

**EFFECTIVE PRACTICES TO INCREASE KINDERGARTEN READINESS AND
PROMOTE LITERACY SKILLS FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS, LITERACY
SPECIALISTS AND FAMILIES**

by

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CERTIFICATION OF THESIS/PROJECT CAPSTONE WORK

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have found that students have been coming into kindergarten with difficulty, in need of additional reading support, causing challenges for teachers to meet the learning needs of all students (Brown, 2014; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009). The purpose of this research was to investigate effective emergent literacy practices that could be implemented by teachers and families to increase kindergarten readiness. To determine effective practices, a qualitative methodology was used to conduct empirical research through a thematic analysis of data collected from a focus group interview that consisted of five consented participants. The participants included a mixture of general education teachers, a special education teacher, and a literacy specialist. From the data analysis, four overarching themes were found including: the importance of phonics in emergent literacy development, children's behavior and social skills, the gap between low and high academically performing students in relation to literacy skills, and exposure to literacy-based activities. The participants explained that engaging in early literacy practices such as reading with and to children, everyday conversations to increase vocabulary development, and providing young children with activities to increase fine motor skills such as cutting and coloring can increase kindergarten readiness and literacy development to decrease the student performance gap.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Without mastery of the foundational reading skills, students have been coming into kindergarten and primary grades with difficulty, in need of additional reading support in all subject areas, meaning teachers have been faced with the difficulty of tailoring instruction to meet the learning needs of all students that could be years or weeks apart in academics (Brown, 2014; Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009). Reading is in our everyday lives. Reading is based upon multiple foundational skills: phonemic awareness, vocabulary, phonics, fluency and comprehension that are interdependent and interconnected during instruction. These foundational skills serve as building blocks for children to develop reading skills throughout the primary grades to become lifelong, efficient readers.

Several researchers (Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Logan, Cutting, Schatschneider, Hart, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2013) have found that limited exposure and experience with the essential skills such as phonological awareness can lead to developmental delays in schooling and serious complications such as a greater likelihood of academic failure, increased substance abuse, and greater incidence of behavior problems, criminality and unemployment. The achievement gap has continued to increase mainly due to socioeconomic status and lack of literacy-based activities and materials at home (Curby et al., 2009; Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012).

The problem relating to this topic is that young children lack the literacy-based activities and opportunities in prekindergarten and in the home needed to develop the beginning essential skills to master the foundational and reading skills in kindergarten and the primary grades to

reduce the risk of reading development delays and behavioral problems (Curby et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2007; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Jung, 2016; Logan et al., 2013). This problem relating to the low kindergarten readiness abilities of young children can be addressed by this question, what are effective emergent literacy practices to decrease the gap in kindergarten readiness and how can these practices be implemented by teachers and families? The most appropriate way to investigate this question is through an empirical research study using a thematic analysis of data from a focus group conversation with kindergarten level teachers and specialists will be conducted.

Background

I have decided to investigate and identify effective literacy practices that will increase kindergarten readiness because of my experiences teaching in schools and working at early childhood care centers. Students have come into kindergarten and primary grades with difficulty in need of additional reading support in all subject areas (Brown, 2014). With the lack of literacy skills, I have observed and taught students with difficulties in reading when substitute teaching. Not only did this affect their comprehension in a designated Language Arts time, it affected students' comprehension in many subject areas. When working in early childhood care centers, I observed the effects of poor emergent literacy instruction on children. Emergent literacy instruction is crucial to enhance literacy development in young children. Through observations, I noticed the increase in low reading skills students entered kindergarten with, resulting in additional support in reading throughout elementary school. With literacy-based activities in preschool programs and at home, literacy development and school readiness would be enhanced.

Terminology

The National Reading Panel (2000) established the five key areas of literacy: comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, phonemic awareness and phonics. Both Brown (2014) and Kim, Im and Kwon (2015) defined emergent literacy as the early reading development instruction focusing on the building blocks for young children to develop language skills, phonological awareness, print knowledge, and vocabulary with appropriate materials and activities to promote literacy. To prepare young children for more advanced reading instruction in kindergarten and primary grades, emergent literacy programs have focused on the foundational skills that have been key factors in determining reading and school success including vocabulary, phonological awareness, automaticity of numbers and letters, writing and reading connections, decoding skills and basic comprehension of a text (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2013). With a strong focus on decoding skills, including phonological awareness and letter automaticity, vocabulary and oral language, children have needed these skills in order to continue the process of literacy development that can be addressed in emergent literacy programs with simultaneous instruction and support from parents and teachers. These authors (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015) have noted that children need to understand and recognize letters and numbers automatically, decipher vowel and consonant blends and sounds, understand print concepts of a book and text, and why people read and write in order to achieve higher level reading abilities throughout learning. Learning to read is an ongoing process that can take place in a preschool classroom and in a home with parents and family members with constant opportunities to engage in language and literacy-based activities to help children move through the stages of reading development.

Several researchers (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015) stated that despite the various programs and instructional strategies, each child learned at an individual rate, growing reading knowledge and strategies to apply and combine when reading, with guidance and support along the way. In particular, Kim and colleagues (2015) found that engaging, positive learning and home environments provided young children with the motivation to grow while developing the foundational skills to become sufficient readers.

Theoretical Stance

The theory that connects emergent literacy development and skills to school readiness is the emergent literacy theory (Strickland & Morrow, 1990). Emergent literacy is an ongoing process, as children are constantly learning from those surrounding their environment such as teachers and family members. As children are exposed to various forms of print through literacy based experiences encompassed in their environment, children will initially begin the process of emergent literacy development naturally through natural curiosity. As family members and teachers surround young children with literature and literacy-based opportunities, young children identify reading and writing to be a crucial life skill that is functional and useful (Strickland & Morrow, 1990). This theory directly relates to the importance of development of essential literacy skills that are needed when entering kindergarten.

According to the International Reading Association (IRA) (2010), several standards are addressed within this empirical research. IRA standard 1.1 states “candidates understand major theories and empirical research that describe the cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and sociocultural foundations of reading and writing development, processes, and components, including word recognition, language comprehension, strategic knowledge and reading-writing

connections” (International Literacy Association, 2018). Within IRA standard 1.1, foundational knowledge of reading and writing development is established, determining literacy candidates are knowledgeable about theories and the best research-based practices to help students in literacy development, directly relating to this study that will determine the best emergent literacy practices to enhance literacy development in young children. Along with implementing the best practices, this study addresses IRA standard 2.2 stating, “Candidates use appropriate and varied instructional approaches, including those that develop word recognition, language comprehension, strategic knowledge, and reading–writing connections” (International Literacy Association, 2018) by developing the best practices to provide literacy-based opportunities to young children before entering kindergarten based on individual needs.

Rationale

The development of emergent literacy skills influenced school readiness that was essential for future success in academics and life (Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015). Children that entered kindergarten with the essential emergent literacy skills, key social-emotional skills and physical health were more likely to succeed in kindergarten, however it has been reported by kindergarten teachers that nearly half of the students experienced difficulties transitioning into kindergarten due to the lack of skills upon entrance.

“Understanding how to better support the development of school readiness as children enter kindergarten is critical” (Ferretti & Bub, 2017, p. 59).

Parental involvement has been justified as a significant role in children’s development (Curby et al., 2009; Dotterer, Iruka, & Pungello, 2012; Jung, 2016; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2011). Even at an early age, families should be spending time together, engaging in play and

shared literacy-based activities. Jung (2016) stated that increased family time and engaging in activities have had positive effects on school readiness. Emergent literacy programs in preschools can help support smooth and positive transitions for kindergarteners with different social and academic activities (Cook & Coley, 2016). Emergent literacy programs, parental involvement and home literacy have an effect on children's development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review was to examine empirical research studies relating to the research question of what effective literacy practices preschool teachers, families and literacy specialists can implement to increase kindergarten readiness and literacy development. After extensive research in the academic databases including ERIC database, PsycINFO, and Academic Search Complete, fourteen research studies were discovered with the most relevance to the research question. These studies were found using key terms such as: emergent literacy, kindergarten readiness, emergent literacy programs, preschool programs, home literacy activities, emergent literacy development, emergent literacy skills and transitioning into kindergarten. The dates of the studies ranged from 2007 to 2017. The studies have been grouped together in the common themes: literacy and reading development skills, school readiness, home literacy, and early literacy practices.

Literacy and Reading Development Skills

Many researchers (Brown, 2014; Duncan et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2013; McGeown & Medford, 2013; Zucker, Pentimonti, Cabell & Kaderavek, 2013) found that emergent literacy focused on the foundational skills that were key factors in determining reading and school success including vocabulary, phonological awareness, automaticity of numbers and letters, writing and reading connections, decoding skills and basic comprehension of a text that prepared young children for more advanced reading instruction in kindergarten and primary grades. According to Brown (2014), the development of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters, rapid automatic naming of objects or colors,

writing and phonological memory were skills that were determined to predict reading and school success upon entering kindergarten and primary grades. Children needed these skills in order to continue the process of reading development that can be addressed in emergent literacy programs with simultaneous instruction and support from parents and teachers. Children needed to understand and recognize letters and numbers automatically, decipher vowel and consonant blends and sounds, understand print concepts of a book and text, and why people read and write in order to achieve higher level reading abilities throughout learning (Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2014). Duncan and colleagues (2007) affirmed early language and reading skills such as vocabulary, letter automaticity, and phonological awareness were essential skills that predicted later reading achievement, therefore are essential skills to begin developing prior to kindergarten. Learning to read is an ongoing process that can take place in a preschool classroom and in a home with parents and family members with constant opportunities to engage in language and literacy-based activities to help children move through the stages of reading development.

Home Literacy

Many researchers (Brown, 2014; Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2013) have determined the importance of an encouraging and positive home literacy environment that was proven to improve reading behaviors and success. It has been conceptualized that teaching literacy within the early childhood classroom plus family involvement has had an impact on children's learning and reading development (Logan et al., 2013). Rich, home literacy environments and routines provided young children with shared reading activities with family and parents while developing print awareness,

language and decoding skills that helped the young children prepare for kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Logan et al., 2013).

Ferretti and Bub (2014) also found that consistent family routines and practices have predicted increased vocabulary and literacy skills. Parental beliefs about the reading skills children acquired before kindergarten and primary grades affected a child's reading development and the development of family routines. Furthermore, parental involvement provided the additional support to increase reading development in young children (Jung, 2016; Nathanson, Rimm-Kaufman, & Brock, 2009). Parents that believed in providing their children with literacy-based opportunities in the home to develop foundational reading skills directly related to increased reading development and success in later years with positive attitudes about school upon entering kindergarten. Researchers (Jung, 2016; Zucker et al., 2013) confirmed that parents with positive emergent literacy beliefs provided children with meaningful, language enriched, family activities such as shared reading that have had a positive impact on children's attitudes toward school and motivation to continue learning. By establishing family routines, the families spent more time on educational activities such as reading nightly before bed, promoting positive reading achievement and discussions about books, and also discussion to increase vocabulary during family dinner time. Ferretti and Bub (2017) and Jung (2016) claimed that these routines in place provided assistance into transitioning into kindergarten where there was an established schedule of daily activities.

Specifically during the early childhood years, Logan et al. (2013) stated that the home environment was crucial in the literacy development of young children. Researchers (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Kim et al., 2015) claimed that young children, under the age of three, developed

vocabulary and decoding skills better with more exposure and experiences with books and literacy related activities at home such as storytelling, and read-alouds with parents. Parents who focused on making meaning and comprehension of a text with a child directly correlated to improvement of reading comprehension of those children in preschool education and primary grades. During the early childhood years, an enriched home literacy environment supported the development of oral language and reading skills (Kim et al., 2015). Providing young children with multiple opportunities with literacy-based activities such as shared reading, storytelling and looking at pictures in books was advocated to develop the child's reading and language skills that enhanced the reading development process prior to kindergarten (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Zucker et al., 2013). It has been confirmed that children in families that spent time reading, playing and participating in engaging, educational activities together had early literacy skills prior to entering kindergarten. According to Jung (2016), children were encouraged to interact meaningfully, developing oral language skills, automaticity of letters and numbers, print knowledge and phonological awareness through shared activities with parents, that were important in the development of literacy.

Early Literacy Practices

Researchers (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2013) investigated emergent literacy activities that focused on the development of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters, rapid automatic naming of objects or colors, writing and phonological memory predicted reading and school success upon entering kindergarten and primary grades. As well as in preschool, literacy activities that were enforced to be implemented in the home continued to develop children's literacy skills. Literacy activities

such as shared reading, storytelling, and read-alouds have been verified to positively enhance children's development of essential literacy skills needed upon entering kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2013; Zucker et al., 2013).

To increase letter recognition skills in young children, Elliott and Olliff (2008) specified that developmentally appropriate activities that encouraged the development of letter recognition using the Early Literacy and Learning Model (ELLM) that was taught in early childhood classrooms by teachers through singing songs and manipulating letters and was enforced through observation and environmental print by parents in everyday activities were successful. Likewise, teachers encouraged parents and families to carryover these activities with their children in shared reading activities at home to develop vocabulary and print awareness, that focused on the social interaction between parent and child when reading and discussing books (Zucker et al., 2013). Researchers (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Zucker et al., 2013) discussed that when children were engaged in meaningful literacy experiences with preschool teachers and family members, children's expressive vocabulary, letter knowledge, print awareness, and decoding skills increased. Diverse activities within the classroom paired with activities enforced at home have shown positive literacy development in young children such as providing a word wall with appropriate pictures for children and family members to interact with and connecting print to activities to increase print awareness, exposing young children to a variety of books and songs that contain rhyming words to enhance phonological awareness, and interacting with young children through read-alouds and storytellings of familiar books to help children with print awareness and fluency development (Brown, 2014; Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2013; Zucker et al., 2013). Brown (2014) declared that with exposure to

meaningful experiences with texts, children's motivation to read and basic foundational skills in language and literacy developed that prepared young children for kindergarten.

School Readiness

School readiness was essential for future life and academic success. Dotterer et al. (2012) and Duncan and colleagues (2007) defined school readiness as the level of a child's cognitive skills, socioemotional skills and attention skills determining if the child was prepared for formal education. A nationwide goal was to decrease the achievement gap of high performing and low performing students, specifically disadvantaged and more advantaged students however, the achievement gap between these groups of young children entering kindergarten has continued to increase (Curby et al., 2009). A child's school readiness has been determined to be influenced by the child's family life and environment, socioeconomic status and the literacy experiences the child was exposed to prior to kindergarten (Curby et al., 2009, Duncan et al., 2007; Jung, 2016). As students continued to enter kindergarten with varied needs and abilities, teacher's instruction was affected due to the children's school readiness levels. With the teacher's knowledge of the diverse needs and abilities of students coming into kindergarten, transition activities have been deemed helpful for families and students entering kindergarten. Researchers (Cook & Coley, 2017; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Nathanson et al., 2009) have concluded transitioning activities such as meeting the teacher and coming into the classroom before officially starting school to initiate rapport between the teacher, families and students has been successful. With the implementation of transitioning activities and emergent literacy activities, students initiated literacy development and established routines that prepared young children to enter kindergarten.

Summary

With the developmentally appropriate literacy-based activities in emergent literacy programs in preschool and in the home, results have shown that young children were capable of developing the foundational skills that enhanced reading development which increased school readiness (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2013; Zucker et al., 2013). Emergent literacy programs with a strong focus on phonological skills, decoding abilities, vocabulary and letter and number automaticity, have helped young children develop the building blocks to read sufficiently in preparation for kindergarten (Elliot & Olliff, 2008; McGeown & Medford, 2013; Zucker et al., 2013). Research has concluded that preschools that provided parents with the tools, skills, and knowledge that encouraged and incorporated parental involvement with children through shared reading and read-aloud activities, parents were providing supportive, rich home literacy environments that motivated and initiated child reading development in preparation for kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015).

With extensive research about emergent literacy and the influence on young children in kindergarten and primary grades, there is sufficient evidence on the impact of parental involvement in young children when beginning and going through the reading development process and transition into kindergarten (Cook & Coley, 2017; Curby et al., 2009; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Nathanson et al., 2009; Wildenger & McIntyre, 2010; Zucker et al., 2013). Research has established the need for developmentally appropriate activities and experiences with literacy to develop the necessary skills needed prior to kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2013; Zucker et al., 2013). Even though emergent literacy has been found to be important, young children have entered kindergarten with

a lack of literacy skills needed to achieve higher reading ability (Brown, 2014; Curby et al., 2009). Emergent literacy practices that can be implemented in the home by parents and in preschools by teachers to provide students with literacy-based activities to help the development of essential literacy skills prior to entering kindergarten needs to be further investigated.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview of Methodology

Young children have come into kindergarten with little literacy knowledge, due to lack of experience and opportunities, that has affected teachers and their curriculum to meet the needs of all students (Brown, 2014; Cook & Coley, 2016; Jung, 2016). Determining effective literacy practices that can be implemented in the home and in preschool can help enhance literacy development in young children prior to entering kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Curby et al., 2009; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Logan et al., 2013). This research addressed the question of what are effective practices that can be implemented by prekindergarten teachers, families and literacy specialists to increase kindergarten readiness and literacy development. A qualitative methodology was used to conduct empirical research through thematic analysis of the data collected from a focus group interview. From the data collected, patterns and themes articulating effective emergent literacy practices and teachers' perspectives on emergent literacy were expected.

Design of Study

The researcher conducted an empirical study using a focus group using a qualitative methodology through thematic analysis. Qualitative data was collected using a focus group discussion, lead by the researcher with scripted questions, that allowed for extended conversation. With the qualitative data collected from the focus group, the researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis. The purpose of this study was to determine effective emergent literacy practices to prepare young children for kindergarten. The researcher expected to determine effective practices from the focus group to prepare young children for kindergarten

and teacher perspectives on emergent literacy activities through interviewing a focus group of teachers. The researcher expected to validate research-based emergent literacy practices determined by the focus group.

Participants. Eight participants were invited to be involved in the focus group discussion, however, five individuals consented to be in this study. There was a mix of general education kindergarten teachers, a special education teacher that works with kindergarten students and a kindergarten literacy specialist. These individuals work in a rural elementary school in Western New York. The age range was 25-60. The average years of teaching for this group was sixteen years. The range of teaching years of the participants was one year, a first year teacher, to thirty-one years. The participants had previously taught in various settings such as preschool, early childhood daycare, first grade, third grade, and remedial reading in different schools and states. The participants gender, ethnic background and health status displayed the pre-existing demographics of teachers in the school district. There were no protected classes of subjects in this focus group.

Procedures. Approval to conduct the study was received from the State University of New York at Fredonia's Human Subjects Research Committee on December 12, 2018. With the consent of the building principal, emails to all kindergarten teachers, special education teachers working with kindergarten students and literacy specialists were sent explaining the study to the educators in depth. Consent forms were distributed on February 5th, 2019 and were collected by an unbiased teacher located in the building that is not involved in the study. The consent form given to the teachers assured the participants that all information from the discussion will be audio recorded using an iPad, and all information from the discussion will be kept secure and

confidential. Written consent was provided by the participants to cooperate in this study. With the consent forms received by March 1, 2019, a date and time to conduct the focus group interview was established.

The researcher conducted the focus group discussion on March 25, 2019. The study took place in a neutral site, creating a convenient and safe environment to conduct the discussion. The researcher asked the participants prompted questions about the teachers, essential emergent literacy skills, kindergarten readiness and the participants' perspectives on effective literacy practices (refer to Appendix A). The researcher created specific questions for the focus group that facilitated the discussion and extended conversation. While the participants responded orally, the discussion was recorded using an iPad. The entire discussion with the focus group lasted thirty five minutes.

Data Collection. The data was collected through an audio recording on an iPad used during the discussion with the focus group. The researcher transcribed the discussion that was transferred to a flash drive which was kept in a locked box throughout the study. A specific coding system was used to eliminate the names and location of the study to protect the participants' confidentiality during the transcription of the focus group discussion. Upon completion of the research, the data was destroyed to uphold confidentiality of the participants.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the data collected using a specific coding system that was used to eliminate the names of the participants to protect confidentiality. The researcher used a thematic analysis of the transcription that highlighted responses that outlined effective practices, patterns and themes within the data that applied to the research question to determine if the

objectives of the study were met. The researcher identified patterns and themes within the data that specified effective emergent literacy practices that can increase kindergarten readiness as well as similar teacher perspectives on emergent literacy. A second reader read the transcribed data, developed a list of themes and patterns within the data, and solidified the patterns and themes with the researcher. The information from the discussion was used to determine effective literacy practices and activities for young children, what preschool teachers, literacy specialists and families of young children entering kindergarten can do to increase development of essential literacy skills and practices to increase kindergarten readiness. After reading the transcription, the researcher and the second reader came to a consensus on the following themes and patterns that occurred within the data: the importance of phonics especially letter identification and sounds, children's behavior and social skills, student academic performance gap between low academic performing students and high performing students, and exposure to literacy-based activities.

Chapter 4: Results and Interpretation

Results

Through a thematic analysis from the data collected from the focus group discussion, themes and patterns demonstrating effective emergent literacy practices and teachers' perspectives on emergent literacy were articulated. Based on the qualitative analysis of the focus group responses during the discussion, the following themes and patterns were identified: importance of phonics, children's behavior and social skills, the gap between low and high academic performing students based on literacy skills, and exposure to literacy-based activities. These themes directly relate to the purpose of the study to identify teacher perspectives and effective practices to increase emergent literacy skills and kindergarten readiness.

Reliability of Data

To ensure reliability of the study during data collection and analysis, participants of the focus group discussion were all asked the same prescribed questions by the researcher. After the discussion, the participants were given access to the transcription of the interview with the specific coding system that eliminated the names of the individuals to determine errors or misinterpretations. After review, no errors or misinterpretations were found by the participants. Along with the participants, a second reader read the transcription with the specific coding system that eliminated the names of the participants to protect confidentiality. The second reader identified themes and patterns within the data. The second reader and the researcher came to a consensus of the patterns and themes discovered from the thematic analysis of the data.

Interpretation of the Data/Results

From the thematic data analysis, four overarching themes were found: importance of

phonics, children's behavior and social skills, student performance gap, and exposure to literacy-based activities. Based on the discussion in relation to emergent literacy, the first theme that emerged was the importance of phonics, specifically letters and letter sounds was crucial for kindergarten readiness. All five participants agreed upon the definition of emergent literacy when one participant stated, “. . . I feel like it's the kids who are just getting ready to read, have the foundational skills for reading, the letters and the sounds, are maybe beginning blending, but they haven't gotten to the fluency level.” Throughout the discussion, the participants described the essential literacy skills stressed in kindergarten focus on letters and letter sounds. One participant stated, “Recognizing letters and sounds is the most important.” Knowing letters and letter sounds were crucial for literacy development, as described by the participants, and effects the students' kindergarten readiness levels.

The second theme that emerged was the student performance gap in regards to the difference in performance and knowledge of essential literacy skills young children have acquired prior to entering kindergarten. Participants stated that essential literacy skills such as knowing the letters of the alphabet and the letter sounds are important for literacy development of young children, however many children are coming into kindergarten without knowing any of these crucial skills, but some students come in with mastery of the important literacy skills, leading to an increase in the gap of student performance.

Some come in with recognition of letters. Especially the letters in their name. But some kids come in knowing all their letters and many sounds already too. And then you have some who don't know any letters at all. Note even the letters in their name.

During the focus group discussion, another participant added, “That gap between students who

are ready for kindergarten and those who have not had any schooling or daycare experiences like that, it is a big difference and it makes things pretty difficult.” These participants explained how the gap in kindergarten readiness with a focus on literacy development is increasing, making teaching young children in kindergarten becoming more difficult due to the range in knowledge and ability of the students. Researchers have identified the increase in achievement gap of young children entering kindergarten to be a factor in increased differentiated instruction in kindergarten due to the child’s family life and environment, socioeconomic status and exposure to literacy experiences prior to kindergarten (Curby et al., 2009; Duncan et al., 2007; Jung, 2016). As the student achievement gap continues to increase, kindergarten teachers are faced with more challenges before beginning the school year as to how to differentiate instruction for the varied learners in the classroom.

The third theme that emerged was social and behavioral skills. Along with the factors increasing the student achievement gap such as the child’s family life, socioeconomic status and exposure to literacy experiences, the participants of the study emphasized the factor of previous schooling experiences that has impacted kindergarten readiness in relation to behavior and social skills. The participants described the main differences between the students who had previous schooling in a preschool or daycare setting and students who did not come to kindergarten with those experiences to be behavioral and social skills. One participant described the differences she noticed with the students who did not have a schooling background.

You can see the difference in skill level because you’ll have kids that are coming in and have never picked up a pair of scissors in their life, or a crayon, or a pencil, or haven’t done pretty much anything. There is a big discrepancy and some parents have worked

with them which has made a difference but you can definitely tell.

Along with the difference in skill level, one participant further explained the difference in stamina of lasting an entire school day. Some students attended a half-day preschool program, some attended a full-day preschool program, other students attended a daycare program that required students to nap, while the remaining students had no schooling experiences, which results in various stamina abilities to last entire school day, affecting instruction. Behavioral and social skills are necessary to begin any instruction, forming the routines and foundation of the classroom. Researchers (Cook & Coley, 2017; Duncan et al., 2007; Ferretti & Bub, 2017) have found that routines enhancing behavior and social skills within the classroom increase student achievement and the classroom dynamic due to the structure and means classroom routines provide children with the opportunity to organize their environment, increase academically and work with peers. However, teachers are not given the opportunity to expand and build behavioral and social skills and routines before providing the students with curriculum instruction. One participant explained the struggles of teaching curriculum while building on behavioral and social skills within routines to effectively run a kindergarten classroom with students that have different schooling experiences.

I think it's also starting a curriculum can be a challenge because they're not necessarily ready to start an ELA curriculum, and a math curriculum, and a listening and learning curriculum. And unfortunately, we don't have the luxury to just stop and do social, emotional, background kind of things. And you're trying to build routines while you're actually trying to teach them core curriculum and that's difficult.

Another participant expanded on this stating, "You don't realize all those little things you have to

teach these kids before they can actually do anything in the classroom.” The participants explained the difficulty of dealing with the various behavioral and social skills students lack when entering kindergarten that could be enhanced at home or in schooling experiences prior to kindergarten.

The fourth and final overarching theme found within the data was exposure to literacy-based activities. “Giving them exposure to reading and writing at an early age is really crucial,” was stated by one of the participants. Throughout the focus group discussion, the participants described literacy-based activities in the home that would enhance kindergarten readiness. One participant stated, “Read to your kids. Read with your kids.” Researchers (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; Zucker et al., 2013) have found that children with early exposure to early literacy practices such as shared reading, storytelling and looking at pictures in books with parents and adults has increased children’s vocabulary, reading comprehension, phonics and oral reading skills that are essential for young children to be kindergarten ready. One participant stated, “Ask your kids questions about books and everything around them because that’s important. Engage with your child.” The focus group participants emphasized the importance of engaging with young children in early-literacy activities that can easily be incorporated into daily lives. Early-literacy activities mentioned by all participants included: shared reading, asking questions about books, exposing children to rhyming through nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books, identifying letters in books and signs, communicating with young children to build oral language and vocabulary, and creating and reading bedtime stories. In addition to early-literacy activities focused on reading, the participants described the importance of exposing young children to writing and the development of fine motor skills such as writing

their names, coloring, drawing pictures, and helping children hold a pencil. The participants emphasized the importance of early exposure to emergent literacy to initiate literacy development for young children that can be done throughout their daily lives that can be completed without cost. For low socioeconomic families, the participants suggested the library, checking out books, talking about books and attending storybook hour for young children to participate in that includes a read-aloud accompanied by an activity. Along with these early-literacy activities, one participant emphasized incorporating vocabulary development.

But even simple things like increasing vocabulary is important. You can go to the grocery store with your child and say, “This is an apple. This is a banana.” Some kids don’t even know that rice is called a grain. Just talk to your kids.

Research supports early literacy activities and the importance it has on early childhood literacy development. Students that had enriched literacy environments and experiences with literacy-based activities had early literacy skills prior to their entrance of kindergarten (Kim et al., 2015).

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Overview of Study and Findings

Several researchers have noted that children are entering kindergarten and primary grades in need of additional reading support due to the lack of exposure and experience with the essential literacy skills such as letter identification and letter sounds prior to kindergarten (Brown, 2014; Curby et al., 2009, Duncan et al., 2007; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Jung, 2016). Without these foundational skills mastered, developmental delays in schooling and serious complications such as increased behavior problems have been found (Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Logan et al., 2013). This problem relating to low kindergarten readiness was addressed in the research question, what are effective emergent literacy practices to decrease the student performance gap in kindergarten readiness and how can these practices be implemented by teachers and families?

An empirical research study using a thematic analysis of the data from the focus group discussion with five participants was conducted to address the research question. After the data analysis, four prominent themes were identified: the importance of phonics especially letter identification and sounds, children's behavior and social skills, student academic performance gap, and exposure to literacy-based activities. According to the data, the participants provided literacy-based activities that can easily be implemented by teachers and families. Several of these activities included: shared reading, asking questions about books, exposing children to rhyming through nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books, identifying letters in books and signs, communicating with young children to build oral language and vocabulary, and creating and reading bedtime stories. The participants explained that engaging in early literacy-based

activities can help students increase kindergarten readiness and literacy development that can help decrease the student performance gap.

Significance of the Findings

According to the data analysis of the qualitative data collected from the focus group interview, four prominent themes were identified that address the research question for this study. The themes found in the data included: the importance of phonics especially letter identification and sounds, children's behavior and social skills, student academic performance gap, and exposure to literacy-based activities. Within these themes, significant data supporting the research question linked to previous research explaining the importance of themes in relation to kindergarten readiness and early literacy development for young children.

According to researchers (Brown, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2014) emergent literacy practices that focus on the foundational skills especially phonological awareness and letter automaticity prepare young children for more advanced reading instruction in kindergarten and primary grades. Along with the participants, researchers (Kim et al., 2015) have agreed that letter automaticity and phonological awareness are essential literacy skills that require mastery before continuing literacy development. With exposure to these literacy skills in preschools and in the home, children are more prepared to continue literacy development and increased kindergarten readiness.

Addressing the second theme found in the data, children's behavior and social skills, researchers (Cook & Coley, 2017; Duncan et al., 2007; Ferretti & Bub, 2017) have found that families and preschool teachers that establish routines in and outside of the classroom have resulted in increased kindergarten readiness in relation to behavior and social skills. Ferretti and

Bub (2017) explained that routines established a structure and means for children to organize their environment prior to kindergarten that resulted in better social, behavioral and academic outcomes in kindergarten. The research aligns with the data collected from the focus group discussion due to the importance deemed by the participants of providing routines and structure to the students to increase cooperative and compliant behavior in kindergarten, providing the teachers with more time to focus on instruction throughout the school day.

In relation to the third theme of the student performance gap, several authors (Curby et al., 2009; Dotterer et al., 2012) explained that the achievement gap between low and high academically performing students continues to increase based on socioeconomic status, parental involvement, and early literacy development. Along with the data collected from this study, kindergarten readiness is essential in initiating literacy development in young children to further close the gap between low performing and high performing students. With literacy-based activities provided by preschool teachers and families, kindergarten readiness can increase which can help to make the change in the performance gap.

Research has been found that supports the fourth and final theme found in this data, exposure and engagement with early literacy-based activities to enhance reading development and kindergarten readiness. Researchers (Elliott & Olliff, 2008; Jung, 2016; Kim et al., 2015; McGeown & Medford, 2014; Zucker et al., 2013) have found that early literacy activities such as shared reading, activities focusing on phonics instruction and alphabet knowledge and engaging with young children in conversations about environmental print were effective in initiating literacy development in reading, print awareness and alphabet knowledge. Along with the research collected from this study, the participants and previous researchers have determined that

exposing and engaging with young children in environmental print to develop oral language and vocabulary as well as shared reading at the library or before bedtime, is extremely important to increase kindergarten readiness and early literacy development.

Limitations of the Findings

Although the findings of this study align and support the research question, there are several limitations present as well. First, there was only data collected on one focus group discussion. The focus group discussion consisted of five consented participants that worked in the same location. Additional focus group interviews with educators from different locations would be beneficial for substantial data to support the research question and purpose for the study for further research. Secondly, the timespan of the study was limited. Four months was allotted to conduct the study which resulted in one focus group interview with a small sample size. The short amount of time resulted in a small sample size of consented participants and analysis of the transcribed data. With additional time, more consented participants might have attended the focus group discussion, providing additional data to support the research question.

Conclusion: Answer to the Research Question

The research question was what are effective emergent literacy practices to decrease the student performance gap in kindergarten readiness and how can these practices be implemented by teachers and families? The research question was answered through a data analysis of a transcription of the focus group interview consisting of five consented educators. From the data analysis, four overarching themes were identified. The participants provided multiple literacy-based activities that can be easily implemented into the home with families and preschools with teachers. These activities include: shared reading, asking questions about books,

exposing children to rhyming through nursery rhymes and Dr. Seuss books, identifying letters in books and signs, communicating with young children to build oral language and vocabulary, and creating and reading bedtime stories, writing their names, coloring, drawing pictures, and helping children hold a pencil. Along with these activities, the participants provided specific literacy activities for families of low socioeconomic status. These activities included: going to the library, checking out books, talking about books and attending storybook hour for young children to participate in that includes a read-aloud accompanied by an activity. Exposure to engaging literacy-based activities such as the ones listed provide young children with early experiences that initiate literacy development and can increase kindergarten readiness.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although the data collected from the focus group interview addressed and answered the research question, additional recommendations for future research could be made to increase data collection regarding effective emergent literacy practices. One recommendation for future research would be to conduct this research using a larger sample size. Interviewing more educators including preschool teachers would provide more data and understanding of the literacy-based activities that are currently being taught and specific experiences that can be enhanced for young children in the home and at school to increase literacy development and kindergarten readiness. Another recommendation would be to conduct individual interviews with consented participants. When conducting the focus group interview, the participants agreed with one another very often, which provided sufficient evidence. However, with individual interviews, more detailed answers could be provided with individual interviews with teachers of various levels including kindergarten and preschool, family members, and literacy specialists.

Another recommendation for further research on this topic would be to investigate educators from different locations. Due to the restricted time allotment for this study, educators from one school district were interviewed. For further research, interviewing educators in different locations and analyzing the data would provide different results that could enhance the literacy activities, perspectives and suggestions to increase kindergarten readiness in homes and preschools to increase literacy development for young children.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Discussion Forum Questions

1. Can you please tell me about your teaching backgrounds? How long have you been teaching? Have you worked in any other school districts? Have you worked in other grade levels? If yes, which grade levels and for how long? How long have you been teaching/working with kindergarten students?
2. Please tell me more about your teaching experiences with kindergarteners.
3. How would you define emergent literacy?
4. Over the years, are students coming to kindergarten more prepared or less prepared?
 - a. Have you noticed a difference between children entering kindergarten with previous schooling and children entering kindergarten without previous schooling (ie preschool)?
 - b. What are your biggest challenges within the first few months of school with a new kindergarten class?
5. What are essential literacy skills that you focus on in kindergarten?
 - a. Upon entering kindergarten, what essential literacy skills do students have?
 - b. Are children screened before entering kindergarten at this school?
 - i. If yes, what screening assessment is used?
 - ii. Do you like this screening assessment? Why or why not?
 - iii. What data is retrieved from this screening assessment?
 - iv. Is this data helpful when planning instruction for the school year and why?
 - c. When entering kindergarten, what are your expectations regarding literacy development?
6. Are there effective emergent literacy practices that could be made to increase literacy development to aid in kindergarten readiness?
 - a. Researchers (Chao, Mattocks, Birden & Manarino-Leggett, 2014; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Jung, 2016; Kim, Im, & Kwon, 2015) have stated that families providing children with literacy-based activities at home increases children's literacy development such as reading to children and exposing children to books. What are some other effective strategies that parents and families can implement at home?
 - b. Researchers (Bouas, Thompson, & Farlow, 1998; King, 2015) have found that daily journal activities help with literacy development. Would you recommend this strategy to families or preschool teachers? Why or why not?
 - c. Researchers (Jung, 2016; Zucker, Justice, Pentimonti, Cabell & Kaderavek, 2013) have stated the storybook telling and activities increase oral language, phonological awareness, and print awareness. How can busy families and families of low socioeconomic status provide children with storybook activities? What books and activities would you recommend?