used throughout this project study to ensure a shared understanding of the material presented.

Alphabet knowledge (letter knowledge): naming all 26 upper-and-lower case letters in isolation (“Literacy Activities That Highlight Emergent and Beginning Literacy Development,” 2022).

Concepts about print: understand book organization, print order, features of print (“Literacy Activities That Highlight Emergent and Beginning Literacy Development,” 2022).

Decoding: converting letters into sounds (Elimelech & Aram, 2020).

Early literacy: foundational language and communication skills that precede the ability to read or write (Fischer & Syverson, 2020).

Emergent literacy: skills children acquire at a young age before they have learned to read and write words (Drivenes Moore & Trysnes, 2021).

Encoding: converting spoken words into letters (Elimelech & Aram, 2020).

Literacy: the ability to read and write well (Fischer & Syverson, 2020).

Oral language: all components of spoken language (Forgie et al., 2022).

Phonemic awareness: understanding that spoken words are made up of individual sounds, focus and manipulate individual sounds (Gezer, 2021).

Phonological awareness: listening, hearing, and sounding out words (Gezer, 2021).

Reading: capability to convert and synthesize letters into words (Elimelech & Aram, 2020).

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are significant in that it will provide insight into the experiences of early childhood educators at the local site on the challenges faced when teaching students who do not have literacy acquisition skills. Research shows that 2/3 of children in the United States do not attain reading proficiency by third grade, and 1 in 3 children start kindergarten without needed literacy acquisition skills, placing all affected students at academic risk (American Academy of Pediatrics Research, n.d.). Of impoverished students, 80% will not develop reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Stanovich's seminal work remarks that early reading predicts lifetime reading, and students should have various reading experiences (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). This study identified a means of addressing the deficiencies of literacy acquisition skills in primary aged students.

The foundation for literacy is in the primary grades. Early childhood educators have a significant responsibility to provide students with the fundamental concepts and skills to support their learning (Forgie et al., 2022). These teachers need knowledge and training in teaching the fundamental concepts to become confident in providing instruction (Forgie et al., 2022). Gaining perspectives of early childhood educators impacts teacher quality in meeting the needs of students lacking literacy acquisition skills and leads to positive social change for students and educators. The impact of the positive social change can be at schools with similar populations of students lacking literacy

acquisition skills. Local policy can be changed or adjusted based on early childhood educators' needs for resources and professional development. Early childhood educators can be included with the planning of the English Language Arts Curriculum Alignment Document for the district.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to understand the experiences of early childhood educators on teaching literacy acquisition skills.

What are early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?

What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?

Review of the Literature

Conceptual Framework

The framework for this study was Marie Clay's (1966) emergent literacy theory. Clay studied children in the formative years of literacy acquisition, documenting changes in reading and writing (Doyle, 2013). Children in this stage participate in pre-reading skills such as retelling stories and pre-writing, which includes scribbling and drawing (Chen & Adams, 2022). These skills are foundational for students to become competent readers (Chen & Adams, 2022). As children become proficient readers, Clay noted the following sequential behaviors: reading print from left to right, awareness of print, appropriate speech patterns, and matching written and spoken words (Doyle, 2013). Clay noted that students who made little progress by the end of the first year of instruction

continued to perform below their grade-level peers years later (Doyle, 2013). Clay's research is the foundation of Reading Recovery, but not all students can access the program. The emergent literacy theory gives insight into the development of students as proficient readers.

Clay noted that children learn at different rates. She wrote that schools needed to meet students where they were when they entered school and grow them from that point (Costantino-Lane, 2021). Teaching children to read in the early grades is the responsibility of schools (Miles et al., 2022). Teachers must observe students' reading behavior to determine their needs and the reading skills to teach. Teaching reading is a skill. Teachers must be well trained and knowledgeable about reading development, data and personalized teaching strategies (Kim & Snow, 2021) to meet the needs of students. Teachers must have knowledge in teaching reading and meeting varying needs.

The theory of emergent literacy is a cognitive one and involves a child's development of various literacy skills, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Carter-Smith, 2021). One study in emergent literacy by Teale and Sulzby (1986) noted that learning the previously mentioned literacy skills is not sequential but is developed concurrently. The relationships between reading, writing, speaking, and listening are a foundation for later learning as children begin to make meaning of stories read to them (Carter-Smith, 2021). The International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children say the most critical time for literacy development is from birth to age 8 (Carter-Smith, 2021).

In addition, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory guided the research, interview questions and data analysis. This theory focuses on the development of an individual within their natural environment (Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022) and how other systems interrelate affecting the individual. Bronfenbrenner said the environment is the immediate setting as well as the social relationships in those places including home and school (Bermas et al., 2024). The students' school environment and relationship with their teachers affects their literacy acquisition skills. For this study on educators' experiences teaching literacy acquisition skills the learning environment might have been an influencer on students' development in the skills. The experiences of the educators in this study gave greater insight into the ecological systems impacting their teaching of literacy acquisition skills to students.

The theory directed the study design, indicating that acquiring literacy skills is sequential and developmental; also, the effects of the learning environment on acquiring literacy acquisition skills. It provided a means to discern when primary students vary from anticipated norms and are identified as at academic risk.

Background on Literacy Concerns

The topics covered in this section relate to literacy, especially early childhood literacy. The Walden University Library was used to search for early childhood and literacy. In reviewing the articles, other subjects regarding literacy arose – such as the concerns over reading practices and the impact on students as they go through their schooling.

Debates have taken place over the years regarding practices on literacy instruction. Ineffective reading instruction and societal influences have attributed to low reading performance (Thomas, 2022). The No Child Left Behind Law in 2001 mandated scientifically based reading instruction to help children learn to read. However, debates about reading instruction continued with concerns on the quality of teacher education, professional development, the theories of how children learn to read and how it should be taught, the role of phonics and the gap between scientific research and classroom practice (Thomas, 2022). One constant is improving students reading proficiency is linked to teacher preparation (Ceballos et al., 2020).

Review of the Broader Problem

Formal reading instruction used to begin in first grade when students were six years old (Rand & Morrow, 2021) but now begins in kindergarten (Constantino-Lane, 2021). Preschool and kindergarten instruction began to focus on auditory and visual discrimination of letter names and sounds as well as word recognition in the 1960's (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Many students do not come to kindergarten ready for formal instruction in reading. Readiness for kindergarten is a child's emotional and intellectual development (Constantino-Lane, 2021). Students who enter kindergarten with the knowledge of some letters of the alphabet, recognize that words are made of sounds will have an easier time learning to read (Phillips, 2023). In addition, students having knowledge of letter names and sounds, and identifying phonemes in spoken words set the foundation for learning to read words quickly and accurately (Roberts, 2021).

Having background knowledge, various experiences and being exposed to a variety of stories is an indicator for kindergarten students being ready to learn (Costantino-Lane, 2021). The authors note that oral language is a skill that students need developed as there is a relationship between oral and written language. Students use oral language to understand what they are reading (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020). Listening comprehension, what students hear, listen and respond to accurately is a key to success for students' oral language (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020).

Students' skills entering kindergarten are a predictor of first grade reading scores (Murdoch et al., 2022). Ninety percent of first graders who are struggling with reading continue to struggle in fourth grade (Pondiscio, n.d.). The foundation for education begins with students' strong literacy and language skills upon entering kindergarten (Murdoch et al., 2022). Early language is essential to children's reading development, and their activities must be meaningful and purposeful (University of Patras et al, 2019). The foundational skills of most importance are phonological processing, print knowledge, and oral language (Murdoch et al., 2022). While oral language is a good predictor of achievement through third grade (Murdoch et al., 2022), many preschool programs do not implement these strategies through shared reading. In addition, a limited amount of time is spent on language and literacy skills development. The ability to distinguish sounds, recognize and produce rhyming words and segmenting words in sentences and syllables in words is critical in the preschool environment (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020).

Emergent and Early Literacy

Early literacy skills are the cognitive functions that develop in students before formal reading and writing instruction begin (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). These skills include oral language, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, concepts of print, early reading, writing and spelling. Visual perception, memory, executive function and speed of processing are cognitive abilities necessary for learning to read (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2021). Executive function is the ability of a student to manage their behavior and acquire academic skills (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2021). Students enter kindergarten with varying backgrounds and ability levels. Students beginning kindergarten with any limitations in the skills for language and literacy are vulnerable to long term challenges in literacy (Goldstein et al., 2024).

Other early literacy skills, vocabulary development, teachers' questions, comments, and feedback on students' remarks play a role in preschool vocabulary development (Farrow et al., 2020). Students learn more vocabulary when teachers engage in open-ended prompts and have extended conversations (Farrow et al., 2020), explaining and clarifying ideas in the text and relating book concepts to what students already know. However, few studies have been conducted on teachers' syntactic use in classrooms, but this could provide strategies for instruction (Farrow et al., 2020).

Learning to Read

Early literacy skills, including sound blending and segmentation, are foundational skills that students need to develop reading skills (Goo et al., 2020). Students who do not have these skills can have reading problems (Goo et al., 2020). These early literacy skills

are essential to developing oral reading fluency and reading comprehension (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2021). A failure to learn to read equates to lower academic skills as students age; other studies included results of low self-esteem and reduced employment opportunities (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2024) as an undereducated work force is unable to contribute to the future economy (Fischer & Syverson, 2020). The difficulty in learning to read causes feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and frustration, leading to a hinderance in academic and vocational potential (Mues et al., 2023). Addressing reading deficits in early grades is fundamental to avoiding reading skills deficits (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2021) in the higher grades.

Studies show that students who struggle with reading in early grades continue to have deficits as they go through school. Students who struggle with literacy skills as early as kindergarten often continue to read below grade level (Fischer & Syverson, 2020). Three out of four third graders who struggle with reading continue to struggle in ninth grade (Pondiscio, n.d.; Solari et al., 2021). In addition, one out of six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade do not graduate from high school on time (Pondiscio, n.d.). Also, students with limited reading skills are more likely to drop out of school and 12% of students with delays in reading in kindergarten will attend college (Hoffmann et al., 2024).

Students who experience delays in reading acquisition during the first three years of school typically do not catch up to their peers later in school (Hoffmann et al., 2024), including students with disabilities (Solari et al., 2021). People used to believe that children who did not learn to read were late bloomers, however students do not catch up

to their peers; by the end of fourth grade the gap in reading does not close (Solari et al., 2021). In addition to this, students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are impacted by reading levels with nearly half of minority students reading below basic levels in 2019 (Galbally & Scharff, 2022). The National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2019 stated that 21% of fourth grade students from low-income homes gained reading proficiency compared to 51% of students coming from homes with higher incomes (Fischer & Syverson, 2020). Also, students who do not learn to read by fourth grade are four times as likely to drop out of school or do not graduate on time. The rates after COVID show delays in reading fluency rates, with 30% of second and third grade students reading below fluency rates within an academic year (Galbally & Scharff, 2022).

There are many components involved in learning to read and some are critical literacy acquisition skills, for example word reading, phonemic awareness, phonological memory and rapid automatic naming (RAN; Cunningham et al., 2021). The development of reading skills, at the foundational levels include phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge (Prabhu et al., 2024). Letter sounds, RAN, and manipulating units of oral language or phonological awareness (Zugarramurdi et al., 2022) are also literacy acquisition skills necessary for successful reading. In addition to phonological awareness, alphabet and print knowledge, vocabulary and language comprehension are foundations for reading (Goldstein et al., 2024). Language skills needed to read and understand words include orthographic knowledge and verbal comprehension (Yujeong Park et al., 2020). Phonological and orthographic processing are believed to be the roots of reading acquisition and RAN, and phonological memory can support or restrict attention on the

sounds of language (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020). Nicholson and McIntosh (2020) added that phonological decoding skills are necessary for students to have a successful start in reading and writing. Procedural writing is also a skill that is a predictor of literacy in primary school (Traverso et al., 2022).

Phonological awareness is the ability to identify and manipulate sounds (Piasta & Hudson, 2022; Traverso et al., 2022; Yujeong Park et al., 2020). It is one of the strongest predictors of reading success (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2021; Schatschneider et al., 2023). The early literacy skills of phonological awareness and letter knowledge (alphabet knowledge) are instrumental for word reading and decoding (Mues et al., 2023) and are skills related to the beginning of encoding and decoding (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). The two skills set the foundation for reading fluency and comprehension (Mues et al., 2023). Phonological awareness is knowing that spoken language is made up of individual words, that individual words are made up of syllables and phonemes and that words can share onsets and rhymes (Prabhu et al., 2024). Another definition of phonological awareness is the sensitivity to the sound structure of a word with the capability to identify and manipulate parts of a word (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). Students' awareness of words, syllables and rhymes are influencers of reading skills (Prabhu et al., 2024).

The preschool environment is a critical time for students to acquire phonological awareness; the ability to distinguish sounds, recognize and produce rhyming words, segment words in sentences and segment syllables in words (Roskos & Lenhart, 2020). These literacy behaviors in early childhood can predict successful reading performance in later years (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Students who perform poorly on phonological

awareness and RAN in kindergarten continue to have difficulties in 5th grade. Children who have reading difficulties have a poor working memory that affects their decoding skills (Yujeong Park et al., 2020). Research supports the development of phonological and phonemic awareness skills to help students with literacy acquisition skills (Piasta & Hudson, 2022; Scanlon & Anderson, 2020).

Phonemic awareness is the ability to blend, segment and manipulate individual speech sounds, or phonemes into words (Piasta & Hudson, 2022; Pittman et al., 2023). Phonemes are the smallest unit of speech sounds that change the meaning of a word (Pittman et al., 2023). Students who can manipulate phonemes are more likely to be successful at decoding and spelling because phonemic awareness is a predictor of successful reading. The ability to manipulate the morpheme (smallest part of a word) also plays a role for beginning readers. For students who have a limited sight vocabulary, they can use morphological cues in reading in addition to phonological decoding (Cohen-Mimran et al., 2023).

RAN is the ability to retrieve phonological patterns from long term memory in response to visual stimuli (Yujeong Park et al., 2020). RAN is a strong predictor of word reading and reading fluency (Ne'eman & Shaul, 2021; Mues et al., 2023).

Orthographic knowledge is an understanding of letter patterns which is positively related to word recognition including multisyllabic words (Yujeong Park et al., 2020). Verbal comprehension is the ability to use words to understand and express meaning (Yujeong Park et al., 2020). Procedural writing involves letter identification, and the ability write letters and words (Traverso et al., 2022). There is evidence to show that

meaningful writing activities can promote early literacy skills (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). Early writing includes composition, handwriting and spelling activities, these activities can support students' acquisition of phonological awareness and letter knowledge (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). Many students who struggle with reading can benefit from writing instruction as both are dependent on the same skills (Al Otaiba et al., 2023).

There is another view of skills necessary for learning to read and those are the cueing systems; semantics, syntax and the alphabet to recognize unknown words (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020). Under this view, students should use context to read unfamiliar words. The authors believe that using contextual information is useful for emergent readers with helping them understand conventions of print. In addition to context, alphabetic orthography is needed for students to learn to read; however, they say students do need to know the alphabetic code to remember words the next time they see the word (Scanlon & Anderson, 2020). Effective reading requires decoding symbols into sounds and making meaning of texts (Rand & Morrow, 2021).

Students learn to read through encoding, decoding, and comprehension (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). Encoding is when students spell, the process of taking spoken words and converting them to letters; decoding is converting letters to sounds (Elimelech & Aram, 2020). The early literacy skills that support encoding and decoding are phonological awareness and letter knowledge (Elimelech & Aram, 2020).

Phonological decoding skills are also necessary for students to begin writing (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020). Word decoding is a foundational skill; then there is the shift for students from word decoding to reading comprehension (Prabhu et al., 2024).

Reading is a product of decoding and linguistic comprehension, or code focused and meaning focused skills (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). Both code-focused and meaning-focused skills are necessary and indicators for later reading success (Piasta et al., 2020). Code focused skills include alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness (Piasta et al., 2020) phonics and word recognition (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). Meaning focused skills are vocabulary, listening and reading comprehension (Al Otaiba et al., 2023) in addition to oral language (Piasta et al., 2020). Reading comprehension is dependent on decoding and listening comprehension skills (Hoffman et al., 2021).

Teaching Reading

Reading instruction needs to be systematic, of high quality (Goldstein et al., 2024) and include code and meaning focused instruction (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). Students who received explicit instruction in letter sound correspondence for a school year performed better on end of the year phonological awareness assessments and word reading skills than students who only had code-based instruction (Schatschneider et al., 2023).

The five instructional components students need to become skilled readers are phonological awareness, systematic phonics, fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension (Ceballos et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2022). Students need explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics (Miles et al., 2022), orthographic and morphological awareness (Kim & Snow, 2021). There should be a scope and sequence for educators to follow to ensure that major grapheme-phoneme relations are taught (Miles et al., 2022). During phonics instruction students learn how to apply their knowledge of grapheme-phonemes to decode words. Phonics is an

instructional method that connects spelling and sound (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). The goal of phonics is to give students strategies to help them read and spell unfamiliar words and through repeated exposure add those words to their sight vocabularies (Piasta & Hudson, 2022).

Students who are struggling with reading need a carefully designed curriculum that is informed by research and evidence-based programs (Miles et al., 2022). It is important to identify and support struggling readers as early as possible because instructional programs are more effective to remediate reading if applied early (Miles et al., 2022). Students who are struggling need appropriate interventions, early childhood programs must identify and provide those interventions (Goldstein et al., 2024). Without targeted interventions, students with low achievement in reading and spelling will continue to have their comprehension impacted (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). Reading outcomes can be improved for students by identifying students at risk and providing appropriate interventions (Petscher et al., 2020). The interventions must be guided by research-based practices, with explicit instruction in specific skills for students to have opportunities to apply them when reading (Garwood et al., 2020).

For students needing early literacy skills, 25 – 173 hours of preventative instruction can accelerate the development of early reading skills (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2024). Explicit and intensive early instruction can reduce the number of students with reading deficits by two-thirds (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2024). The study found that teachers are inadequately prepared to implement evidence-based instruction (Pindiprolu & Forbush, 2024), hindering the implementation of effective literacy instruction.

Teachers need content and pedagogical knowledge of literacy development, including phonological awareness, phonics, and morphological awareness to make sound instructional decisions (Hudson et al., 2021).

When a student is not making progress, the teacher either repeats instruction or moves on in the curriculum with the hope that the student will catch up; without effective interventions students struggling in reading will fall further behind their peers (Goldstein et al., 2024). Response to intervention (RTI) has a positive impact on students; reading outcomes through early identification of students who are at risk of reading deficiencies (Porter et al., 2022). RTI uses evidence informed instruction and interventions across tiers of instructional support within the general education classroom.

Interventions should focus on phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge together as opposed to providing interventions in those skills separately (Goldstein et al., 2024). Teaching students' phonological awareness and letter knowledge improves decoding skills (Petscher et al., 2020). If word level interventions are not provided, it can lead to student difficulties in language development, comprehension and negative consequences for academic and lifelong success (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). As with regular reading instruction, interventions should build on skills gradually, providing high levels of support with students having opportunities to practice and receive feedback (Al Otaiba et al., 2023). However, the literature is lacking in what early interventions are easy for teachers to implement that show strong benefits. There is also the concern of false identification of students in need of intervention and interventions not matching student needs (Porter et al., 2022).

It appears teachers lack knowledge of how language structure works hindering their ability to identify students' needs, the instructional targets and corrective feedback for them (Porter et al., 2022). Educators need knowledge of research-based reading instruction and intervention so they can know what to teach and how to teach it (Porter et al., 2022). Students receiving interventions should be monitored to determine if progress is being made. One study showed students who received interventions in kindergarten had higher reading scores at the end of first grade as opposed to students who only received interventions in first grade instead of kindergarten and first grade (Solari et al., 2021).

Teacher Knowledge of Reading Instruction

In the early grades, explicit instruction is needed for students to acquire foundational skills needed to learn to read (Porter et al., 2022). Teachers need preparation in how to teach code related literacy skills as well as opportunities to practice teaching the skills (Tortorelli et al., 2021). In a 2019 survey, 5% of teachers say they learn about teaching reading in college programs while the majority learn on the job through curriculum, their colleagues and professional development (Kim & Snow, 2021).

There are some gaps in the knowledge that preservice teachers have in literacy instruction. While knowledge of how to teach literacy skills may be gained it is not applied in in-service teaching (Lammert et al., 2022). The gap may be caused by the context of the curriculum and the focus of the teacher education program (Arrow et al., 2019). In addition, coursework and practicums do not always align with the day-to-day teaching that takes place in elementary classrooms especially with the varied needs of

students (Lammert et al., 2022; Tortorelli et al., 2021). Preservice teachers need research-based theories, concepts and practices on how to teach students from diverse backgrounds to read (Lammert et al., 2022). Also, knowledge is needed on how students develop literacy and how to teach concepts in developmentally appropriate ways (Tortorelli et al., 2021).

There is concern of student underachievement in reading with limited research on how to train teachers on effectively teaching early reading skills (Flynn et al., 2021). Some educators of preservice teachers have weak knowledge of phonics specifically morphemes and phonemes (Flynn et al., 2021). However, preservice teachers can learn through exposure to phonics-based programs and individual school practices about literacy instruction (Arrow et al., 2019). It is important for teachers to understand how to teach early reading skills because their knowledge affects student' learning outcomes (Arrow et al., 2019). Results from a study on literacy knowledge and perception of preparedness to teach reading indicate preservice and classroom teachers feel somewhat prepared to teach reading but lack knowledge of phonics and phonological awareness (Porter et al., 2022).

Educators need explicit knowledge of what they are teaching, and the instructional methods used to teach them. Explicit instruction involves explaining a concept, modeling the concept and offering guided practice with feedback (Piasta & Hudson, 2022). One study stated that educators have more knowledge in the areas of fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension than in phonics and phonological awareness (Arrow et al., 2019) which are skills needed for students to learn how to read.

For educators to support students in phonological awareness they need an understanding of phonology so they can choose the right words for instruction and make modifications to instruction during phonological awareness activities (Piasta & Hudson, 2022).

Educators may know how to complete the tasks of phonics and phonological awareness but do not have explicit knowledge on how to teach the skills (Arrow et al., 2019). For example, educators may be able to identify words beginning with the same phoneme but when asked to define phoneme awareness they are unable to do so (Arrow et al., 2019).

Research shows teachers need understanding of the foundational literacy skills that are necessary for providing effective reading instruction. There is a relationship showing that teachers with good subject and professional knowledge can lead to better outcomes for students (Flynn et al., 2021). Students successful in word decoding received explicit instruction by a teacher with knowledge of phonology, orthography, morphology and literacy instruction (Arrow et al., 2019). While some teachers know the evidence-based literacy practices they do not feel knowledgeable using them in practice (Arrow et al., 2019). There are teachers who have misunderstandings regarding foundational literacy skills, for example counting the number of phonemes and morphemes in words and distinguishing between consonant blends and diagraphs (Hudson et al., 2021).

One study noted a need for differentiated instruction to help students become strong readers (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). Teachers must identify students' deficient skills to provide differentiated instruction to meet their needs (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020). Teachers need to target the skills required for reading in the primary grades

because the foundation of reading is in these grades. Research shows explicit instruction of foundational literacy skills provided students with the greatest opportunity to learn to read proficiently (Hudson et al., 2021). However, the authors say primary teachers need support in understanding the skills required for learning to read, identifying when students are missing those skills, and differentiating instruction to meet the needs (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020).

Teachers build knowledge for students in listening comprehension, phonological awareness and phonics. Therefore, teachers must be knowledgeable in phonological awareness and phonics (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020) to teach the skills to students. Teachers need to build knowledge in the primary grades to improve comprehension in reading in later years (Hoffman et al., 2021). Students need language and literacy learning experiences from teachers, but the quantity and quality of those experiences vary based on teachers' preparation programs (Piasta et al., 2020) and knowledge. A lack of knowledge effects the self-efficacy of teachers and can cause a negative response to students' errors that can lead to not helping students or referring students for outside services (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020). The more knowledge a teacher has, the more they are likely to persist and look for information to help them with instructional concerns. Some teachers blame reading failures on low socio-economic status or students who are English language learners instead of instructional weaknesses (Flynn et al., 2021). Educators must be knowledgeable in deciding on approaches that will work best for students and be able to make modifications for students as needed (Paige et al., 2021). It is necessary for educators to use their professional knowledge in instructional strategies

to address students' needs, however, teachers may not know what they do not know in the areas of phonological awareness and phonics to know what they need (Flynn et al., 2021; Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020). There is a gap in teacher knowledge of language and literacy, teachers have more knowledge in literacy instruction (Nicholson & McIntosh, 2020).

Teachers' subject knowledge of teaching phonics is crucial, training should take place at the local level with coaching over time (Flynn et al., 2021). Individual coaching over time may be more successful than stand-alone professional development in a large setting (Flynn et al., 2021). Personalized coaching over a year is shown to have value as it gives teachers time and provides them with expert support to put new knowledge into practice (Flynn et al., 2021).

There is an instructive process that is systematic during the early years of reading instruction (Prabhu et al., 2024). Literacy instruction that is effective should be of quality and with a growth mindset in the literacy domains for students (Galbally & Scharff, 2022). Researchers recommend teacher preparation programs provide instruction in phonemic awareness, morphology, code related instruction and needs of diverse learners (Thomas, 2022). For teachers currently in the classroom setting, curriculum and reading programs should be evaluated, in addition to the professional development needs and the local leadership.

Local leaders have influence over teacher knowledge and practice. Knowing that all reading programs are not created equal, selection should be done with care and caution (Thomas, 2022). Reading programs should be chosen based on scientific

evidence of instructional skills supporting early reading development (Petscher et al., 2020). Professional development for teachers should be consistent and based on research-based strategies. However, there is inconsistent data on the effectiveness of professional development with and without coaching (Piasta et al., 2020).

Instructional practice time during the reading block should match research suggestions for the development of literacy skills. Phonemic instruction in kindergarten – first grade was low compared to the time for phonics instruction even though phonemic awareness is needed to effectively teach phonics (Arrow et al., 2019). According to Kim and Snow (2021), 20% of schools in the United States are spending less than the recommended time on systematic teaching of decoding skills. In addition, 50% - 60% of educators report teaching the five instructional targets daily and 20% - 30% teach them once or twice each week (Kim & Snow, 2021).

Planning reading lessons involves a deep knowledge of reading as well as a variety of pedagogical practices so the teacher can choose the appropriate practice for students to meet their literacy goals (Hoffman et al., 2021). The judgments educators make when they plan and implement instruction affects students' learning (Paige et al., 2021). The quality of the lessons, in addition to the classroom environment and student-teacher interactions can cause gains in students' academic skills (Paige et al., 2021). Educators need theoretical and conceptual rituals and routines that are essential for learning to read (Hoffman et al., 2021). However, researchers do not know which routines may be more beneficial to underserved students in developing specific skills associated with learning to read (Hoffman et al., 2021).

There is concern over reading instruction in classrooms. There is debate regarding the role phonemic awareness plays in reading instruction. Some scholars feel enough time is not given to the skills which caused a movement called Science of Reading (SOR; Tortorelli et al., 2021). The Science of Reading is the knowledge of reading development and best practices for reading instruction (Galbally & Scharff, 2022). SOR does not specify what needs to be taught, the frequency or intensity (Kim & Snow, 2021). SOR guides educational stakeholders in decision making about literacy skills (Petscher et al., 2020). Research shows that code related skills support reading but there is not agreement on how it should be taught to students (Tortorelli et al., 2021).

Implications

The findings of this project study could have implications for practice in the classroom. Early childhood educators can have the professional development and resources needed to effectively teach literacy acquisition skills to students. Students would have the foundational instruction needed to be at the expected reading level by the end of kindergarten. The early grades are a determining factor in students' success in the older grades. For many schools, the focus is on grades three and higher as they take yearly standardized tests. Instruction changes can occur earlier so students can succeed on high stakes tests in later years. In addition, implications of this project study could be influential within the district. This study will inform district leaders on what early childhood teachers say they need for support in the classroom, curriculum changes, professional development, and resources to bridge the early literacy gap for students.

Summary

The first section explained the problem with literature support and data from the Title I school showing a deficit in literacy acquisition skills. Literature supports teachers' needs regarding the instruction of literacy acquisition skills so primary-aged students will become readers. The literature review presented the conceptual framework for the study and related studies on early literacy skills, teacher instruction, and teachers' experiences.

The second section supports the study's qualitative research design. It describes the interviews of teachers who work with primary-aged students that took place to learn about their experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

A basic qualitative design approach was appropriate for addressing the local problem in this study. A qualitative study addresses the meaning groups have regarding a human problem involving early childhood teachers helping students build literacy acquisition skills (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research encompasses the actions and experiences of people, such as early childhood teachers in social settings, like a Title I elementary school (Kekeya, 2021).

The qualitative research design has the observer within the environment where the study occurs (Creswell, 2013). The researcher collects all data where participants are experiencing the problem. It begins with assumptions and involves field notes, interviews, and conversations. The researcher collects data in the natural setting and makes sense of the data, establishing evident patterns and themes (Creswell, 2013). The researcher examines documents and uses open-ended interview questions. Within the qualitative research design, patterns, categories, and themes are developed and constantly checked with the data (Creswell, 2013).

There are various approaches to qualitative design, including general or basic, ethnographic study, case study, and mixed methods. The basic research design with interviews is appropriate as this study seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon, building literacy acquisition skills, in individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), early childhood teachers. While an ethnographic study involves a small group representing a larger group (Kekeya, 2021), and this study represents a small group of early childhood

teachers, an ethnographic study focuses on human society and culture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A case study can be an individual, group, or institution such as a school that focuses on the events that people experience and the issue as it presents itself (Kekeya, 2021). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) further define a case study as a bounded system to be studied. Mixed methods would not be appropriate for this study as the focus is on early childhood teachers' experiences based on data rather than the data itself.

Participants

The criteria for selecting participants for this study were early childhood teachers with early childhood teacher certification at the Title I elementary school. Nineteen teachers with early childhood teacher certification were invited to participate in the study. The participants included classroom teachers of kindergarten through second grade and the pre-kindergarten/elementary exceptional education supervisor. These educators were chosen based on their experience teaching students' literacy acquisition skills and their location at the Title I school.

The superintendent was advised of the study and the participants needed for the interviews. Email invitations were sent to participants seeking an interview to gain their perspectives. I shared my educational background and study focus within the initial email to establish a working relationship with the participants. To continue the working relationship, I acknowledged the value their perspectives will bring to the study. I shared that I value their time commitments with the scheduled interviews. I followed the ethical obligations set forth in the IRB for protection measures. Interviews were voluntary and did not involve sharing the knowledge of the individual participants with the principal or

superintendent. A consent form was shared with participants before interviews to share the purpose of the study. Interviews took place privately and were recorded with password protection. Demographics were in a group format, not by individual identities. To protect the privacy of participants codes were used for grades taught instead of the numerical grades, EC is early childhood and UE is upper elementary.

Table 1

Participant Representation in Project Study

Participant	Gender	Years teaching (range)	Grades taught (student teaching included)	Certified in Early Childhood	Took a class in reading instruction
P1.	F	16–25	EC, UE	Y	N
P2.	F	26+	EC	Y	Y
P3.	F	0–6	EC	Y	N
P4.	F	26+	EC	Y	Y
P5.	F	0–6	EC, UE	Y	Y
P6.	F	7–15	EC	Y	N
P7.	F	7–15	EC, UE	Y	Y
P8.	F	7–15	EC	Y	N
P9.	F	26+	EC	Y	Y
P10.	F	16–25	EC, UE	Y	Y
P11.	F	0–6	EC	Y	Y
P12.	F	0–6	UE	Y	Y
P13.	F	0–6	EC	Y	Y
P14.	F	0–6	EC	Y	Y

Data Collection

In qualitative research, a detailed understanding of the issue or problem can be accomplished by talking to the people involved and letting them tell their stories (Creswell, 2013). For this basic qualitative study, data collection took place via interviews. Interviews were conducted to get information that could not be observed

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) define interviews as conversations between the researcher and participant focused on questions related to the research study (2015). Interviewing early childhood educators empowered them to share their stories (Creswell, 2013) and experiences about teaching early literacy skills.

There are three interview techniques: highly structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Kekeya, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this research study as they included open-ended general questions that lead to conversations. Using open-ended questions helped lead to conversations on classroom practices in teaching early literacy skills. In the open-ended and semi-structured format, teachers expressed their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and views (Kekeya, 2021) on teaching students' deficits in early literacy skills.

Interviews were conducted and recorded through Zoom and saved for 5 years on a USB drive in a locked box. In addition, recorded interviews were stored on the computer with password protection. After the recording, a transcription of the interview was completed using Otter.ai and kept with the recording. The Otter.ai is a program that converts audio and video recordings to text. The transcription was reviewed by me and the interviewee for consistency.

An interview protocol was established with semi-structured and open-ended questions. Interview questions were created to gain insights from early childhood educators on teaching early literacy skills. The guide to getting good data was to ask good questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Question wording is important; it should be straightforward and use familiar language. Questions are formed to get information on

experience, opinion, knowledge, and background/demographics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The study focused on early childhood teacher perspectives; their experiences, opinions, and knowledge regarding early literacy skills were the data that was analyzed. The background/demographics of each participant was a data piece that was also gathered. A research log was kept noting emerging themes and categories. An electronic and hard copy inventory of the data was kept. This inventory has the transcribed interviews, research notes, and memos. Sufficiency of data collection was noted when saturation took place, and no new information was learned from participants.

In my role as a researcher, it was important to remain unbiased in my questioning and responses to the answers. I have 25 years in the field of education, having taught Grades 2 -5, with the last 11 years as a literacy coach. My experience and roles did not compromise my role as a researcher. In addition, I worked with these teachers in some capacity for the past eleven years. Due to the nature of this study and the relationship with teachers, they may have been more inclined to participate. I was never in a role as a supervisor or evaluator for the teachers; therefore, bias was not a concern. I reminded the participants that the decision to participate in the interviews was voluntary and would not impact our working relationship.

Data Analysis

Collecting and analyzing data should take place simultaneously as the researcher is learning as the analysis of data is taking place (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Comparing interview transcripts can inform future interviews. For the data to be trustworthy, participants verified and approved the data, specifically the transcribed interviews

(Kekeya, 2021). Once the participants reviewed the transcripts, a thematic analysis of the transcriptions was completed. Data analysis for basic qualitative research is inductive and deductive. The inductive piece works back and forth between themes and the data until a comprehensive set of themes is formed (Creswell, 2013). Checking the themes against the data was the deductive reasoning of the analysis.

Marie Clay's emergent literacy theory (1966) helped categorize the themes that came from the transcribed interviews. Clay noted there is more than one way to read and write, there are cognitive behaviors that students must learn to be proficient, learning to read has a sequence and students learn from knowledgeable teachers.

The data analysis should acknowledge and include an analysis of discrepant cases which are those that do not fit the pattern (Waite, 2011). For the discrepant cases found in the data analysis, each case was investigated and analyzed to understand teachers' experiences that differed from the primary themes found in the interviews.

Data Analysis Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills and explored their suggestions for improving resources and training for teaching literacy acquisition skills. Invitations were sent via email to 19 educators certified in early childhood education. Fourteen educators agreed to the video recorded interviews.

The semistructured interviews included 10 questions focused on educators' experiences about the factors and challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills and their suggestions for improving resources and teacher training (Appendix A). The

educators were asked the same interview questions during their 30-minute interview. All interviews were conducted, recorded and transcribed through the Zoom and Otter.ai platforms. Notes were taken during the interviews for reference. Each educator was assigned a number to protect their identity.

To address accuracy of the data, I reviewed the transcriptions and audio recordings for accuracy in wording. Each educator received the transcript to confirm accuracy. One educator clarified a response to a question regarding educator background. I submitted two transcripts to the committee chair for review.

Two questions guide this study and address the problem:

What are early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?

What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?

As part of the interview process, background questions were asked including taken a class on teaching reading in college, years teaching early childhood grades, and total years teaching at a Title 1 school. The data showed participants had 185 years of collective experience teaching at a Title 1 school. When looking at the early childhood grades, K – 2, the educators had 145 years of experience, averaging about 10 years of teaching. This background data is reflected in Table 1. The interview questions were designed to gain the perspectives of early childhood certified teachers on teaching literacy acquisition skills with a focus on the two research questions.

As I read through the transcripts, I sought answers and solutions that the teachers wanted. For this qualitative research, I did an inductive analysis of transcripts. The process included coding the data and comparing the data and the codes (Bingham, 2023). Coding is the process of taking unstructured data, analyzing it and applying labels (Jiang et al., 2025). Inductive analysis involves reading through transcripts to identify codes, patterns and themes (Bingham, 2023). The codes are not predetermined but identified as the researcher reads through transcripts. Inductive coding is the process of pulling meaning from text or narrative data, Appendix B, to determine patterns and insights (Jiang et al., 2025). Researchers discover themes and trends as opposed to deductive coding that involves pre-determined codes to support or refute a hypothesis (Zhao et al., 2024).

There were five phases to the process of analyzing the data: organizing the data, sorting the data, understanding the data, interpreting the data and explaining the data (Bingham, 2023). The data was organized in an Excel sheet. Each participant had a sheet, and I noted the answers of the participants for each interview question. After completing this for each participant, I noticed key words that were repeated. I went back to the Excel document to highlight words and phrases that repeated to sort the data. I then noted the themes developed that were aligned with the research questions. I wrote out the research questions and the interview questions that aligned with them and the key words and phrases that aligned. The data were interpreted with open codes based on the answers to the interview questions. The codes were then categorized as themes emerged for the research questions. The themes are described below, and the data is explained afterwards.

I met with the methodologist for support in categorizing over 100 phrases and terms from the 10 interview questions. The process took time, looking for similarities among key words and phrases. Following Saldaña's framework, my initial coding began with a descriptive, in vivo coding technique. This was used to process codes to capture participants exact words and actions (Saldaña, 2015). The purpose in doing this was to break the data down into manageable segments and begin to identify basic patterns. Then codes were recoded as more accurate words and phrases were discovered and merged (Saldaña, 2015) as patterns were revealed. The word and phrases from the codes were grouped into categories and themes to reveal relationships and overarching concepts. This axial coding explores connections between categories to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Coding is an iterative process, and recursive – moving back and forth between data and codes to refine interpretations. Memo writing is a part of the process; it is essential for documenting insights, reflections and analytic decisions. The themes formed answered the research questions that guided the study:

What are early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?

What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?

Theme 1: Background & Foundational Learning Gaps

Early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills varied based on their encounters. But a major concern among educators is the varying levels of student readiness when they enter school. Children are not coming

in with rich background knowledge; some have basic background knowledge, such as letter recognition, while others have had little to no exposure to early literacy skills.

Participant 8 stated:

I think the biggest struggle is when they come in and they just have little to no knowledge about some of them have never even held a pencil before ... the struggle is them coming in with, you know, very little background knowledge, so they don't have a good vocabulary. They can't follow instructions, because they're not given instructions, you know. They're not spoken to at home. They don't know how to have conversations. So really before you can even get into teaching, you know the standards. You know the literacy standards. You have to kind of jump back and teach basic pre-reading skills like, what is a book? Which way do you hold the book. How do the words go?

Some students lack access to early childhood education programs like preschool.

One educator stated that early education programs are necessary for developing literacy skills for students. Another noted that students with a preschool background do well in kindergarten because they have greater knowledge of letters, letter sounds and other early literacy skills.

This lack of exposure to early literacy skills makes it challenging for kindergarten teachers to teach the current grade level standards and indicators. They must meet the needs of students varying learning levels, for those who have background knowledge and those who do not. Educators in first through second grade emphasized the importance of students having foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness, blending sounds, and

rhyming words. Students need a strong foundation before they can advance in the expected schoolwork. However, educators felt they need flexibility in meeting students' needs, but the curriculum does not allow for that to take place. Participant 14 stated: "I think sometimes that we must take a step back and teach the basics and make sure that we get the foundations down before we do anything else."

There are long term effects of students not having foundational skills with students having difficulty with reading due to missing early literacy instruction. For one, teachers in the next grade are not teaching the skills that students need. Educators felt students are being pushed forward before they are ready, leading to frustration. Many expressed concern that literacy instruction is too focused on standardized testing instead of skill building which widens the literacy gap. Participant 5 stated:

I would say is ... from 3rd through what 5th - 6th grade, the kids are taking standardized tests. And I feel like there's a whole lot of heavy emphasizing on the standardized testing. And I feel like a lot of focus on that can take away the focus on the teaching and preparation. And I feel like that can kind of bog the students down, and it can kind of lead the students further behind than addressing the real issues that they need to be addressed.

Students need foundational skills like letter sounds, blending and decoding to be able to read. These skills build on each other. One participant gave the relationship to foundational skills and reading as building a house. Participant 1 stated:

When you're trying to teach them a new skill in literacy, and then they're going to have some type of foundation that they can, that they can build on. But it's just

like...Like people always use the trying to build a house, and you're trying to build a house on sand when the tide comes in, and when things get rough, and when they think it's too hard it's going to start sinking so because they don't have a firm foundation, and they just need a firm foundation. And it's going to start like anything else.

Theme 2: Curriculum Requirements

Educators feel they have many resources supplied by the school and district but not flexibility with its use. Students use Lexia Core 5, a blended learning program where teachers can provide differentiated instruction. In addition, educators have training in Orton Gillingham (OG), and Lexia LETRS. The Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH) Into Reading is the district resource used for literacy instruction for all students. The district provides a Curriculum Alignment Document (CAD) for educators to follow for daily instruction. Many educators expressed frustration with the inflexibility of literacy resources. Participant 10 stated:

But right now, I have a curriculum. That tells me that I got to do A, B and C ...

There's no flexibility. And so, we we have resources. We have great resources. But sometimes the resources are not used to the best way that we, as the true experts, could use them.

In addition, educators feel pressured to adhere to structured programs rather than addressing individual student needs. Teachers have noted that the strict pacing of literacy instruction does not allow enough time for struggling students to grasp foundational concepts. Participant 14 stated:

My number one struggle is that we are always kind of forcing children to be in a place that they're not ready for yet. I don't. I don't think that it's too much to ask kids to like, comprehend, or to infer or do different reading skills. Or, you know, literacy skills. I just. I think sometimes that we have to take a step back and teach teach the basics and make sure that we get the foundations down before we do anything else.

Moreover, the mismatch between different literacy programs, such as OG, LETRS, and HMH, creates confusion and inconsistency in instruction. Participant 8 stated:

So that's conflicting and then, so they want us to do OG, and we also have HMH Into Reading which tells us to do it another way. So, it's just and then Lexia, too. If you look into that data and look at their resources which they have some good resources. But again, it's you know, it's kind of telling you to do it a different way which can be good, because you can just kind of see what what works for your students. But the problem comes in when you're being told you have to use all these resources and they don't really match up.

Some educators noted that not all schools and students are alike, and the resources don't necessarily fit the needs of all students. Educators would like flexibility in using the resources and professional development with using the resources with fidelity. Whereas some educators would prefer to use just one program with fidelity and not add on any new programs. Participant 6 stated: "I don't feel like we have a concrete program because

I feel like, you know, it changes every other. We're adding something every 2 years, maybe to me. HMH, then, is OG, now it's LETRS.”

Regarding OG and LETRS, one participant (13) stated:

I feel like both of them are great, but I wish we could just stick with one program and be allowed to teach it with fidelity because when we're offered multiple, it's hard to choose which ones we can teach, or we should teach. And I don't think it's done with fidelity, because there's so many options.

While educators acknowledge the varied resources from the school and district many expressed a desire for using the materials as needed for their students and not have them as a requirement.

Theme 3: Parental Support

In addition to classroom instruction, educators stressed the importance of parental and community involvement in literacy development. Educators noticed a difference with students who have support at home prior to beginning school. They mentioned students who have support from home have background knowledge and more exposure.

Participant 9 stated:

exposure from being at home and having parents reading to them, and that is humongous when a child's parents are reading to them every night. That is tremendous...that instills a love of reading, and that makes them want to. And it's a bonding experience that a lot of our kids don't have, and it can be for a lot of different reasons. Parents can be working. They may want to, but they just don't have the time or energy to do it.

Many parents, particularly those with demanding jobs or limited literacy knowledge, are unable to provide the necessary support at home. Participant 5 stated: “limited, not enough, parental involvement. I feel like parent engagement is like a key factor in early literacy skills. Sometimes parents who are less familiar with early, like literacy skills struggle to support their children.”

In addition, Participant 7 discussed the discrepancies seen with children with support at home and those without:

when the kids are getting out of the car in the morning ... Sometimes I'll open up the door, and the radio station is every other word curse word, and that's what they're hearing coming to school and then sometimes I'll open up the door, and they may have a device in their hand playing a game, or it could be that they do have a device, but it's something educational that they're working on or it could be that they're getting out the car and have a book, or whatever. So, I do think that some of those discrepancies has something to do with being prepared before you leave home not just relying on the school to teach all of the literacy.

While parents depend on the school to provide literacy instruction during the school day many parents seek support for their child's literacy instruction after school, whether it is extra help or homework assistance. Participant 10 stated:

A lot of times what I'm teaching – the parents may not quite understand it, or have the means, in order to reinforce what I needed. Or if I even sent something home. They looking at like, what do you want? What do you want me to do with this? Some of it? It wasn't that they didn't want to. They didn't quite understand how to

use it, and we guilty. You're not going to send me this long checklist. Say, okay, you're going to do ABCD. I'm not going to sit here and read all of this, you know. I just want to know quickly. Give me a cheat sheet on what to do, and sometimes, I guess, because as educators, we know how to take the steps to do it. But when we sit home the parents are not able to follow up the way kids.

To assist parents, educators suggested that structured daycare programs and community initiatives could help expose children to early literacy skills before they enter school. Additionally, they emphasize that children need to be introduced to books and storytelling at a young age to develop a love for reading. Participant 1 stated:

I feel like daycares need to start getting more structured and teaching this stuff. Um, because we cause, as you know, we know, that it's not being taught in homes, and I'm not saying it's ... you know I'm not blaming anybody because people have their own situations. People work and they don't have time, but um if this thing can stay, it needs to start as early as it can.

Without these foundational experiences and the support of home, students may struggle to connect with literacy instruction in the classroom. Educators are at the heart of early literacy instruction, yet their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students often depends on the support they receive.

Theme 4: Instructional Support & Resources

At the most basic level, teachers need tools that allow them to meet students where they are. This includes hands-on materials such as manipulatives, phonics games, cubes, tiles, and puzzles that engage students in kinesthetic learning. Teachers

consistently emphasized the importance of developmentally appropriate resources, not generic or rigid curriculum documents. Materials like decodable readers, leveled libraries, and literacy kits for small groups help educators scaffold instruction in a meaningful and manageable way. Participant 6 stated this regarding decodable readers:

I'm thinking about reading. We don't really have um. I know HMH, does come with readers. But not always decodable readers, and I know our grade level we ordered some. But you know, like I said that's not provided district wide. So, I'd like to have something that's district wide across all kindergarten classes that we could use as decodables to gauge understanding, because I know we had level text before. I forgot the name of the program ... we used to have middle level reading text with kindergarten... We moved away from that right.

One participant would like leveled readers to meet the needs of students with varying reading levels. Participant 1 stated:

I would love to have ... a brand-new spanking, brand spanking, new level library that's on the lowest to the lowest level and the highest ... Some of them can read on the 4th grade level. But I'm thinking more on those lower-level readers, the ones that do come with without the foundations. I would like to have more of those level readers and readers that that would help you to pick, pull out those phonic skills to help them gain more of the skills in phonics. Yeah. So, at the same time they're you're reading. They're learning the phonics in, you know, in a story that they, they really, they can enjoy.

In addition to resources that meet the needs of students, educators want materials and resources aligned and the flexibility in the curriculum for students who may need to revisit foundational concepts.

Theme 5: Professional Development & Training

Equipping teachers to teach early literacy requires ongoing, professional development. Educators want more than one-time training sessions—they need sustained support, opportunities for reflection and follow-up that helps them implement the new strategies with success. Educators received training in LETRS and Orton-Gillingham; they have used the strategies but expressed the need for more training on how to use the resources more effectively. Participant 5 stated:

Professional development, I guess, will be one and not necessarily professional development on like a whole bunch of new stuff. But professional development on stuff that we already have to implement just ways that we can implement it in the time that we have to implement.

Also, educators wanted professional development for teaching foundational skills to students who seem unable to attain the skills and strategies for small group instruction to meet the needs of students. Participant 8 stated:

I definitely could use something that would help me help students who are just not picking anything up. That's where I struggle the most like the students who are getting it, even the ones who are getting it slowly. We can do something, but I have one student in particular. It always seems like you have one. It's like you're not picking up anything, and I don't know how to help you. You know, I feel like.

I'm just. I mean a repetition, of course, but I feel like we just keep repeating, repeating, repeating, you know, is there something else that we can do to possibly help those students, or, you know, am I doing the right thing?

Another participant, 13, noted a need for training on what a literacy lesson should look like for varying leveled students:

I think, professional developments. That show us how a good in-depth reading lesson is supposed to look for students. Both who are on level, above level and below level. So, a professional development, where we can see a reading lesson done with fidelity and with more emphasis on the phonics instruction piece of the reading lesson.

Additionally, educators wanted the opportunity to learn from each other. While educators participate in weekly grade level plannings, they wanted opportunities to attend workshops, peer modeling, classroom observations and shared reflections were mentioned. Participant 10 stated:

I think more training on what we have and better ways to use what we have is needed and teachers working with teachers. I don't think teachers get opportunity to really collaborate to collab like they really want to I can remember coming in, we would get opportunities like if I saw like. Oh. I heard Miss ... did this wonderful lesson. Can I go see it? Sure, we'll arrange somebody to watch your class so you can go. You may not be able to see all of it, but you can go and watch part of it...

The salient data from the interviews showed effective literacy instruction can't happen in isolation and educators want more collaboration in addition to training on the materials and resources used to improve students' outcomes in literacy. Repeatedly, the early childhood educators said they wanted a focus on one program, so they could focus their instruction for students and collaborate and learn from one another. These data informed the project study as a professional development focused on LETRS with time for collaboration and reflection.

In summary, the findings of this research were embedded with the framework of Marie Clay's emergent literacy theory (1966) and Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979). Clay's work regarding early literacy learners found that students with limited progress in reading and writing at the end of their first year of instruction continue to be among the lowest performing students year after year (Doyle, 2013). Based on the findings of this qualitative research project study, early childhood educators noted the need for supports for students who are not gaining the skills needed after kindergarten. Participants noted frustration in knowing what to do for students who are not attaining the skills needed to learn how to read. Clay acknowledged that students learn at different rates; participants wanted resources and guidance on meeting the varying needs of students. In addition, participants in this study want training on one instructional resource so they can be knowledgeable in meeting students' needs. Clay reiterated that teachers need to be well trained and knowledgeable about reading development in students.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory focuses on development in natural environments and how other systems affects the development. In this case, participants noted the varying programs and requirements they must meet or use to instruct students that they do not feel fully trained in or do not meet the needs of their students. While participants acknowledged they do their best, they felt they could use more training in one resource to meet their students' needs.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

After analyzing the research data and common themes, I concluded the best approach for this qualitative project study was a 3-day professional development workshop for early childhood educators. The professional development workshop entitled, “LETRS from A to Z” (Appendix F) was created to meet the needs of early childhood educators. The goal of this workshop is for early childhood teachers to have more time to learn and review the components of LETRS to plan for implementation in the classroom with the support of the school-based literacy coach.

Rationale

There are many factors that contribute to students learning to read, one factor is teachers’ professional development. Hao (2023) said the states must ensure they provide a supportive system for teachers that aligns standards with professional development, classroom support and curriculum to meet the literacy needs of students. Knowing that teachers play a key role in providing foundational skills to children (Uribe-Banda et al., 2021), it is important to provide training in early literacy instruction. There are five skills that students need to learn how to read: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Duffy et al., 2024, Hao 2023; Uribe-Banda et al., 2021). There are gaps in teacher knowledge about how to teach these areas and students need explicit instruction in each of these areas (Duffy et al., 2024).

A common theme from the early childhood educators was collaboration with others and training on the materials and resources to improve students’ early literacy

instruction. LETRS training has been provided for early childhood educators through eight face to face meetings over the course of 2 years with online videos. The state of South Carolina is moving towards a SOR approach to literacy and required early childhood educators to take the LETRS training. Many states are getting curriculum that aligns with SOR so a plan is needed to support teachers in this transition (Hao, 2023). A more in-depth professional development in LETRS will allow the educators to collaborate and have more engagement with the components of LETRS to make their early literacy instruction more effective. This intrinsic motivation will give the educators an opportunity to improve themselves (Hooper et al., 2023) as opposed to attending because it is a job requirement (extrinsic).

Early childhood educators want professional development geared towards their interests and needs as many professional development learnings are focused on upper elementary due to high stakes testing (Hooper et al., 2023). Educators have been dissatisfied with professional development that does not meet their needs and isn't engaging (Hooper et al., 2023). In addition to professional development, educators need time to learn and apply the new knowledge (Hao, 2023).

Review of the Literature

For this literature review, I used the Walden University library. As the focus of the project is on professional development for early childhood educators, I used those terms initially. I then focused the search on professional development and literacy, specifically phonological awareness and phonics.

PD Meet Needs of Educators

Professional development is a way to prepare educators to work with early childhood students by providing activities (Hegde et al., 2025) to improve the intentional teaching of early literacy skills (Chaitow et al., 2023). It also supports teachers who have challenges as well as strengthen instruction, but the professional development may not meet the needs of educators, aligning with practices that are developmentally appropriate for early childhood students (Hooper et al., 2023), engaging and relevant. There should be a positive change in educators' practice, improvements in their knowledge and skills (Hegde et al., 2025) as well as positive change in the learning for students (Chaitow et al., 2023) after being provided with professional development opportunities. Early childhood educators need professional development that is hands-on, allows for authentic assessment and includes student choice (Hooper et al., 2023). Effective professional development is content focused, involves active learning techniques, collaboration, coaching, feedback and reflection (Hooper et al., 2023). Early childhood educators need access to appropriate and relevant professional development that is developmentally appropriate for their students and gives practice and techniques that are appropriate for early childhood learners. Educators want the opportunity to collaborate and reflect on their learning and practice.

Issues arise when professional development does not meet expectations, educators have reservations on the content or are uninterested (Hooper et al., 2023). To alleviate this issue, there should be a separate professional development for early childhood

educators and the opportunity for collaboration with other early childhood programs like Head Start (Hooper et al., 2023).

When early childhood educators are involved in high quality interactions, professional development, coaching and collaboration, students benefit by having greater classroom engagement (Downer et al., 2024).

Components of Effective PD

Early childhood educators say in person professional development, and online courses help them learn new knowledge to influence their teaching practices and may cause a shift in their teaching beliefs (Downer et al., 2024). Professional development should address the needs of individual teachers, continue over time and allow for opportunities to apply the newly learned information in the classroom setting (Bose, 2023). In addition, to change instruction practice and improve student outcomes, professional development must have focused content, active learning, collaboration among educators, modeling of effective practice, coaching and extended time (Duffy et al., 2024). Also, effective professional development should be responsive to educator needs, align with school goals, incorporate coaching, feedback and follow up, collaboration among educators and able to implement in the classroom (Wood et al., 2025). Professional development influences educator knowledge, belief systems, attitudes and pedagogy (Uribe-Banda et al., 2021) which in turn influences student learning. Educators can also benefit from a tiered approach to professional development, providing relevant and personalized learning based on teacher needs (Bose, 2023). Moats was referenced regarding educators needing ongoing professional development focused on

one topic, with practical applications, opportunities for collaboration followed by in class coaching (Duffy et al., 2024). Targeted professional development can positively impact classroom practice, teacher-student interactions and student outcomes (Hernandez et al., n.d.).

Job embedded coaching is a support that can be offered as an alternative (Downer et al., 2024) or in collaboration with professional development instead of taking a course. Literacy coaches can help teachers address specific needs of struggling readers (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2021). Coaching is effective if there is strong content, active learning with coherence among policies and programs (Cutrer-Parraga et al., 2021). In addition, coaching needs to be embedded within the school. Professional development through coaching can be effective because it gives teachers tools to improve classroom practice and deliver high quality instruction (Hernandez et al., n.d) in literacy.

School site administrators can support learning of early childhood educators by having a collaborative learning culture where teachers can speak freely, discussing and reflecting on their learning and classroom instruction (Bose, 2023). Early childhood educators also need opportunities to learn in small groups whether a literacy group, grade level or topic specific interests (Bose, 2023). Some educators may need one to one support or individualized coaching; when there are observations there should be immediate feedback with recommendations for instruction (Bose, 2023). Early childhood educators that were interviewed mentioned having release time for teachers to observe other teachers, attend workshops and conferences and attend specialized trainings; the release time would need to be provided by the school site administrator (Bose, 2023).

There should also be access to a literacy coach or mentor for early childhood curriculum (Bose, 2023). Early childhood educators need resources to support early literacy instruction, for example decodable texts, phonics games, and multi-sensory materials for students; educators need professional books, journal articles and online resources to support instruction (Bose, 2023).

Science of Reading

The SOR promotes evidence-based reading techniques (Duffy et al., 2023) based on decades of research on how students learn to read (Hao, 2023). There are effective practices in SOR for teaching reading that can bridge the achievement gap (Duffy et al., 2023) among students. Early childhood students learn to read with instruction that is based on scientific evidence with practice with phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency vocabulary and comprehension (Bose, 2023). Many early childhood educators struggle with translating the theoretical knowledge of teaching reading to the practical skills needed for the classroom (Bose, 2023). For early childhood educators to make the connection between knowledge and skills, more professional development is needed with knowledge and practice as a basis for it (Bose, 2023). Many preservice educators feel they need more support in phonics skills instruction (Bose, 2023). All educators teaching early literacy skills need a good grasp of the English phonological structure therefore the professional development should include a focus on English phonology and language structure (Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023). In addition to English phonological structure, a strong content knowledge of orthography is needed to support students' phonological awareness development in early literacy learning (Piasta et al., 2020).

Instruction is important for struggling readers. Students in the early stages of reading have a sensitivity to sounds, phonemic awareness, that help develop their word analysis (Uribe-Banda et al., 2021) and beginning readers benefit from explicit instruction in word analysis (phonics; Duffy et al., 2023). Students need to be taught systematically and explicitly (Duffy et al., 2023). To meet the instructional needs of students, educators need professional development in focused areas to meet their students' needs. Early childhood educators need training in phonological awareness, practice using decodable texts with students, instruction with oral fluency, use of manipulatives and how to instruct explicitly systematic phonics (Duffy et al., 2023).

The effectiveness of language and literacy professional development for early literacy skills focuses on specific emergent literacy practices, be intensive and ongoing (Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023). The professional development needs a systematic scope and sequence to develop specific skills, utilize active learning with time to practice instructional techniques and the application of the skills with feedback and self-reflection (Jaskolski & Moyle, 2023).

Motivation to Participate

To be invested in the process of coaching and professional development training, educators must have buy in (Hernandez et al., n.d.). Reflection is important to professional development. This is transformative for educator growth. Educators need time to reflect on their practice and challenge any misconceptions or inaccurate assumptions (Duffy et al., 2023). There should be an evaluation of professional

development to determine if there is a change in instruction from the educator and the effectiveness of student outcomes (Chaitow et al., 2023).

Educators who participated in language and literacy professional development showed gains in content knowledge and were also able to provide more explicit phonological and orthographic instruction (Piasta et al., 2020). Those who had coaching in addition to professional development showed greater gains in content knowledge and higher quality classroom instructional practice (Piasta et al., 2020).

Project Description

This project was chosen to address early childhood educators' suggestions for their professional development needs to address literacy acquisition skills for students. One theme from the research showed educators wanted professional development on how to teach foundational skills as well as to focus on one program to implement. The additional professional development will support educators as they teach phonemic awareness, phonics and phonological awareness to early childhood students. The project entails a three-day professional development for educators in kindergarten through second grades at the site (Appendix D). Educators have already completed virtual and eight face to face training in LETRS, but this professional development will have a focus on the foundational skills students need to learn to read.

The 3-day professional development will consist of:

- Revisiting training in LETRS, focused on what needs to be taught and the importance of teaching skills for phonological awareness
- Training on the strategies and materials used to teach phonological awareness

- A scope and sequence with activities for implementation
- Time to practice and plan with peers

After the professional development sessions, classroom demonstrations, classroom observations, ongoing data review and reflections on the practice took place with the support of the school level literacy coach.

Day 1 focused on phonological awareness, phoneme consonants and vowels – learning the sounds, practicing the sounds, and activities for instruction. Day 2 focused on assessments and a scope and sequence for instruction of recognizing letters and teaching sound correspondences with the support of the school literacy coach and district English Language Arts Coordinator. Day 3 focused on reviewing data of student learning, progress monitoring and small group instruction for students who are not growing in the foundational skills. Each day provided time for reflection of current practice and the changes that will come from the training. Training was provided in person on the professional development days offered by the district.

The early childhood educators benefitted from the three-day training because they had opportunities for interacting with peers, practice and planning for implementation in the classroom; also, they will be able to come back together for reflection on the practice and make modifications. This professional development can be offered to educators in the future, as LETRS training is a statewide requirement.

Resources

The resources needed for the 3-day professional development included a large room to seat 13 educators and their classroom assistants. In addition, a computer and

Smartboard capable of connecting to the Internet. Also, hand mirrors, pens, pencils, sticky notes and any other school supplies educators may need.

Educators needed to bring a device to access resources and for planning. In addition, educators needed their LETRS Volume 1 participant manual. For the third day of planning, educators will need to bring reflections of the practice in the classroom.

Existing Supports

The study participants were an existing support for this project. Focused professional development was a resource need as well as a training request. Educators wanted training and focus on one program to implement. Administrators were also an existing support as increasing teacher capacity was needed to improve teaching and learning. There is also a state funded literacy coach at the elementary school to provide training. In addition, there are weekly grade level collaborative planning meetings.

The local site had space for the professional development in addition to Smart Boards that connect directly to the internet. Since the professional development will occur on district professional development days, substitutes will not be needed.

Potential Barriers

A barrier to the completion of the project was professional development for the beginning of the year may have already been planned by school administrators and district staff. A solution to the barrier was to share the results of the research study and professional development plan with the district to have this professional development implemented on the remaining professional development days for the school year.

Another barrier was the inability to have the training on three consecutive days. This can be alleviated by requesting the district to provide substitute teachers for the early childhood educators or use the classroom assistants or other non-homeroom staff members to cover the classrooms.

Project Evaluation Plan

There should be evidence of whether the goals of professional learning have been met (Guskey, 2025). Guskey also says one should plan how and when to collect the evidence of the learning (2025). For this professional development, teachers were given a survey at the end of each day to determine if the goals of each day were met. The daily survey (Appendix C) allowed for adjustments to the next day's instruction especially if any topics needed clarifying. At the end of the three-day professional development, teachers completed another survey to assess the effectiveness of the training.

Project Implications

The goals of this professional development based on the research were: (1) Teachers will strengthen their early foundational skills instruction through a focus on phonological awareness, phonics and comprehension; (2) Teachers will learn a new resource for instruction in early foundational skills; and (3) Teachers will apply new learning to meet the needs of their primary aged students.

This qualitative research project study may impact social change by providing teachers with professional development that they want so they can provide adequate instruction to primary aged students in reading instruction. In addition, district leaders

can begin hearing the needs of teachers and providing professional development around their needs to assist with instruction of students.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

The project study addressed the needs of early childhood educators to provide the literacy acquisition skills for early childhood students. Based on the findings of the qualitative study this professional development was chosen to address early childhood educators' needs for teaching literacy acquisition skills to early childhood students. The professional development was grounded in Clay's (1966) emergent literacy theory. Emergent literacy theory posits literacy is a developmental process that is influenced by school environments. The strength of this qualitative research project study was to provide early childhood educators with professional development they needed to address literacy acquisition skills for students. One major theme from the research showed educators wanted professional development on one program that addressed the teaching of foundational skills. A facilitator provided training in a smaller environment with the educators to train on resources and use of materials for educators to have time to see a model and practice. Another strength of the project study was educators will be in smaller learning environments to discuss foundational skills and implementation in their classrooms. There were longer opportunities to practice and receive feedback before educators did the instruction with their students. For example, when teaching students letter sounds it is important for teachers to be able to model the correct formation of their mouth as well as the sounds themselves.

But there were potential limitations to the professional development. The first was the timing of the sessions. It was ideal for the professional development to take place

prior to the beginning of the school year, but the district and building administrators already had their days planned out and the educators were unable to attend. The sessions for the professional development needed two full days and the district provided professional development for elementary employees for just one day at the beginning of the school year. To address this, I will speak with the district instructional coach for English Language Arts and the professional development director about the professional development plan for the educators at the Title I school. I will ask for the use of the school site for the trainings so educators will have easy access to any materials needed from their classrooms. In addition to having, it at the school site, the building administrator will be able to come and observe the learning taking place and what to expect when visiting classrooms during this instructional time.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The purpose of the professional development was to support early childhood educators with teaching foundational skills and other literacy acquisition skills to students. The professional development provided resources and time to practice instruction in the skills before implementation in the classroom. An alternative to the 3-day professional development was to utilize the early childhood educators weekly grade level planning to do professional development. This time allowed each grade level to learn and plan in a smaller setting with a facilitator. The school has a literacy coach that could provide the training and as they are on site, they could model for the teachers as well as in the classroom. The literacy coach can co-teach, observe and give immediate feedback to the educators to support their professional development implementation.

Another alternative was to have a facilitator provide a day long professional development on the district level professional development days throughout the school year. Aside from the district professional days prior to the beginning of the school year, the district calendar has built in three other professional development days during the school year.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

I have learned with this process that learning is a never-ending process. As a lifelong learner I wanted to pursue solutions to a problem that I experienced as a classroom teacher. In addition, as a literacy coach seeing early childhood students not making gains in reading, I wanted to find ways to support educators in their classrooms. The needs of the students was a driving force behind this work because I believe the early childhood grades are the foundation for the rest of students' education and if there are cracks and missing pieces in the foundation, students will have gaps in their later educational years.

The process for this study was a long one for me. While I had many thoughts on what the problem was, narrowing it down to one specific topic proved to be more difficult than I could imagine and after discussion with my initial committee I felt lost. The problem of students not growing in reading is rooted in many different causes. My focus had to be clear on just one area that could provide support for students. Although students were not growing in reading, the students were not the problem. Looking at what can be controlled and changed the problem moved to what educators perceived as the problem because they are in the classroom experiencing the lack of growth. The process

of slowing down allowed me to look at the problem from different perspectives, write a clear proposal of what I wanted to focus on, create open ended interview questions that would allow conversations and no single worded answers. In addition, I learned how to look for trends in data to determine a plan of action to support educators.

The project development came from the repeated wording I was hearing from educators. They wanted to support their students, but they wanted to focus on one program with support and resources to implement in their classrooms. It was during the interviews that I began thinking of a deep dive into LETRS and allowing educators time to practice and plan before fully implementing it in their classrooms. I reviewed literature related to professional development. In person professional development that is collaborative and focused support teachers' learning. Teacher buy in for professional development was something I had always thought about, but the literature supported it. I felt the educators I interviewed would have buy in because this was something they voiced that they wanted.

Developing this qualitative research project also increased my research skills. As a literacy coach I provided professional development daily to educators, but this project study forced me to focus directly on the needs and wants of the educators I interviewed instead of what I was directed to do. I found it to be very important to focus on the needs of the educators so they will see the purpose, be engaged and be willing to go back to their classrooms to implement their learning.

I have been in education for 25 years with 14 of those years in an instructional leadership role. This doctoral journey has taught me one thing – endurance. Due to my

daily work and increase in duties in other areas, time dedicated to this journey was not up to par. There were also times initially where there wasn't any progress and I felt I was wasting time. However, this work was important for me to endure and see the process until the end. My husband and uncle also encouraged me to continue and not give up. In addition, my chair continues to push and encourage me because he could see the finish line better than I could.

I also learned to lean on others and not feel isolated in the process. Reaching out to the research librarians and methodologist was humbling and rewarding. Each conversation brought clarity and a renewed energy to continue the work. This journey also taught me to focus on my goals and to see them to completion. Developing the project took time to do research and narrow down what educators really needed for their growth and development.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

This work is so important as children are our future, and we need to help and support them as much as possible for them to be successful. Early childhood grades are important and set the foundation for success as students move forward. Students coming to school unready can continue to have gaps so educators need more knowledge in closing the gaps so students can learn the foundational literacy skills needed to become readers.

The lowest grade level I taught was second grade and I saw gaps in foundational learning skills. I was a new teacher and did not know why students were not ready for second grade. As I transitioned out of the classroom and could visit classrooms, I

developed a love for the younger students and saw the eagerness to learn but I also saw educators struggling to teach foundational literacy skills. This doctoral journey gave me the opportunity to address the need. I learned that educators saw the need and while some discussed the home support that was needed many of them spoke of the need for more focused professional development to support what they are doing in the classroom.

I felt supporting educators in the classroom with professional development and resources was the best avenue for the project study. Because educators had a voice in what they wanted, they would be more willing to attend and be attentive in the professional development. I have learned that listening to what educators want is key to their growth because they are working in the classrooms closely with students and see the needs and the gaps.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

It is widely known that a failure to learn foundational skills for reading will lead to reading deficits later that can have long term effects for students such as poverty and lower employability (Lane et al., 2025). Early childhood students must have phonemic awareness, decoding, and phonics instruction to become readers. Early childhood educators for this study recognized that need and wanted support. Unfortunately, due to high stakes testing, focus for reading and support goes to the upper grades where there are foundational gaps hindering students from reading instead of focusing on the early childhood grades to build the foundations for reading.

The professional development is a way of supporting educators with what they asked for and needed. There is a clear focus for phonemic awareness, phonics and the

opportunity for practice and planning with a facilitator who is skilled in the subject and can offer immediate support and feedback. As this professional development is for a group of educators at one school, this can lead to the professional development being offered across the district to all early childhood educators. The feedback for the sessions can improve the professional development so it is truly meeting the needs of the educators and not following a specific program. Expanding this professional development to all early childhood educators will impact more students' reading instruction which will impact students' long term in reading and other subject areas that heavily rely on reading skills. Future research can look at the impact of specific programs focused on foundational skills have on students' long term, tracking the progress of those students from early childhood to elementary grades.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills and explored their suggestions for improving resources and training for teaching literacy acquisition skills. Educators certified in early childhood shared their experiences of the struggles and the need to meet the needs of teaching literacy acquisition skills. The project developed was a professional development opportunity to focus on literacy acquisition skills that educators could implement in their classrooms with support and feedback.

Research has shown that effective classroom instruction in foundational reading skills, phonemic awareness, decoding and encoding, can reduce reading problems later (Lane et al., 2025). Early childhood educators benefit from ongoing professional

development in teaching foundational literacy skills. The educators interviewed expressed the need for more training and resources in the instruction of these skills because they saw the importance of the skills for students to become readers. The social change implication is hearing what educators need to instruct their students and providing them with the support they need. Instead of professional development being a top-down decision, educators can share what they need and those making the decisions can provide the support that is needed by those in the classroom. By listening to the educators and providing them with what they need, student reading achievement will go up and the gaps in reading will begin to shrink.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The research questions seek to understand the experiences of early childhood educators on teaching literacy acquisition skills.

RQ1 What are early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?

RQ2 What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?

Conceptual Framework: Marie Clay's Emergent Literacy and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Introduction
<p>Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. I am a doctoral student at Walden University in Curriculum Instruction and Design. I appreciate you taking the time to meet and participate in this interview with me. The focus of my study is on early childhood literacy and the experiences early childhood educators have on teaching literacy acquisition skills to the students. I asked you to participate in the study because you are certified in Early Childhood Education.</p> <p>This interview will be recorded as stated in the consent form. Also, your personal information and identity will remain confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin?</p>
Background
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What college or university did you graduate? 2. Was there a class on teaching reading? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Tell me about the experience in the class, the learning and activities. 3. How many years have you been teaching? 4. How many years have you taught in a Title I school? 5. In the Title 1 schools did you teach students in grades K, 1 or 2? 6. In the Title 1 schools, how many years did you teach K? 1? 2?
Interview Questions
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about your experience with teaching early literacy skills to early childhood students. (RQ1) 2. What early literacy strategies and programs do you use with students in relation to (RQ1): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Phonemic awareness? b. Alphabet knowledge? c. Sight words? d. Phonics? 3. What literacy strategies are most successful with students? (RQ1) 4. What literacy strategies are least successful with students? (RQ1)

5. How do you feel the resources provided by the school and district support teaching early literacy skills? (RQ1)
6. What can you tell me about the struggles with teaching early literacy skills to early childhood students? (RQ1)
7. Using the provided resources, why do you feel there is a gap in student acquisition of early literacy skills? (RQ1)
8. Are more resources needed for teaching early literacy skills? If so, what resources do you need? (RQ2)
9. What training do you need to teach early literacy skills to early childhood students? (RQ2)
10. What other strategies or interventions can support teaching early literacy skills to students? (RQ2)

Closure

Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me and participating in the interview for my study. I will transcribe the interview for your review. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Appendix B: Coding of Interviews

Research Question 1

What are early childhood educators' experiences with the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?

Teachers' Experiences Themes Questions 1 - 7	
Categories	Categories Narrowed
Background Experience	Background Experience
Community Resources	Early Literacy Foundational Skills
Curriculum & Programs	Curriculum Concerns - Programs, Pacing and Input
Curriculum Alignment & Requirements	Materials and Resources
Early Childhood Background	Parent & Community Support
Early Literacy Programs	
Engaging materials and activiteis	
Foundational Literacy Skills	
Foundational Skills	
Good Resources	
Implementation Challenges and Inconsistencies	
Instructional Strategies	
Instructional strategies and methods	
Lack of Flexibility	
Materials and Resources	
Pacing is above students' ability	
Pacing of Instruction & Curriculum	
Parent/Home knowledge and support	
Parents	
Resources not aligned	
Teacher Input	
Testing Emphasis	
Use of worksheets	

Research Question 2

What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?

Teacher Needs Themes Questions 8 - 10

Categories	Categories Narrowed
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Collaboration with Peers	Foundational skills of Students
Enough Resources	Access to Resources
Foundational Skills	Access to training and professional development
Hands On (Manipulatives)	Support
Ideal Education	
More Training	
Need More Manipulatives	
Need More Resources	
Need More Training	
Need to Focus on One	
Ongoing PD	
Parent Support	
Professional Development Needs	
Resources	
Student Engagement	
Student Play to Learn	
Students Need Foundation	
Students Progress	
Teacher Input	
Technology & Curriculum	

Categories to Themes

Categories for Question 1	Categories for Question 2	Themes
Background Experience	Foundational skills of Students	Background & Foundational Learning Gaps
Early Literacy Foundational Skills	Access to Resources	Curriculum Requirements
Curriculum Concerns - Programs, Pacing and Input	Access to training and professional development	Parental Support
Materials and Resources	Support	Instructional Support & Resources
Parent & Community Support		

Appendix C: Evaluation

“LETRS from A to Z”

Day 1 – Day 3 Feedback

The feedback you provide on the professional development will help ensure that your instructional needs are being met. This survey will be given at the end of our sessions.

Please circle your response to the following statements.

1. Today’s learning strengthened my understanding of foundational skills instruction for my students.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. Today’s learning gave me a new resource for teaching foundational skills.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. Today’s learning strengthened my ability to meet the needs of my students.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

What questions do you need addressed have from today’s training?

“LETRS: From A to Z”
Teacher Professional Development Project Summative Evaluation

Thank you for attending the 3-day professional development. Your feedback is very important to assess this work and determine next steps. Thank you for participating.

Please circle your response to each of the following.

1. As a result of this 3-day professional development I have a better understanding of phonological awareness, phonics and reading comprehension.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. As a result of this 3-day professional development I have a better understanding of how to use the resources to support my students in phonological awareness, phonics and reading comprehension.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. As a result of this 3-day professional development I feel more confident in applying this new learning to meet the needs of my students.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Did the training meet your needs to teach your primary aged students?

What other training or supports do you need?

Appendix D: The Project

This is an overview of the professional development project that addresses the problem of the qualitative research project study. This 3-day professional development was created for early childhood educators who work at a Title 1 elementary school in South Carolina. The problem was early childhood educators struggle to help students with literacy acquisition skills in a Title 1 elementary school. The 3-day professional development includes revisiting professional development with LETRS, a program focused on literacy acquisition skills, a guest trainer, partner and small group practice, planning a scope and sequence, and opportunities for in classroom practice with immediate feedback.

Purpose

The educator professional development project is a 3-day professional development project with a tentative implementation date of Summer 2026, with the approval of district and school level administrators. The goals of the professional development are (1) Educators will strengthen their early foundational skills instruction through a focus on phonological awareness, phonics and comprehension; (2) Educators will learn a new resource for instruction in early foundational skills; and (3) Educators will apply new learning to meet the needs of their primary aged students.

Learning Opportunities for Early Childhood Educators During the Professional Development Project

Opportunity to ask questions of peer, literacy coach and expert in a small setting

Opportunity to learn through engaging practice with other educators

Opportunity to practice and receive immediate feedback

The professional development will begin with a welcome and asking who is in the room – grade level, years teaching, familiarity with LETRS.

Target Audience

The target audience for this professional development project are early childhood educators in a Title I school in South Carolina. The proposed professional development project for early childhood students will be held at the research project study site and includes reviewing components of phonological awareness instruction, modeling and practicing instructional elements, an expert facilitator and instructional planning.

Materials and Equipment

Large space for educators

Table and chairs

Smartboard

Educator personal devices – laptops or chromebooks

Chart tablet

Writing materials (pens, pencils, papers, post it notes)

Handouts

Day 1: LETRS A to Z – Phonological Awareness – What is it?

Timeline and Activities for Day 1

Session 1 – 60 minutes

The purpose of the session is to share the results of the research with participants and why the professional development project was chosen. The three overarching goals

will be explained. The three goals are (1) Educators will strengthen their early foundational skills instruction through a focus on phonological awareness, phonics and comprehension; (2) Educators will learn a new resource for instruction in early foundational skills; and (3) Educators will apply new learning to meet the needs of their primary aged students.

Session 2 – 60 minutes

The purpose of the session is to allow educators to get up and moving, and to gauge prior knowledge on the content. In addition, Session 2 will begin with an activity to get the participants moving and having discussion. The activity is called Four Corners. Each corner will have one of the phrases – *I know this very well, I know a little about it, I have heard the term, I don't know what the term is*. I will present a word to the participants, and they will move to the corner that matches their knowledge of the term. Participants will discuss in their corners why they chose their location. There will be a time to share out after each term. We will do four corners on key phrasing – phonology, phoneme awareness, phonics, letter recognition. Groups will define the terms and rank their knowledge of the terms on a scale of 1 – 5, with 1 little knowledge to 5 great knowledge. The corner groups will have the opportunity to share out with all the participants.

I will share the focus of the rest of the day in relation to the terminology that was discussed.

15-minute break

Session 3: Foundations of Phonology (60 minutes)

The purpose of the session is for participants to understand the meaning and purpose of phonology. The focus will be on the foundational aspects of phonology awareness and the components of phonemes, phoneme blending and segmentation with individual sounds and simple syllables. Participants will review the terminology and have examples of the following key terms: phonological awareness, phoneme, phonemic awareness, and phonology.

Phonological awareness – awareness of all levels of speech sound system, syllables, onset-rime and phonemes

Phoneme – smallest unit of sound used to build words

Phonemic awareness – awareness of the individual speech sounds (consonants and vowels) in spoken syllables and the ability to manipulate the sounds

Phonology – rules by which phonemes can be sequenced, combined and pronounced to make words

Phonics – study of the relationship between letters and sounds they represent

Onset and rime – division of a syllable into two parts onset comes before the vowel the rime includes the vowel and whatever is after it

Activities:

Kindergarten – match words with the same first sound

Recognize if single sounds are the same or different

Blend a sound with a rime

First Grade – segment final phoneme

Segment phonemes, blend vc, cv, cvc

Substitute phonemes to build a new word – final and medial sounds, segment ccvc words with initial blends

Second Grade – delete sounds in initial and final sounds, substitute sounds in words with blends

Third grade - Delete sounds in words with blends, delete and substitute any sound in more complex syllables

Lunch Break (60 minutes)

Session 4: Phoneme Awareness 20 minutes

After lunch, I will model correct consonant phoneme sounds with mirrors for teachers as we practice. Teachers will have the opportunity to practice in a mirror and with a partner. The same procedure will follow for vowel phonemes.

The day will end with an evaluation and closing activity. Teachers can leave questions on a parking lot chart that can be answered the next day.

Session 5: Consonant Phonemes 60 minutes

Take educators through the process of teaching phoneme grapheme correspondences

Give everyone a mirror

Today we will learn to read and spell a consonant sound

The new sound is p

It is the first sound in pet

Say the first sound in pet

Look in the mirror

What does your mouth look like when you say the sound

Listen for the p sound at the beginning of some words. Say each word after me.

Do the same for each letter.

Consonants –

Articulation – front of the mouth, back of the mouth or in between

Stops – sounds with one burst of sound

Unvoiced p t k

Voiced b d g

Nasals air streamed through the nose as the sound is made

m n ng

Fricatives hissy sounds

Voiced v th z zh

Unvoiced f th s sh h

Affricates two or more consonants

Ch j

Glides vowel like qualities and combine with vowels, consonants that are

followed by a vowel phoneme that glide right into the vowel

Wh w y

Liquids seem to float in the mouth

L r

Session 6: Vowel Phonemes 40 minutes

Phonemes in order of articulation

English vowel phoneme chart

Close and Wrap Up 10 minutes

Activities

Read aloud books with rhyme patterns and alphabet sounds

Syllable deletion

Initial sound matching

Onset-rime division and manipulation with boxes

What sound? Give a word, first sound middle sound, last sound

Final sound match

Blend phonemes p e g peg

Initial and final sound substitution poodle noodle

Day 2

Session 7:

The beginning of the second day will be a review of the practice from the previous day and answering any lingering questions. Educators will have the opportunity to practice teaching each other the consonant and vowel phonemes looking for correct mouth formation.

Session 8: Facilitator Model & Practice

For the second day of training a facilitator from Lexia will present on the correlation between LETRS training and the Lexia Core5 platform that students use as well as resources for student assessment classroom instruction.

Educators will have the opportunity to learn how to teach phonological skills and practice with a partner with support from the Lexia facilitator.

Lunch Break (60 minutes)

Session 9: Reflection (20 minutes)

Session 10: Scope and Sequence (120 minutes)

The afternoon, educators will plan a scope and sequence for nine weeks with the resources provided. Educators will plan for individual or whole group student diagnostics, use of decodable text

Wrap Up & Close: 10 minutes

Day 3

After nine weeks of instruction, the educators will come back together again for a day of reflection, practice and planning for further student instruction. Between the second professional development day and the third one, educators will have been observed and given feedback on their instruction. There will also have been opportunities for visiting each other's classrooms to observe the implementation of the professional development received. This session will serve as an opportunity to review and clarify misunderstandings and continued planning for student instruction.

Appendix E: Slideshow Presentation

**LETTRS : from
A to Z**

Professional Development for Teachers
Dena R. Crews
Walden University
Doctoral Student

**Professional Development
Overview**

- Goals of Professional Development Project
- Agenda Overview

Goals

- Teachers will strengthen their early foundational skills instruction through a focus on phonological awareness, phonics and comprehension
- Teachers will learn a new resource for instruction in early foundational skills
- Teachers will apply new learning to meet the needs of their primary aged students.

PD Days 1 - 3

1. Day 1 – Phonological Awareness
 - a. What is phonological awareness?
 - b. What should be taught?
2. Day 2 – Putting it into Practice
 - a. Model teaching phonological awareness skills
 - b. Practice teaching phonological awareness skills
3. Day 3 – Reflection, Feedback, Plan and Practice

Day 1 Agenda

- Session One: Introductions
- Session Two: Early Literacy Components Four Corners
- Break
- Session Three: Foundations of Phonology
- Lunch Break
- Session 4: Phoneme Awareness
- Session 5: Consonant Phonemes
- Break
- Close: Day 1 Evaluation

Session 1

Welcome

Who's in the Room

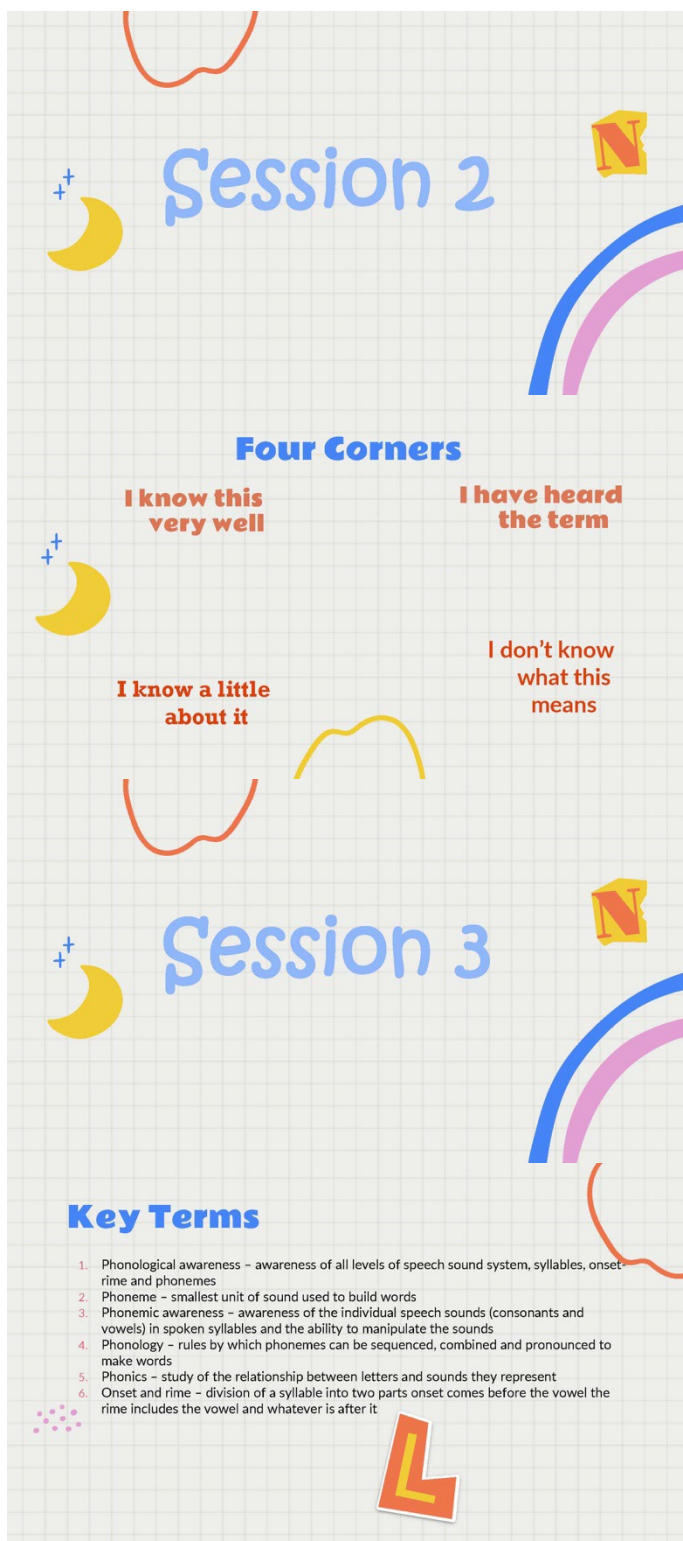
Grade Level
Content Area
Trained in LETRS

Why We Are Here

Introduction & Research
Results

Results of the Research

1. What are early childhood educators' perceptions about the challenges of teaching literacy acquisition skills?
2. What are early childhood educators' suggestions about the resources or training for teaching literacy acquisition skills?



Session 2

Four Corners

I know this very well

I have heard the term

I know a little about it

I don't know what this means

Session 3

Key Terms

1. Phonological awareness – awareness of all levels of speech sound system, syllables, onset, rime and phonemes
2. Phoneme – smallest unit of sound used to build words
3. Phonemic awareness – awareness of the individual speech sounds (consonants and vowels) in spoken syllables and the ability to manipulate the sounds
4. Phonology – rules by which phonemes can be sequenced, combined and pronounced to make words
5. Phonics – study of the relationship between letters and sounds they represent
6. Onset and rime – division of a syllable into two parts onset comes before the vowel the rime includes the vowel and whatever is after it

Session 4

Consonant Phoneme Model

1. Articulation - where is your tongue?
 - a. Mirror
 - i. Front of the mouth
 - ii. Back of the mouth
 - iii. In between your teeth

Consonant Phoneme

fricatives consonant
unvoiced
voiced

stops nasals
sounds

affricates glides
liquids

Session 5

Vowel Phonemes

long e short i long a short e short a long i short o short u /a/ /i/ long o oo long u /y/

oi ou er ar or

Session 6

Phonological Awareness Activities

	K - 1	2 - 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match words with initial consonant sound • Segment final consonant sound 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delete sounds in initial and final consonants • Delete and substitute sounds 	

Close

1. Recap of the Day
2. Evaluation for Day 1

Day 2 Agenda

- Session 7: Welcome & Recap
- Session 8: Model and Practice
- Lunch Break
- Session 9: Reflection on Practice
- Session 10: Scope & Sequence
- Break
- Close: Day 2 Evaluation

Session 7

Welcome & Recap

1. Parking Lot
2. Evaluation Response
3. Recap Day 1

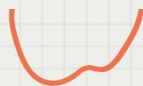
Session 8

Guest Presenter

1. Presenter from Lexia
 - a. Connections between Lexia and Letrs
 - b. Model and practice with Phonological Skills



 Lunch Break 

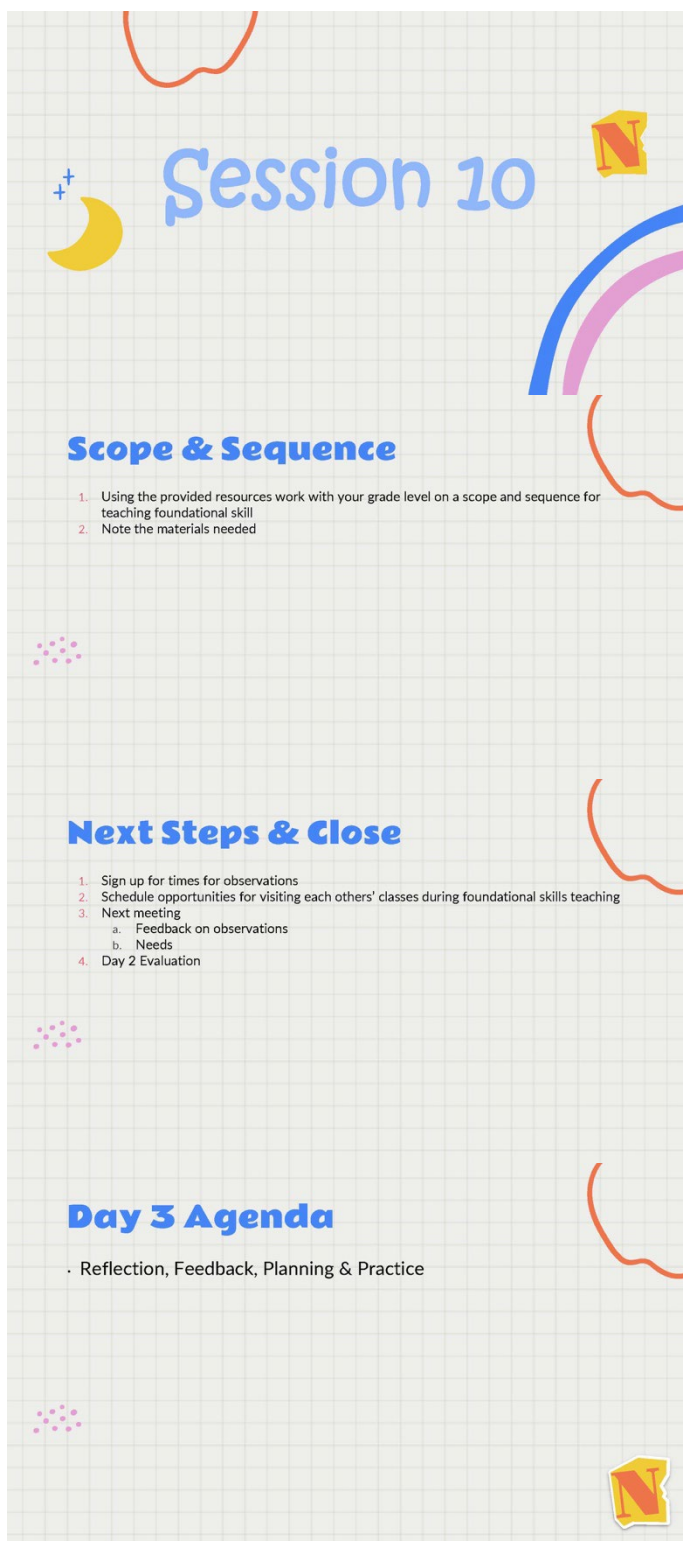


 Session 9 

Reflection

1. Thinking back to the practice discuss with your grade level
 - a. New Learning
 - b. Application in the classroom
 - c. Your Comfort Level





Session 10

Scope & Sequence

1. Using the provided resources work with your grade level on a scope and sequence for teaching foundational skill
2. Note the materials needed

Next Steps & Close

1. Sign up for times for observations
2. Schedule opportunities for visiting each others' classes during foundational skills teaching
3. Next meeting
 - a. Feedback on observations
 - b. Needs
4. Day 2 Evaluation

Day 3 Agenda

- Reflection, Feedback, Planning & Practice