EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC DECLINE ON THE LITERACY OF MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES IN THREE REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

Thesis
Submitted to
The College of Arts and Sciences of the
UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of
Masters of Arts in English

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May 2013
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EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC UPHEAVAL ON THE LITERACY OF MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES IN THREE REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

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This thesis seeks to examine the relationship between literacy attainment and the current recession. The impact of the economy on the global labor force has unquestionably altered the lives of many families in all over the country. Literacy development has altered the social, economic, cultural, and political development of the middle-class families, and current economic realities have become a daily discusses on news outlets around the world. The downturn of this financial crisis is transforming the way working-class families gain access to critical pieces of knowledge and skills to safeguard their position on the literacy ladder. Since money plays a key role in accessing technology, tutors, books, and higher education a collapse or economic downturn can challenge any family’s social class, but it cripples the middle-class. In short, middle class families lives have been—and continue to be—transformed in immense ways as a result of the significant economic disparity, outflow of resources, and the desperate need answers to the social classes dilemma regarding literacy development. The intent of this study is to determine whether the elements of region, race, and place in the class sphere,
age, or engagement play a roll in maneuver through the economic downturn. Through interviews conducted on Facetime, Skype and in-person I chose three distinct families and examined how they negotiate the effect of this economic landscape on their lives and that of their communities. Using documented case studies I reveal that while the middle class' financial status is in economic upheaval, the literacy development of the children is pertinent for community engagement. In fact, literacy of middle class families preserves community literacy, engagement, and builds an infrastructure that enriches communities by example alone. Although, social, political and economic endeavors are weigh in when establishing the direct impact that the economy has on middle class families the more crucial impact however, is the economic impact on literacy development during a recession. Additionally, the roll parents take in ensuring that economics never impact engagement in the development of literacy in their families.
Dedicated to my mom, my sisters and my forever love
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I must first thank God for without that presence this project would not possible. To, Dr. Bardine for his guidance on this project, and the many others throughout my career here at the University of Dayton; your efforts have not gone unnoticed. Thanks for believing and encouraging me that great way that you do. To Dr. Boehnlein, hearty thanks for reading this project and sharing your knowledge with me on this project as well as the many classes that I was privy to be a part of. I have learned much from you that I will take with me in my next endeavors. To Dr. Slade, thank you. Thank you for your understanding, your guidance, and our conversations. You are truly a great leader for all who pass through these halls.

To my sisters, thank you. These thanks are for all the times I read this project over the phone to you, for allowing me to ignore your calls and still love me, but most importantly for looking after mom while I pursued this degree. My gratitude is forever. To my son and daughter thank you. For my love, your patience and support has not gone unnoticed. You are amazing, thank you.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This project derived from a conversation with a family inside a local fast-food restaurant. After first, admiring the young father and his son and letting the father in on my admiration, he admitted that his young friend was not his son, but his brother. Over the course of the next hour we engaged in a conversation about reading and writing and the challenges of access to literacy that his seemingly two-year-old brother experienced. As the conversation progressed I later found out that the child was not two-years-old, but in fact four-years old and obviously delayed in literacy skills and development. As, I asked him his name and age he struggled with not his name but his age. His language level was seemingly below the average four-year, and when I asked him to show me his age with his figures his brother admitted announce he did not know how to do that. While the little boy played with my daughters Ipad the realization was not that he was delayed—he simply lacked access to material that would expand his literacy growth at the critical time in life when enhancement of literacy is critical for any child. I discovered this by first accessing a children’s book on the Ipad. I pointed to pictures and letters out of six scenarios he got one right--apple. At that point, I began to question the role of economic disparity in literacy development. I questioned the impact of economic (or lack thereof) on the literacy development of people who consider themselves as “middle-class.” I question, whether economic challenges facing this young child and his family were isolated? Or whether a new trend for struggling working class or middle class
families was emerging? In the wake of the recession, do working classes or middle-class families seek avenues to enrich literacy in their families? Or do these families wither away literacy achievement when economics hinders progression. It was these inquisitions that inspired the question: What impact does the economic downturn have on a middle class family’s access to literacy development venues?

Thoughts about the impact of the economy on the global labor force and its relationship to literacy achievement in middle-class families began to take shape. The access to education for middle class youths was at the core of my interest. I considered how the current recession linked to the education and literacy development in households where economy was the focus. Prior researchers have studied literacy and have examined its impact on social class, economic positions, and political development in middle-class families; however, the current economic realities have become a daily discusses on news outlets around the world. At the core of the discourse are middle-class families. The downturn of this financial crisis is transforming the way working-class families gain access to technology critical to safeguarding their position on the literacy ladder. Since money plays a key role in accessing technology, a collapse or economic downturn challenges most social classes, but it cripples the middle-class. In short, middle class families lives have been—and continue to be—transformed in ways that required adjustments in creativity, engagement, and assurance; as a result of the significant economic disparity, outflow of resources, and a desperate need for new measure and methods traditionally used to strengthen the middle class communities while exploring and acquiring literacy development.
Author Jonathan Alexander in a book titled *Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web* writes on literacy ideology and the methodological impact of technology on literacy. Moreover, Alexander contends literacy redefines a new generation of youths daily. Alexander references redefining, recasting, and reshaping literacy or updating the platform so that scholars can better understand the methodology of technology uses by youths in developing literacy skills (Alexander). In addition, Richard and Cynthia Selfe explore the concept of a socio-critical approach to technology, an approach and philosophy that support my research substantially.

I seek to document how distinct families negotiate the impact of this uncertain economic landscape through documented case studies involving observation, interviews, and discourse within the household. Through direct observation and interviews with the parents, I seek to examine that while the middle class' financial status is in economic upheaval, the technical literacy, book attainment, tutor needs, and social class (or lack thereof) endures the greatest trial. In fact, technological literacy of middle class children preserves community literacy infrastructure while upholding individual family units and thus, building the need of parental engagement. Moreover, social, political and economic upheavals have a direct impact on the middle class family structure and the technological literacy development of the family.
President Barack Obama was sworn into office in January of 2009 and on that day he inherited one of the worst economic depressions in history. The depression was a direct result of the housing crash of the year before. “In 2007, the housing bubble burst, leading to a high rate of defaults on subprime mortgages (Weisberg). It would take several years for the effects to spiral downward, but when the depression registered the middle class was greatly affected. Due to erroneous loans and overpriced housing middle class family’s found themselves in a crisis that would change not only the direction of their financial future, but also change how the term “middle class” is perceived by communities, and government. What is often not associated with the term “middle class” is the impact the economic state of the nation has on the literacy development of middle class families. Does literacy growth shift both of who families were and are currently? If so, is that a result of the current economic state of the economic crisis in America? Is attaining literacy an enabler that beholds the middle class? In this thesis I will explain what the middle-class is according to the United States Census Bureau, politicians and the families I studied for this research. I will explore how access to literacy and language engagement play a significant role in the universal connection between society, education, and the middle-class. I will also examine the primary connection between middle class identity and literacy development. I contend that the state of the economy
weighs heavily on the way middle class literacy is developing or is attained. As I explore the journey of literacy development in a middle class family from small cities in Ohio, South Carolina, and Texas, the focus primarily is on the significance of assimilation in the community through status, environment, literacy tools, language, social class, and self-identify. I will also examine the link of the former to the cultural common denominator of the natural origins of identity within the middle class, as well as that connection to the current economic crisis and the development of literacy in equidistant families.

To begin this discussion it is first necessary to define “middle class and middle class identity.” Ascertaining a clear definition of middle-class involves breaking what is generally seen as a group of people who share similarities like social class and income into three parts. According to the Census Bureau, the middle-class has three distinct groups: lower middle class, middle class and upper middle class. This is defined by median household incomes of any American making $20,000 to $250,000 dollars yearly. Additionally, it also includes factors such as education, region, community, population, and population growth as well as median housing prices (Commerce). Politicians from Governor Romney to President Obama define middle class as all households making less than $250,000 annually. Yet, according to a PBS documentary titled Upper class, Middle class and lowest class, only 5% of American households have incomes of $186,000 or more annually (Service). However, in 2011 the Census Bureau reports that the American middle-class household is $50,000 or less. To be more specific in Dayton, Ohio salaries between $30,000 and $50,000 qualify family households as middle class. With such
wide-ranging qualifiers of middle class it is necessary to determine a fair calculation of middle class.

The *American Heritage College* dictionary defines the middle class as “the socioeconomic class between the working class and the upper class, including professionals, highly skilled laborers, and lower to middle management” (The American Heritage Dictionary); it seems the real definition of the middle class ranges from slightly above poverty ($20,000) to slightly below comfort ($250,000) thus, leaving the families in the middle in a state of intermediate. The middle class faces a number of issues. For example, are we middle class? If so, what are middle class signifiers? The term “middle,” signifies “equal distant,” but to where (The American Heritage Dictionary)? So, how do the “middle” identify with the path to literacy development? According to David Rohde:

The closest the task force came to defining middle class was in a January 2010 report [referred to as] „Middle Class Task Force”
launched in January 2009 and includes the secretaries of labor, health and human services, education and commerce…. the document concludes that „middle class families are defined more by their aspiration” than their income.

This essentialist approach is loosely applied to families in the middle. Thus, the approach to define middle class based on material assets links a connection with the political aspects of the term middle class. If “aspiration” is indeed a factor in defining middle class then what is the relationship between aspiration and literacy development in middle class families? If simply applying aspiration to family constructs of literacy growth, excess, and development is the “new enlightenment” then “Middle Class America” has won half
the battle of ensuring literacy achievement in their family units. Such simplicity is, however, unlikely, and implies that the 60% of American middle class households lack not only the ability to stimulate literacy development but also lack drive and ambition.

However, it is likely that the majority middle class lacks the tools of access to developing literacy within the family construct and therefore, the “means of education are distinct, separate and unequally, dispensed according to one”s social class” (Romano). In fact, the role of social class is significant to the development of literacy in any family. The social class identity or the middle class necessity to identify is the catalyst that drives the discourse, as it relates to literacy development in communities. The power of literacy growth is entrenched with the state of the economy, and as a result of the economic downturn the parents in middle class families struggle to ascertain not only active engagement but also avenues that assist in the climb to the top in literacy achievement. In “Writing and the Creation of the Past,” Alexander Stille denounces the ever-changing push toward new literacy development:

Writing has been linked to democracy from the time of ancient Athens…Literacy was a requirement of citizenship in Athens and a means for citizens to hold their leaders accountable. While literacy has, at times been used as a bar to exclude the illiterate from exercising power, reading and writing have generally been a form of empowerment…Fredrick Douglass went to great lengths to learn to read…saw it as an essential step in his eventual liberation…The sense of historical context that comes with literacy is a part of the feeling of enfranchisement; knowing where you
have come from is important to forming an idea of where you want to
go. (751)

Maybe literacy is not just tied to educational aspects of reading and writing. As Stille
suggests the writing link to democracy has existed for centuries. Historically, slaves in
America were denied many rights including citizenship. As long as people in power were
able to deny literacy tools the oppressed would remain oppressed. There would be no
higher access to literacy because the lack of economics alone would hold them at bay.
Presently, the state of the economy has had a negative impact on Americans. Upper
social classes are the least disturbed by the shift in the economy, but the middle class
struggles for a literacy place. How will a middle class family in America be competitive
in their search for literacy equanimity? Should middle class America pause and ponder
about the effect the economic crisis has on the how the family gains access to literacy?

Pathways

In a time where dialogues of a recession emerge from the tongues of American
families, many states across America and the world expiate to this inevitable reality.
Many working class families across the United States have had to face critical realism of
a recession, while others continue life seemingly uninterrupted. The task of determining
the impact of the recession on literacy in middle class families is approached from
various views. Though there is hegemonic research on working class literacy
development there is very little research on the “economic impact on literacy
development” on families during this current day crisis. Scholarly researchers, from
Linda Brodkey, Bronwyn T. Williams, and Phillip Finn discuss literacy in middle-class
families from the perspective of identity, educational attainment, success, and difference.
One critical reality remains—when considering all of these factors—parental engagement in literacy expansion during stressful periods such as a recession, change the role parents play in ensuring literacy achievement in their families. Much of research surveys only the impact of the economy on middle class households as a hole. However, although literacy development is linked to identity, community, and pathways to a balanced life; how do middle class families maintain the new challenges brought on by the recession? This review of literature will examine scholarly work that encompasses the former, and explores the newness of the impact on literacy that the current recession has bestowed on middle class families in the United States. Since most Americans are significantly more comfortable with better opportunity to excel, it is no surprise that the disproportion of income is of lesser importance (Sawhill).

*Balancing Act*

In my research I discovered that working class families begin the literacy climb at a disadvantage. Many parents from working class families have little to no quality time to spend on ensuring their child’s place on the literacy ladder to success. Although, ideally in the United States “everyone has an opportunity to achieve a better life” (Sawhill 47); realistically the “better life” may assist in the economic climb. Though, the pathways to a better life are only successful if economics are strong. Isabel Sawhill and others, suggest that if the six life stages of family formation, early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence, transition to adulthood, and adulthood referred to as the Social Genome Model, are met with favorable outcomes, then families are creating generations of successful offspring (48). The question to ponder is what happens when all those goals are met, and the family is blinded sided by a recession that hinders their normal approach
to literacy development opportunities? Additionally, comparing the economic impact to different middle class households (based on Census definition) “people do move up and down the ladder, over their careers and between generations, but it helps if you have the right parents”, but even with the right parents will literacy development agencies be accessible to these families during an economic downturn (Sawhill 48)?

Though many factors play into accessing literacy development, the most important factor is the role that parents play in obtaining necessary tools that enhance the literacy development of a family. “If success [for literacy development] at each stage varies by gender and race, it varies even more by the income of one’s parent” (Sawhill 49). Since literacy development is tied to the school-readiness of each child, the disparity created by the untimely recession hinders the majority middle.

As a result of the recession the social class line is clearly visible and the middle class families are at the forefront of the gap. Sawhill contends, “the research community has now identified, using rigorous randomized controlled studies, any number of successful programs, some of which pass a cost/benefit test even under conservative assumptions about their eventual effects,” (52). A solution would consist of parents’ abilities to maneuver through the economic loopholes that obstruct their families’ path to literacy development.

Challenges in Black Middle-Class Families

Finding a balance is at the core of every family, but balance is specifically challenging in middle class families that struggle with the pitfalls associated with the current economic decline. Social class definition is an intrigued part of middle class privilege. For example, identifying in the Black middle-class” either by income, gender,
education, or experience identifying is culturally a significant part of belonging. As parents African-Americans negotiate a place in the sphere not only for themselves but also for their families. Education, followed by income is the determining status signifier. Uvanney Maylor and Katya Williams argue a different challenge to middle class families gaining access to literacy development. These authors held seminars on attitudes of black women identifying with both being black and middle-class simultaneously. Maylor and Katya also studied the experiences of Black “middle class” parents and the resistant of the women to assimilating into a specific social class (346). Mayor and Williams explanation includes “the other,” which links being “Black and middle class” to exploring what exactly that specification classifies (351). In a controlled setting the authors examine black middle class educated parents; though they accomplish this task through a series of surveys and observations, they do not examine the affect of the recession on the literacy development of black middle class families.

Though one or both of the parents are adequately educated these families are still unable to negotiate a learning environment conducive to advantage within their social class. In other words, the recession is one challenge obstructing black middle class families, but is that the only obstruction? Are Black families standing in the way of their own growth? “This means that middle-class parents are not only able to utilize economic resources to avoid their children attending schools they consider educationally inadequate, but [they] can remove their children from schools that they believe are not meeting the child”s educational needs” (Maylor). This view, published in 2011, after the onset of the recession simplifies the idea that economics has little to no effect on the way African-American parents gain access for literacy development Parental engagement,
according to Maylor and Williams, is the significant attribute that regardless of the economic impact on these families as a result of the recession, parental “engagement” will close the gap. The role the black parent plays in the school secures their access to literacy for their children.

However, engagement for black parents is often met with opposition. Therefore, not only are they hindered by effects of the recession, but also by others like, employers who refused to allow time-off for events that evolve engaging with their child. Are Middle Class African American parents met with a higher disadvantage of obtaining literacy development routes than white middle class parents? It is the “perception [that regardless of literacy levels] Black parents…knowledge [level] was not…accepted or considered a factor in relationships they tried to develop” to improve literacy growth for their families” (Maylor 348). Hence, for black middle class families seeking literacy enhancement in the midst of a recessive economy, not only is there a challenge by economics and status, there is also a challenge of, and because of their “blackness”.

The National Urban League’s State of Black America 2012 report concluded that the economic climb of the last 30 years for African Americans is non-existent since the recession struck (Turner). In fact, according to Turner, black middle-class households decreased by more than 50%, while white middle class households suffered a mere 13.6% drop in income; thus, doubling black America’s disadvantage to venues that enhance literacy development. The central core of any family’s success with literacy and particularly black middle class Americans literacy development is the advantage afforded the status of access. However, the unyielding recession obstructs not only how families
accrue income, it also affects and limits access to technology, books, tutors, and college, thus jeopardizing the literacy gain of the family unit.

Thus, exploring the impact of the recession on black and white middle class families it is only fair to note that research on the challenges that face people of color is more involved even when all other challenges balance. In a review of Patrick J. Finn book *Literacy with an Attitude;* the writer contends that Finn suggests, “Access to powerful literacy is a matter of justice” (Romano 3). If this approach is acceptable then consider middle class families of any ethnicity will control how their family gains access to powerful literacy development. Regardless of the extremities that are a result of the recession, powerful literacy development is essential to the progression of middle class families’ literacy. The challenge for black middle class families is how they should negotiate acquiring the tools to develop literacy within their families, with the weight of the recession transforming the traditional methods of acquisition.

Realistically, acquisition to the new economic crisis for the middle class is an uphill battle. Many parents are facing monumental challenges obtaining or maintaining a level of competitive literacy development in the working-class family structure. The road to success that deters the average family in the quest for equality is often a struggle. In the area of literacy, working class parents are disproportionately disadvantaged. In that “people living in poverty have increased from 31 million in 1999 to 46.2 million in 2010, thus, 15% of the population in the United States as poverty ridden,” hence indicating that working-class families fall in status (Romano)? Or are the working class parents providing a different, less powerful literacy knowledge? The economic status of the family dictates the type of literacy that is obtained within that family. A lack of economic
resources for the middle majority creates a disadvantage in the literacy attainment for the working class family. Thus, introducing the ideology that the lack of access to literacy agencies cultivates a different less powerful form of literacy development that is “rote and fragmented, rather than conceptual and linked to the world in ways that help parents understand the relevancy to their lives,” and that of their children”s lives (Romano). Black Middle Class American families lack of economic resources challenge how working-class families compete in the literacy arena.

Middle Class Dialogue

The United States of America has a reputation of security, enhancement, and progression for all people regardless of social status, gender, education, or race. The United States however, cannot pin a definition for Middle Class. Because there is no definitive government definition of this group of people, the gap ranges for the middle class suggest that any family between $20,001 and up to 250,000 qualifies in the middle majority (Rohde). Nonetheless, “the middle class has been intensively studied,” yet very little research examines the loss of literacy development in middle class circles associated with the loss of income in both White America and Black America (Rohde). If, as Rohde suggests Americans define middle class by self-identifying--how will working class families maintain equal literacy levels in this process (Rohde 1)? Scholars in the field are searching for a definition of middle class in order to determine the needs of the majority middle as it relates to the approach of this group for literacy development. Equanimity when exploring literacy development in the middle class family construct insists that all literacy tools are attainable regardless of income.

Taking income out of the process of literacy access levels the literacy
achievement capability. One researcher explains, “What Foucault and other poststructuralists have been arguing the last fifteen or twenty years is considerably easier to state than act on; we are at once constituted and unified as subjects…” (Brodkey, On the Subjects of Class and Gender in "The Literacy Letters"125). Unification involves certain common denominators. For example access, means, and engagement. If one or more of those common denominators are absent the calculation falls short of the target for gaining access to literacy development, thus leaving many families struggling to acquire equanimity the best way they can. Often ones best efforts are not always the path that ensures achievement for literacy improvement.

In fact, Brodkey in an article states, “American scholars have more than a passing interest in academic freedom (and growth) because historically the relationship between the academy [education] and the state [government] have been uneasy” (597). Currently as the recession worsens, the uneasiness of the state regarding middle class is the topic of discussion on the tongues of many Americans. Literacy “involves education, critical thinking, and action,” and open discourse on the middle class access to all of those former literacy qualifiers is vital (Romano 4). “The point is that growing up in a….white, middle class U.S. community immersed me in….mainstream education, and that helped, in many ways, make it easier for me to succeed” (Williams 343). But does this still apply since the onset of the recession? Settling in to the onset of the economic downturn working class families both White and Black react to their families” decrease in the income and class, and “American society considers the have-nots as a liability, and believes that increased literacy” among this group will keep the families competitive (Hofacre 124).
Competitiveness is essential in the quest for literacy development in all American households. In a recent study of fifth graders Jean Anyon noted:

In one school, designated executive elite, family breadwinners were top corporate executive in multinational corporations or Wall Street financial firms. Their incomes were in the top 1 percent in the United States. In a second school, designated affluent professionals, family breadwinners were doctors, TV and advertising executives, and other highly paid professionals. Income were in the top 10 percent for the nation. In a third school, designated middle class, breadwinners were a mixture of highly skilled, well-paid blue-and white-collar workers and those with traditional middle-class occupations such as teachers, social workers, accountants, and middle managers. Incomes were better than average for the United States but below the top 10 percent. In a fourth and fifth school-designated working class, about one-third of the breadwinners were skilled blue-collar workers; about half were unskilled or semiskilled blue-collar workers, and about 15 percent of the heads of households were unemployed. (Finn)

In Anyon’s survey besides the fact that all of the schools were in northern New Jersey, predominately white, upheld standard state policies, and all had the same textbooks, yet they were failing the literacy development for working middle-class families (Finn). This unevenness was captured inside the learning environment. Though the children were “labeled” as average the publisher description of the text inside of the books described the books for usage with “low ability students,” thus jeopardizing the student perception
of self by limiting their ability to excel beyond what social norms prescribed for individuals within a specific social class (Finn). What has happened to probability or chance being absent of, or disconnected from, social class? Denied of choice, working middle-class options limit places, methods, and means to literacy progression in the family.

The normal tensions within a community are always present, but the recession creates new community anxiety in the middle class. “Many literacy scholars have detailed the difficult position some students find themselves in when facing” competition in their literacy rise (Williams); ultimately, “it is the way we all internalize and normalize the beliefs and values of the community and social class to which we tell ourselves we belong” (Williams). Can economic capital be the catalyst that hinders or propels middle class literacy development at the height of the decline? “If we move from one social habitus to another, we have to learn new social practices,” including how to access literacy progression for our families (Williams).

Though parents can help their student decipher “standard literacies that reflect certain relation[ships] of or with power and economics, what help is offered for parents who struggle with the reality of alienation brought on by the recession and the impact it has on how the family obtains literacy help to move the family forward (Williams 346).

Parental Anxiety

Scholars have researched the underachievement of boys for decades. “The increasing social and political concern about boys” underachievement (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998) is often underpinned by a „poor boys” discourse (Epstein et. al 1998, 6) which positions boys as vulnerable causalities” (Jamieson). As parents negotiate the
recession the framing discourse about the affects parental lack of access has on the literacy development of not only the boys but also the family is at the beginning of many conversations about position, choice, and approach. “Choice as a basis for service distribution has increased social inequality and social segregation” particularly among middle class families (Jamieson). Daily as the economy stales the “images of isolation and disconnect” between literacy development, status, and community are ever present among working class families (Jamieson). Parental anxiety for middle class families seeking academic avenues to powerful, stronger accessibility to literacy growth is hampered not by parental ineptness, but by the uncontrollable position resulting from the upheaval of economics.

One reality following the recession for one of the middle class family in my study is the frustration associated with equanimity when exploring literacy development for the family. The economic crisis resulted in an adjustment that affects the family in enormous ways. For example, the recent downsizing of living space has had the largest effect on the literacy of the children. Many studies consider environment in the discussion of literacy attainment. Scholars agree that living space and environment are critically to literacy attainment. According to Brodkey of her living environment several decades ago:

We were a family of five, my parents and three girls, in a four-room house, a kitchen, a living room (known as the front room), two bedrooms, and a bathroom. Attached to the back of the house were an un-insulated and unheated enclosed porch (it would have been a summer kitchen if it had been equipped with a stove) and a storeroom (used as a playroom when the weather was warm). In such small quarters, interior space is
social by definition, since to be in a room is to be in either the company or
the proximity of others. (535) (Brodkey, "Writing on the Bias")

Families today seek private, separate quarters to give their child every advantage for
literacy development. The small quarters in one family are constant reminders of not only
the recession but also the parents” inability to gain competitive literacy skills in an
already competitive space.

The isolation as a result of the recession is crippling for middle class families as
they struggle daily their children who are marginalized both by social status and lack of
access to the tools required to improve individual literacy growth. The realities for middle
class families affected by the recursive plague of social decline due to economics pursue
different to stay at least equal. “The road to success in the new world economy
requires…more” (Zhao). More what? More aspiration, determination, inspiration--since
growth is “creating jobs at the very top and the very bottom,” and predictions from
Andrew McAfee (MIT blogger) 2012 report shows a implication that “employment ratios
will not start to trend upward in the coming years,” hinders middle class America”s
access. In light of the current economic downturn can middle class Americans keep their
family”s literacy development competitive without economics?

The United States government passed the No Child Left Behind act in in 2001,
and President George Bush signed it into law on January 8th, 2002 (Uknown). The
enactment however, occurred some six years before the recession took its toll on middle
class families. “The United States is near the end of a revolution that effectively turns
education into indoctrination, mistakes diversity for distraction, and interprets [literacy
growth] as autonomy” (Zhao 58). Zhao suggest that literacy attainment is headed in the
wrong direction. In order to build a new stronger middle class “the United States must make a U-turn” (57). Thus, how will the middle class acquires access to the qualifiers of literacy that keeps them competitive (Zhao 58). Zhao explains:

There are three essential elements in the new paradigm. First, learning experiences should be personalized [and accessible] for each student’s interest and enhancement of his or her strengths…when fully developed [literacy] can be valued. Second…ensure that students are engaged…and prepared [for] consuming information. Finally, learning should occur in the broad context of globalization, and technology should be used to expand students” learning beyond the school to the globe. (59)

According to Zhao this is a lethal combination of promise that will ensure well-rounded students in middle class families. However, he offers no plan on how parents can attain this task in the throes of a recession. Though a great idea, middle class families need more than a random idea as they struggle through the loopholes of a depression parents need a paradigm that focuses on keeping the child literately competitive with those in age bracket.

Scholastic Achievement

The recession has created record high unemployment across the nation since 2008. As of February 2013, the number of jobless American is 12 million (The Employment Situation–February 2013). To adequately access literacy achievement in middle class families is pertinent to review “educational attainment in black and white middle-class families” (Kalil). Statistically, this is achieved by accessing “a substantial share of the differential impact of job loss on black and white middle-class youth [and] is
explained by race differences in household wealth, long-run measures of family income, and…parental experience of long-term unemployment” (Kalil). Thus, the current high level in parental job loss impacts both black and white youths literacy achievement. The long-term unemployment for middle class families strikes an already unsteady foundation. According to Ariel Kalil, the affects often result in significant material hardship among other factors, which is an intricate part of literacy progression.

Lacking material tools, such as access to technology, tutoring assistant, books, or any additional resources that will increase the literacy of a child effects the educational achievement of that child. When thinking of the impact of the recession on literacy, many parents believe the depression is “race-less”; however, research suggests that blacks are “significantly less likely than whites to perpetuate their middle-class status across generations” (Kalil). In other words, Kalil explains “black and white middle-class families respond differently to economic events that occur over the course of children’s development” (Kalil). As middle-class parents from both racial backgrounds scramble for solutions that will keep their family on the literacy development track, there are variables that point out differences in perception for each race. According to Kalil, the disparity difference between races lies in the theory that blacks are more likely to experience longer job loss than whites, thus affecting the literacy attainment within the family structure (60). Though Kalil ascertains that job loss, long-term unemployment, and wealth issues in the middle-class drive the mechanism that hinder educational growth among this group, this study does not offer recommendation for a solution to the disparity that creates a long-term effect on middle class literacy development (60).
The former study links job loss to literacy attainment, however, Iram Siraj-Blatchford studies the odds that exist when job loss places a child’s [literacy growth] at a disadvantage, but also adding the link of the “parents aspiration” to the child achievement, while dismissing the notion the of economics as a hindrance; signaling that education gain is the most relevant matter (463). Does parental aspiration drive literacy attainment and achievement in middle class families “against all odds?” One African American mother in the study said:

Education is the key to life now, in the whole world…the whole world, anywhere you go, education is the key to your success or for your future in life…my own personal belief is that you don’t leave everything to the teachers, the school plays a big role, but a home is where you get the majority of what you know in life. You have to help out, you have to help the children, you don’t just leave it to the teachers, [and] so it is like we are preparing them. (470)

It is Sirj-Blatchford contention, that because of the struggle middle class families instill an aspiration of “hope against all odds” to propel the family forward. Regardless of the struggles experienced by the majority middle, parental engagement with the families’ literacy attainment is critical to the success of the family. Yet, since the onset of the recession many black and white middle class parents find themselves moving mountains in order to gain literacy attainment for their children.

Logically, economics drives almost all faucets of life, and economics is the mountain mover. Ascertaining various avenues to the relationships difference between races in similar middle class situations is meaningful to my research. What is the
relationship gap (if any) that exists in achievement with families’ economics that are similar but race factors that are different? According, to Constance A. Lindsay “there may be reason to believe the black middle-class experience differs from that of the white-middle class experience in some important ways” (762). Is environment, neighborhoods, and disadvantage the deciding contributors that stifle literacy growth in certain communities? “Regardless of race, adolescents from families with more resources tend to perform better academically than their counterparts from poorer families” (Lindsay 763). So what does this mean with the recent economic crises” in the United States? Since, the middle-class makes up the majority middle of the population in America and resources for this social class have plummeted drastically in the last four years, the literacy development of America’s middle is at a drawback that is startling. Thus, requires an examination of literacy pattern approaches in both black and white middle class family structures. The wakening in both black and white middle class families can be established through a series of correlations. For example, neighborhoods, hobbies, grades, time, and parenting approaches play an emerging role in developing literacy support in middle-class households (Lindsay 761).

The Awakening

America in its multi-ethnic existence is comprised of three groups of people: lower, middle and upper class citizens, but middle class and working class Americans face the most difficult hurdles. Social class and caste systems hold most Americans to a socioeconomic classification, thus affecting how middle class American gains literacy equality. “After forty years of revolutionary nationalism, cultural nationalism, integration, protest, capitalism, black capitalism, professionalism, and higher education
initiatives,” middle class Americans at the onset of the recent recession remains at a deficiency on many levels, particularly literacy advancement (Crisman 51). It is imperative for not only Americans, but also Middle class Americans to advance the fight of equanimity of literacy attainment that stales progression within the social class. Find solutions to advance of literacy achievement for all families and communities. Shifting the once safe sphere that engrosses middle class American communities, to a more aggressive war against repression that highlights the ongoing depravity of literacy gains associated with the economic downturn. Crisman in a poem to Robert Allen titled *Los Naranjos* wrote:

> We have planted seeds of our lives,
> They grow beyond us,
> Large, vast, fragrant,
> Like the ceiba, that large tree
> That guided your labor seven years ago
> And still sways, much larger
> Over the fruits of Los Naranjos.

Though this reference is about a village called Los Naranjos, and the reference means “The Oranges,” the analogy also represents American middle class communities. Although seeds have been engrained in the middle class, and social norms have been established as set in stone, it is essential for middle class Americans to continue “the sway” in order to develop a middle class of scholars that approach literacy with an aggressive, progressive “positioned” attack regardless to the limits produced by the recession.
According to Roz Ivanic, a scholar in the field of teaching writing “positioned means something like made to seem to be a certain type…or given a particular identity. The word „identity“ is useful because it is the everyday word for people’s sense of who they are. [However,] the plural word „identities” is better because it captures the idea of people identifying simultaneously with a variety of social groups” (4). Previously, middle class America identifies with a particular social group, but at the onset of the recession those who classify as “middle class” felt the impact of their individual family reality. The fragmented state of association by government, community, economics and self-placed a restriction on literacy development for the family. The normalcy of the struggle became significantly intense as the family economics became significantly strained. Ultimately, the families intentionally or not, ascribe to identities that alter the way they access the literacy cannon (Ivanic).

According to a Labor Department report the United States economy lost nearly 2 million jobs in the last four months of 2008 (Banda). This significant job loss affected middle-class families in ways that altered the literacy development of 60% of America. What are the characteristics of successful literacy development achievement in Middle-Class America? When examining race, ethnicity and social class group’s access to literacy gain it is human nature to attach the American ideology of economics to the perils of success. However, exploring the role of class has in literacy attainment is essential. Though this research does not define a solution to middle class American’s journey to conquering the access to literacy problem; researchers continue to study the differences of black and white literacy development and the role that economics plays in the attainment of equality in both groups. “Race and ethnicity, class… and gender have
been staple ingredients of this conversation” and research…because all these facets of social being have such significant consequences for the life changes of individuals and groups…of social identities” (Brodkin). In the wake of the economic decline both black and white middle class families seek avenues to equal access to literacy growth for their families. Scholars will continue the debate what constitutes middle class as well as the racial divide that creates the gap between black and white literacy developments. However, although there exist an obvious gap in literacy development among middle-class families with similar economic means, there is yet in place a solution that will give middle America equanimity in literacy gain. In the negotiating of middle class literacy growth in America it is important to ask critical questions significant to the economic stresses in American middle-class communities. First, how will middle-class Americans both black and white gain equal accesses to literacy during an economic crisis? Also, are middle-class families defined by the way they approach literacy development for their family? Or is literacy in middle-class families defined by the perception of changed economics? What is the common dominator of identifying, perception, and literacy development in middle-class communities? Finally, are working-class and middle-class family accesses to literacy determined by economics or aspirations? It is unclear whether there exists a definite answer to one or all of these questions. But scholars continue to examine and evaluate the effect of the economic recession on the development of literacy in middle-class households.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to examine how American middle-class families gain access to literacy development during the current recession. The goal is to determine the difference in black and white middle-class families approach to literacy development (if any) during an economic crisis. The study compares three families in three different regions categorized similarly by education, income, neighborhoods, and marital status living in the United States. The families are guided by the following research questions: Has the recent crisis regarding the economy created a shift that affects how middle class families gain access to literacy building tools (i.e. technology, libraries, available engagement, tutors, etc.)? Has the economic decline hindered how family literacy development matures in their family? How and what methodological approach of reshaping, redefining, and recasting literacy takes place within the middle class family structure as a result of the recession? Will the current state of the economy alter the approach of how middle class families define literacy? What support if any is provided to middle-class families to assist in equal literacy growth opportunities for their middle class students by schools, government or self?

Initially, to answer these questions I looked at only families within a specific region. However, with further research it would be beneficial to survey different regions since the middle class is determined differently in different regions. The three families I chose fit the criterion for my research. In other words, each family is considered middle
class according to the Census Bureau, married with one or more parents working, with at least one school age child living in the home, living in a neighborhood, at least one parent holding a higher degree, and the family is minimally or largely affected by the recent economic crisis.

*The Roberts*

The first family is African-American and lives in South Carolina. They have four adult children living outside the home and one teenage son living in the home. In my interview I learned that the mother is a third year undergraduate student, a recently unemployed manager as result of cutbacks on her last job. Identifying as middle-class, the father is a professional truck driver who spends the majority of his time on the road. The family lives in a two-bedroom upscale duplex, and at the time of the interview were several months behind in the rent for their home. They had no car of their own, but were driving a borrowed 1996 car from one of the older children. When the family had a two-income household each member of the family had separate cell phone lines with Sprint Network. Once the family income dropped the teenage son lost his cell phone and there is no landline in the home. Internet and cable exist but in fragments, thus meaning sometimes the service was on and other times it was disconnected for non-payment. Some months the family can’t afford the extra cost, but most months Internet is not in the home. This family’s economics play a key role in how literacy is obtained by their teenage son. Although the parents describe the son as bright, academically engaged, and eager to earn a college education, their personal economic situation alters the way their son gains literacy equally.
The second family is a white American family residing in Ohio, comprised of a mother and father and one school age teenager in the home. The mother and father are both full-time students and they also work full-time jobs. They reside in a middle class neighborhood and their daughter attends one of the local high schools that struggle for proper funding for educational enhancement. The economics and time afforded to education in the family structure is significant for my research because I seek to explore time management in middle-class families as a positive element of literacy attainment or negative element in the role of enhancing literacy in the family unit. Although overwhelmed with personal desires of enhancement, the parents in this family must also employ time management, economic stability and academic progression for the family in a declining financial state. My interview with the parents involved a questionnaire, but many of the answers took our interview in different directions. Both parents work full-time and attend school full-time. Since the recession life has taken the family in many directions and time spent developing literacy in the child is often fragmented and only at the request of the child. In other words, because of time factors the parents find themselves negotiating various different tasks. The mother described her child as “independent requesting and requiring little assistance” with any aspect of literacy growth (Interview). During the interview I learned that although the mother was a college student working full-time, only recently within the last month did she apply for a library card. Embarrassed by this admission, the world that opened as a result of this impulsive move enlightened her about literacy development assistance available through her local library.
The Dunbars

The third family, from Texas, is comprised of a bi-racial father and an African-American mother. They have three school age sons. The mother and father have professional degrees and they rent their middle-class home. The mother works part-time and the father works full-time. Their sons’ academic success places them in the top 5% of their classes, according to the parents. They share all technology and spend at least one hour on weekends with some type of academic challenge. The challenge involves worksheets, tutorials, or puzzles found online or in books and formatted by Tanesha for the boys to complete. This family was chosen because of their interest in the academic development of their sons, and because economics forced the once private schooled children into the public school domain. After several years in a private academic setting and a focus on individual literacy development, the public school setting introduced less privatized literacy engagement. In fact, the parents’ role in the public school arena increased to a heightened level once the realization of economics shifted and shaped the different levels of literacy progression by their sons. Each child was learning literacy skills on different levels, yet all three were in same grade. This obvious difference in teaching methods was an incentive for the parents to pay close attention to how the school was developing the literacy of their sons.

Though all of the families have similar economic backgrounds, through the various interviews I discovered the approaches are very different in the techniques they use to develop literacy in their households.
Household Selection

Initially, I discussed my ideas for researching the effects of the economy on the literacy of young boys in middle class families with various colleagues at several universities. After researching family statistics in the Census Bureau database, I established a criterion that would best suit my research endeavors. In the database I discovered that regionally families in the middle-class category are established based on three levels of distinction. The Census Bureau divides middle-class families into three groups; lower, middle, and upper middle-class, comprising the groups and the salaries with large noticeable gaps. Such gaps in salary compensation made it difficult to locate families that fall in one are all of the defining characteristics set by the Census Bureau. The young man that I met in the restaurant was significant in locating families in the Ohio region. Of the four families he suggested I selected one of for this study. This decision was based on the time commitment the family could commit for my research initiatives. My search for additional families in different regions was more challenging.

The participation of each family was strictly voluntary. I presented an overview of the study to each family and they decided whether or not they wanted to participate, and the amount of time they could commit. Of the three families chosen only one could not commit to eight hours of interviews. However, one other family was difficult to reach on many occasions, but insisted that they did not want to drop out of the study. In a three-week period, I asked the family for three to eight hours of interviews comprised of a question response in-person, email and/or by Skype. I spent time getting to know each family (via one or more social media sources,) on different topics relating to my research. Topics such as, economics, politics, literacy, finance, community, social media, and the
various levels of the class groupings were all included. After several hours of interviews, and the comfort level was established I moved from written field notes to recordings of our conversations with each family. Two of the families kept in touch on a regular basis but one family struggled to respond in a timely matter. However, all three families have finished the study.

*The Roberts*

In a conversation with a family friend in South Carolina about my research, she mentioned a family that she thought would fit into my study. I sent a brief email to the mother explaining my topic and research as well as my interest in studying her family. I eventually spoke and met the Roberts family at their home in South Carolina. After a brief interview, the family fit into the lower middle-class group as defined by the Census Bureau. Via Skype and one in-person interview I concluded that this family was ideal for my research. The Roberts family was instrumental in finding the family in Texas, and this family was eager to be a part of my research, but could only commit to six hours of interviews. Each family agreed to interview via in-person, Skype, telephone and email interaction.

Angie and Terrance Roberts of South Carolina discussed climbing hurdles that hinder literacy growth in their family, but struggle with the directions on how to move beyond the red tape of economics to accomplish this. Angie, an unemployed student, and Terrance an over-the-road truck driver or long distance driver, searched for ways to improve the literacy of their gifted teenage son in a region where literacy advancement is difficult for a child in any family and certainly a child of color. Located in a poor performing county, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts looked outside of the county to find available
resources to keep their son competitive with high performing counties. Mrs. Roberts revealed, “I like the safety of this school community but it seems I traded safety for literacy enhancement…but what am I supposed to do?” (Roberts, Interview). In a county where their child is enrolled in a “magnet program” as told by Mrs. Roberts, “they said this program would offer more advantage for my son…but what they meant was safety advantage, not an advantage to keep my child academically competitive with other(s) in different counties” (Roberts Interview). Angie’s understanding of a “magnet program” set expectations of achievement as a result of education at this school, well above what the school could deliver. Once grade reports for the school were learned, her son was in a magnet program but a poor performing one.

The Austins

The Austin family spoke to me about their struggle with poor school systems, literacy attainment challenges for their child, and the parents’ struggle for literacy development that would improve their personal economic climb, if accomplished. Susan Austin (pseudonym for the mother) has one Associates Degree (A.A.), and is enrolled in a second Associate Degree program, while working full-time. John Austin (pseudonym for the father) is working on his undergraduate degree and also holds a full-time position in a blue-collar job. Their perceptions on the literacy attainment within their family structure centers on determination, time, and need, economics, expectation and ambition. “Accomplishing the impossible” is how Mrs. Austin defines it, adding, “sometimes I don't know which direction I should go first, but then I focus.” As economics took a turn for the worst, Susan and John decided to lead their child’s literacy development by being examples of how to climb hurdles, like economics.
Unlike the Roberts and the Austins, the Dunbar family moved to their community based on the school inside the community. Location was only significant to the literacy development of their sons. Tanesha and Taylor both hold professional degrees but Tanesha works part-time in a corporate organization, and Taylor also works for a large corporation. Tanesha’s schedule is specifically arranged around the children. In fact, while her husband drops them off at school every morning, she uses the free time to prepare for snacks, and evening events occurring on the children’s schedules before leaving for work. Though Mr. Dunbar has been equally as unemployed as employed (changing jobs every other year by choice), the family manages to keep their children competitive in the literacy quest. One-way they think this is accomplished by “interviewing the school’s principal” about the school’s achievement record. Instead of “the school’s principal interviewing me” about my sons I reverse the focus (Dunbar Interview). Having two 4th graders and a rising 6th grader Mrs. Dunbar uses every opportunity to remain engaged in her sons’ literacy attainment. As a member of the Parent Teachers Association, Mrs. Dunbar actively acts as teacher parent in the 6th grade room and a “on call” parent in her 4th graders’ classrooms. Mrs. Dunbar is extremely active in school programs for her children, and has lunch with them on average three times a month. Although the economic crisis forced the Dunbars to remove the children from a private school and enroll them in a public school, they did not “let the economic downturn dictate which school to enroll their children” (Dunbar Interview). Hence, staying in a community where the community embraces literacy as a vital element to the growth of family in the community, the Dunbars would rather struggle to remain in the
place that has better schools, than to step down a notch and live comfortably. In other words, literacy enhancement for the Dunbar children comes at a price--the economic comfort is not as high a priority when placed beside literacy achievement for the children. Mr. and Mrs. Dunbar’s perception of achieving literacy venues for their children is more significant than the economics they may or may not have access to.

Conducting the Study

Two of the families met with me five times, and one family met with me once. The first interviews contained questions that would allow me to get a basic background of the family economics (See Appendix A). All families willingly volunteered information on their family economics, and this was accomplished by providing a range of each couple’s income (See Appendix A). In the second interview we discussed how each family defined two terms--literacy and middle-class (See Appendix B). In the second and third interview I asked how or have each family been affected by the economic crisis and in what ways, if any? (See Appendix B) These questions were necessary to establish the parents’ perception of change in literacy development of their children due to the economic downturn. Additionally, the parents established the effects their family faced accessing literacy education. In the fourth interview, the parents discussed the various tactics they implemented to enhance literacy progression for their child, and the specific knowledge and skills needed to assist their child in comprehension, understanding, and development to remain competitive outside of the school setting (See Appendix B). Finally, the parents established methods of engagement that assisted in the development of literacy skills in their family. Engagement is used as a method that produces material, projects, and the action from the parent’s role when monitoring awareness within the
family household (See Appendix B). Thus, in their engagement with their child(ren) on various projects, as parents, are they economically able to provide materials that better improve their child’s understanding of the literacy achievement? As I reviewed the transcripts and field notes from each interview, conversation, observation and email, I examined the economic catalysts associated with literacy achievement. Middle-class families at all levels are confronted with the economic crisis and impact on the literacy of their families. They seek ways to maneuver through the challenges the recession has created on their access to literacy gains for middle-class children. In fact, the questions about, the family definition of middle-class, their classification status within the middle-class, and whether or not the family identifies as middle-class--prompted self-analyst and family analyst. Additionally, the question referencing the way or ways the economic downturn had affected their family’s access to education created the most discussion from all of the parents. I analyzed the response of the parents and after that they had different responses. I compiled my data in terms of how each person viewed class, income, literacy, and the necessity of engagement. I focused particularly on the definition of middle-class; as well as how each of the participants perceived themselves, and their parental engagement with schools, child and outside resources. I looked for patterns in community, age of parents, education, and the age of children (See Appendix A). I categorized their responses to the questions based on gender, race, and region, income and education. I examined their responses in groups, and discovered that based on the region, and the economic advantage available in that state literacy success is attainable. Moreover, the determination of the parents is key to the success of literacy development
and enhancement of a child. Additionally, literacy development is at a high risk in middle-class communities as a result of the recession.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

The Roberts, Austins and Dunbar families had different opinions on the definition of middle-class, the impact of economic on their family literacy growth, and the definition of literacy. The first family, the Roberts approached the definition of middle-class cautiously. In the interview, their reply for the definition created a difference of opinion between the couple. Thus, extracting a conversation about the middle-class during the time of the interview. Angie replied “middle-class is a family making between $40,000 and $80,000 a year, residing in a community where homes have an average of 3-4 bedrooms.” Terrence Roberts, however, differed in his definition by saying

Middle-class can be an income of $20,000 or more but not to exceed $90,000 a year, and the household that they live in has little to nothing to do with how they are grouped by society. I mean the amount of bedrooms in my house has nothing to do with how I fit in the middle-class it has more to do with the size of my family. I mean, we live in a two-bedroom townhouse with one and half baths and we have one-child living in the home. That’s enough for the size of my family. (Roberts Interview)

Angie’s description excluding the salary difference opinion is based on the community’s housing relevance, whereas Terrence’s definition was exclusive of the community and focused on the salary association linked to middle-class. Terrence spends two weeks out of the month on the road as a long distance truck driver. His connection to the community
is disjointed because of his time away from the community. Angie is subjected daily to what is happening in her community, thus tying her to the issues in community that Terrence is only privy to occasionally.

The Austins

Susan Austin defines middle-class as “any family with an income of $40,000 to $50,000 with the latter being the higher level of income for middle-class prestige. Though John was not available for his definition of middle-class because of time commitments of work and class, Susan says:

When defining middle-class I think of income although income ranges are different today than it was a couple of years ago. For me, the range for middle-class starts at 40,000 and since I consider myself broke all the time I would say that I am middle-class. With my husband’s salary and mine combined we make more than $50,000 but we are on the low end in terms of our finances. (Susan Interview)

Susan went on to say “2008 middle-class families had more income than they do today” and “she is making that assessment based on families in her neighborhood.” Susan’s claim of better salaries in 2008 is based on her family’s middle-class status of today, rather than five years ago. Prior to 2008, Susan was able to attend school and not be concerned about employment. However, since the onset of the recession a two-salary income is essential in maintaining their household. Susan’s comparison of finances before 2008 and at present is the main cause for her definition of middle-class.
The Dunbars

The Dunbars, in their definition of middle-class, said, “I think middle-class is a joint income or home income of $100,000.” During the interview Tanesha said, “that I consider our family „just”middle-class.” When asked what she meant by “just middle-class”? Her response was

My family and I are in the middle spectrum of middle-class. I don’t believe it is solely based on income, I also believed it is based on location, employment, and mindset. I mean, the community we live in is a middle-class community with most households having a minimum of one child and a maximum of three children. Most families have one parent either as a stay-at-home parent or at least one parent working part-time. We believe that it takes two incomes to remain in the middle-class arena; therefore I contribute to our income part-time. I consider myself a full-time parent and a part-time employee. (Interview)

The economic status of Tanesha and Taylor’s household has “changed considerably since the onset of the recession. However, the use of other funds has been their saving grace” (Interview). In other words, savings accounts and others economic sources, like cashing in on retirement plans, has kept the family stable.

Definition of Literacy

Angie Roberts defined literacy “as the ability to read and write in matter of understanding what read, and the ability to write about what is read.” Mr. Roberts agreed with her definition. Angie went on to say:
Literacy has always been of high importance in my house. When my grown daughters were in school all of them did really well with reading and comprehension, except one. I couldn’t understand why she struggled so much with the reading process. For years, at least (all of her secondary years) she hid the fact that she had not only trouble reading but also understanding what she read and it was hopeless. It was not until she sought higher education that test revealed she suffered from dyslexia. I wish I would had the funds to better prepare my child in the reading process back then. I feel like literacy capability provides and unseen self-esteem, which helps propel any student forward. I do believe her literacy battle was the deterrent causing her not to start college right after high school. So you see, literacy starts with understanding what you comprehend, and with the ability to understand, like my daughter you feel lost. However, my other daughters and my son do not suffer from this disability. (Interview)

However, Mr. Roberts disagrees with his wife. He offers, “Having additional funds for help is unnecessary if parents do not pay enough attention to the signs of illiteracy.” He goes on to say “I think we dropped that ball by not being more involved. That is the reason why we are extremely involved with our son’s literacy aptitude.” The suggestion from Terrence sheds a different light on literacy development in middle-class household. Mr. Roberts attributes the lack of attention to his child’s literacy development to the notion;
That in order to stay above water—meaning in a nice community, in nice home, with a car (two before the recession, and the one daughter was at home at that time also had a car), and the means to pay all the bills in that month on a two-parent income, also created a deficiency in their household. Not in economic gain but in literacy gain, not for all the children, but does that matter how many? No, it doesn’t because working, place, and means should not over-ride a parents’ ability to spot challenges their children have.

Angie says, “It’s just that being middle-class comes at a price. Usually both parents must work to hold-on to the status, but he’s right it should never come at the price of the child” (Interview).

_The Austins_

Susan Austin on the definition of literacy explained:

There are various types of literacy, like financial literacy, literacy in your ability to read and write, literacy in comprehension and lots of people no how to read words but lack the ability to interpret [what they read] it. You also have financial literacy where people no how to make money, but no how to use it. But for this interview I will say that literacy is reading and writing and understanding what is read and written. (Interview)

Susan goes on to say “literacy growth occurs not just in the home and community but that classrooms have a significant role in literacy development for my child.” Although she described her child as an “independent learner,” Susan and husband John both work full-time and attend school full-time, and have little time to assist with school assignments.
Thus, according to Susan “unless her child asks for help” she does not assist her teenage daughter.

_The Dunbars_

Unlike the Roberts or the Austins, Tanesha and Taylor defined “literacy as education at various levels.” Tanesha goes on to say “Our family’s literacy level is above similarly situated children and families [and] not because of affluence [or lack thereof] but rather commitment. Similar in the response from Mr. Roberts relating to engagement and awareness of family literacy progression, the Dunbars reference commitment and not economics in their response to defining literacy achievement in their family. Although, the gap of defining middle-class is thousands of dollars different between the Roberts” and the Dunbar’s, both define literacy progression in terms of commitment of both child and parent, while the Austin’s define literacy as independent means of self-growth. Meaning, the Dunbars associated the literacy achievement of their sons to their role as parents in equipping them with support to obtain literacy achievement.

_Impact of the Economy on Literacy Development_

“Since neighborhoods are critical to social development of any kind, I see my neighbors downsizing, trading their homes for condos, and those whose children attended high-end childcare and private schools are now attend public schools” (Angie). As Angie’s neighborhood changes the concern is evident. Angie continues:

My neighborhood changes every week. People move in and out [but] more today than five years ago. I am saying that to say that moving your children from one school system to the next has to impact their literacy development because each school is so different. I mean they are supposed
to be the same in most school districts but I don’t believe that. So when you change districts you risk the literacy enhancement of your child. I say that because there is not that many “good” schools in this city. Which since the recession, schooling here has changed.

The Roberts discuss the impact of the economy on literacy in schools and determine that it has a counter effect on how their son gains access to literacy development outside of the classroom.

Before the economy crashed and teachers felt secure in their positions, they offered additional services to the children. But now they send emails about tutors for hire, library hours, and online tutoring but for a fee. Just seven years ago, those services were free for students needing assistance. (Terrence)

In the school system in the Roberts” district it is their conclusion that the economic crisis” has not only affected the neighborhood they reside in, but also the district where their son attends school. Angie says “though my husband and I could feel the crunch in our pockets, we never expected for public school to cost so much. I mean I don’t even know why they call it a free education anymore because it is not.” Angie and Terrence struggle with adjusting to the demands a public education has on the pockets of the parents. For example, supplies for school projects, drivers education, and club dues.

*The Austins*

Susan had similar stances on the economic impact on the literacy of her child. Living in a school district that in her opinion is below average, the economy has taken its
toll on an already struggling school. Moving from a high performing school district in South Carolina before the onset of the recession, Susan explains:

Moving from an outstanding school district where the teachers must have been well paid, they had to be well paid or least they performed as if they were well paid because their attitude toward literacy spoke volumes. Compared to the current district where we constantly have emergency levies and a shortage on teachers and most are overworked, thus morale is low and spills into the classroom. I do feel like my daughter has been affected by the recession because it takes more effort on her behalf and my behalf just to be motivated. I worry about her education being affected in the Hanover district, versus attended school in Mecklenburg district the Northwood area, where schools are top notch in academic ratings, thus have more money. (Interview)

Susan’s assessment of the economic crisis on her child’s literacy attainment links to low wages for teacher’s, morale, thus the system cannot have an advantage in the teacher pool of selection, when the state of economics determines who teaches her child. In her assessment about the economic impact on literacy she shared a story about a teacher at the school offering tutoring to children after school and charging them a fee. Therefore, proving to Susan that although it may not be all teachers who are money driven but in this state of economic strife teachers’ abilities to improve literacy achievement is blocked by their own self-indulgence for economics. Thus, the lack of funds afforded to the school hinder the motivation of its teachers. Without the tools in the classroom for
literacy development, like technology, available tutors during lunch, and individualized attention if a child needs it creates challenges for both the student and the instructor.

*The Dunbars*

The Dunbar’s response to the question on economic impact was “Our children’s [literacy] have not been impacted [since the downturn].” Different from the other participants the Dunbars revert back to “they [the children have always] and are still exposed to parental and online tutorial [that increase] our children’s climb in the literacy arena.” Tanesha was not able to provide for me any ways she felt her family had been affected by the lack of literacy attainment because of her role in ensuring that the boys do not fall in literacy success. She contends, “Because my children are well read and we discuss current events appropriate for their ages” their advantage is above most in their age range. Tanesha shared a story about the presidential debates and to her surprise, the level of involvement her children expressed. According to Tanesha, her sons not only watched the debates, but they also asked various question about not only the president’s responses but also his opponent’s responses. Tanesha also said that one of her sons screamed at the television on several occasion. “They need a good environment with open discussion to remain above average in literacy growth. We provide this for our children and other than the cost of shelter, the action is free.” Thus, Tanesha moves again to the importance of engagement in the literacy of the child and dismissing economics as a possible hindrance.

The first three questions of the survey were designed to establish how each family views middle-class, literacy, and the link of both with economics. Regionally, they answer each question differently, based on a number of factors, such as neighborhoods,
schools, and economics. However, I noticed that middle-class is defined differently not only by the government but by families inside the middle-class society. This difference is seen in the income difference, the regions of location, and the responsibility of the parents’ roles in literacy achievement, ensuring or improving middle-class status, and defying the literacy gap within the household, and thus rising above it. The questions on literacy differed based on economics, time, and engagement with their children. Though all of the families spoke of vacant houses in their communities, they also agree that those vacancies are a direct result of the economic crisis. All but one family spoke of engagement being critical to literacy development but that family’s time management window to include engagement in literacy development for their child depends on time management. In the next section I will discuss the relationship between literacy attainment, social class and the connection to economics.

**Parental Observation**

Two of the families in this survey commented on their concerns relating equanimity of literacy with other children in the same age range. The Roberts’ perception of equal advantage in their son’s literacy attainment consists of slight disadvantages. “Sometimes my son does not have access to research materials for his projects. He has lots of those. Generally, if we don’t have enough finances to pay the Internet bill it gets turned off. When that happens he gets his information from the set of Encyclopedias but I know that information is dated” (Angie). Dated material does not mean it is wrong or doesn’t enhance her son’s literacy growth it merely limits it. For Terrence, “access to the world wide web is a critical part of literacy development.” He continues with “limiting him from other venues where his peers have constant access, places him at a
disadvantage. Since the Internet is connected to the cable, my son is cut off from the world, and contained [restricted] to the pages of a dated book. But I guess since economics is not equal literacy attainment can’t be equal either.” (Interview)

In Susan’s observation of her child’s ascent to literacy “since entering middle school and high school, technology tools like computers, printers, and various programming are at her finger tip.” However, Susan admits, “although technology is available for her child to remain competitive, teacher motivation affects and limits the growth to a certain degree.” Unlike the Roberts, Susan never mentioned hindrance derived from lack of ability to provide extras like internet in the home; in her observation the motivation of the teachers affects how well her child climbs the literacy ladder. In fact, Susan contends “the high school has great technological advantages, but horrible teacher selection makes the technology advantage obsolete.”

Until recently, Tanesha Dunbar worked part-time (she now works full-time) and before that she was a stay-at-home mom. In her role as a stay-at-home mom, she was able to socially connect with the parents of other school age children. Like most schoolyards, many parents use “pick up time” to discuss their child’s progress in school, athletics, church, or any other area they feel is significant to share and compete with other parents and their children. Tanesha says “In order to observe my children in their learning environment away from home, I have [always] made a special effort to be involved as a parent at home and at school. [Recently] I begun working full-time but my flexible schedule [a requirement Tanesha made in accepting the position] allow my continued parental involvement.” Thus, this way Tanesha is upholding engagement and involvement, both critical elements to ensuring literacy achievement for their sons.
The Dunbars, in ensuring competitiveness in the literacy arena for their children, choose to trade their economic place with a more promising investment, like literacy development for their children. “The relationship between literacy skills, economics, and the social characteristics of children in the same age bracket as my sons is economically the same. So, [ensuring they are observed in both setting] is a method of validating that are available resources are present” (Dunbar). Meaning, the Dunbars ensure that either one or both parents engage with their child and others parent and children in the classroom learning environment to ensure that their children remain in the top tier of the classroom literacy.

Specifically, the Dunbars ideology of engaging with the children at all levels of literacy advancement propels the children forward in the literacy quest. Aside from economics, the Dunbars invest in observing how their children acquire literacy advantages, and ensuring that they [the parents] are key in this process. However, Susan and Angie in their observations are hindered by economics and motivation, both of which lend a deficiency for literacy growth for their children’s educational advancement. Though both couples offer reasons for the lack of equanimity in their prospective regions, the perception of championing a solution is based on the economics of each of their households, which is discouraging.

*The Roberts’ Technology and Literacy Development*

In the preceding section technology access was significant in the Roberts’ household because of the various projects their son was required to complete. In Angie and Terrence’s opinion Internet service was key to keeping their son competitive with others in his age group. As recent as a year ago, the Roberts had no working computer in
the home. “We had a computer, but it was so old and outdated when you turn it on it would take ten minutes to maneuver to the web. My son nick-named the computer „snail fail” because once you get to the page it would re-boot, and you had start over.” Angie explains, “With just one income I could not just go out and purchase a new computer even though I knew not having one was hurting my son.” Limited finances limit material items, which help promote literacy progression, such as access to computers in the home. Angie admits „I know there are computers in the library, but the library is downtown, and the hours do not really fit into my schedule. In fact, in my city there is only one library, and most times when we go all the computers are in use.” Terrence adds “We finally had to sacrifice and buy a refurbished computer just to feel like at least the element of technology is present and having the access in the home for him is not only convenient but expected to keep him in the loop.” Susan Austin’s response was similar to Terrence’s in-that “having a computer in the home made life easier for her child’s research endeavors.”

The Dunbar’s Technology and Literacy Development

Conversely, the Dunbar’s home is equipped with wireless access, a desktop, an Android and I-phone technology, as well as an I-pod. Tanesha and Terrence contend:

Electronic literacy tools are essential in any home. These type tools are very important to the literacy growth of the family as a whole. My children are very literacy tech driven, and their knowledge of gadgets is often shared with my husband and I. Since technology attracts them to learning, I (we) use it [technology] as spring-board to accomplish many things with the children. But it is important to remember that although the
advantages of technology in literacy are enormous, it [world-wide web] comes with certain risks. (Dunbar Interview)

Although the Dunbars keep their home environment competitive for literacy development, Tanesha concurs:

My children use computers at home [but] they also use the computers at the public library as resources for class work. It is really my way of having them learn how to use a library catalog while including technology in a public arena. Librarians teach the children a different type of literacy skill - how to locate research for projects and I don’t pay a dime out of pocket for this service.

Not only is the service free, but it also allows an opportunity for literacy learning in a library setting. It is the Dunbar’s contention that the education shared by the librarian is some of the best help they can offer to their children.

Like I said before, my children are well read, but taking them to the library four or five times a month enhances their research literacy, and it also teaching them how to use library links to get books from all over the country. This is important to their literacy development because other branches have larger library, thus expanding our children’s literacy level. (Interview)

The technology advantage the Dunbar’s children have over the other families in this survey is that at their children’s school the children have access to computers all day long. In fact, “Each student at their school has an Ipad for use in the classroom, which was one of the reasons my husband and I moved to this school district.”
**Other Comments**

The interviews covered many different relationships involving economics and literacy development. Understanding the families’ definitions of middle-class, literacy, and the relationship of the former to development in their children was significant to this research. Although, each family has different definitions of each term, as well as different views on the impact of the recession on their child’s literacy growth, I wanted to examine other questions associated with literacy attainment in these middle-class families. For example, what specific skills and knowledge are needed for their child or children to comprehend and use information from any text? I also asked, what literacy development tools (i.e. study patterns, time spent studying, laptop access, website assistant, electronic notebooks, journals) on a daily basis are available for use in the absence of the parents? Additionally, the parents were asked to discuss a current project they observed their child working on.

*The Roberts*

Angie and Terrence approached the discussion on their child’s project by first admitting that their son often waited to the last minute to start his projects. Terrence said, “I often ask my son how long has he had his project? Usually, he has about two-weeks to complete each project. He gives us a notice of about two days.” When asked why does he think that happens? Angie responds, “Some of it is laziness on our son’s part but I think it is his resistance to ask for ‘one more thing’. He knows we are on a rather tight budget.” Angie admits that when her son waits to the last minute “he usually only gets an average grade on it”, which makes her “question his knowledge level in the subject area.” However, Terrence believes “his low grades may have a connection to waiting to the last
minute,” but he believes “that the low grade is a result of the child not totally understanding or comprehending what is expected” of the project. Angie, on the other hand, says in her observations:

I think my son understands all his assignment but he gets really frustrated when he wait so late to start something he has had for two weeks. He usually starts most of his projects doing some type of research to better understand which direction he wants to pursue. So I think that with a little or a lot of research he still gets the main point. However, I am not sure if he retaining such a cram session. I also, think that his fear of asking for additional resources like a tutor or a portable tablet to at least work on projects when he is not at home hinders his efforts. Therefore, our lack of ability to afford “convenience” stands in the way of knowledge and literacy skills. (Roberts and Roberts)

Mrs. Roberts also explains about her son’s love for music. As a member of the marching band for past two years she has watched her son obtain a music literacy that requires a different skill and a different financial strain.

I know this may be off topic a little, but since we are discussing literacy attainment my son spends an enormous amount of time enhancing his music literacy. As a middle-class family the financial burden placed on us as parents to help develop not only normal literacy growth [reading, writing, comprehension, technology] but the literacy attainment of music for my son”s literate enhancement is also part of the equation. I spent $400
for him to play with the band, and that does not include additional cost, like maintenance of the instrument. (Roberts and Roberts)

The previous comments from Angie introduce additional literacy attainment required to improve her son’s competitive spot in the literacy race.

As for current school projects the Roberts son, is “winding down” his sophomore year. Angie continues that standardized testing is “my son’s focus and has been [since] the end of the high school year.” As like many school districts the end of the year means standard testing. Angie says, “I think they work on reviewing what my son and other students have learned over the course of the year. Like right now they are reviewing the English portion of the test” (Roberts and Roberts). As Angie walks me through the process she explains her own process of learning how the students prepare. “I emailed his instructor to ask how I could help me with the test.” Standardized preparation is different in every state and on every grade level. Angie’s son, prepared by writing something called a „long response” to whatever topic the teacher gives. His response should be at least a page written in class” during school hours. This method allows for the teachers to respond and gauge where the students are. Parents in this instance can also ask the child what did they do in school to prepare for the state exam. Angie however contends, that their son typically does well on standardized test,” so we are “committed” to help in any way possible. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts” commitment to keeping their son competitive in the midst of a recession has its challenges, but their involvement in the process cannot go unnoticed.
The Austins

Susan’s approach to how her daughter attains specific literacy skills and knowledge understanding and comprehension using various texts is described slightly different from the Roberts’ scenario. Susan says, “What I try to do is tell her [my daughter] that first she must decide what it is she is supposed to get from this.” This approach may help with understanding the process of the assignment. She continues, “It is really important to focus on the objects of the project. Like, “What are you trying to learn?” It is Susan’s opinion that “Knowing how to read is important, but there are so many people who know how to read but cannot comprehend what they read. Many people in the middle-class “must read something over and over again just to get it. I don't know if that happens in other classes [of people], but I am guessing that it does not.” It is Susan’s contention “money buys a better education” and that “comprehension is the key to understanding” (Interview). Therefore, in their household she stresses comprehension and knowing what is required for the assignment.

Susan goes on to say “third grade is an important part of a child’s literacy development” because “that is [in her opinion] the time when her daughter learned how to focus on the main point of a story or sentence.” Susan’s thinks that her child’s third grade environment was critical to the enhancement of many of her skills she uses today. “Reading and writing are embedded in the learning process inside the classroom of every third-grader, or at least that was the case for my daughter.” Susan’s daughter does not know literacy development without the help of technology. Since primary school some type of electronics has played a significant role in her literacy journey. Susan’s daughter, unlike her mother is very familiar with the ins and outs of a library. She uses the
resources of the school’s library, as well as the public library to develop her understanding of new topics. According to Susan, much of her daughter’s access to public library material is accessed online. She is able to “ask a librarian” any question she may have about any project. Susan admits shamefully, “I just applied for a library card, and I think I have not had one for over ten years.” Unfortunately, it was not because Susan needed information for this helpful source that brought on her need to apply for a card; the initiation of the card was brought on while waiting to pick her daughter up from a school event.

In the library Susan made many observations. Although she is familiar with the library and its quiet policy, her reflection on her daughter’s study ritual differed drastically. The quiet environment in Susan’s mind stimulates “creative wonderings” but in her home her daughter always completed her assignment with some type of noise in the background. Her daughter created an environment by first “locking her bedroom door, turning the volume of her music player up,” and Susan assumes she then opens her notebook to whatever subject she has to tackle that day. She kind of does her own thing, unless she needs my help” (Interview). Susan contends, “my daughter must have some background noise, unlike the way I gained literacy enhancement. I had to have a quiet environment. Her daughter”s current project involves comparing themes from *Romeo and Juliet* with themes in Langston Hughes” poem “Dreams.” Susan”s participation in this project included helping with “writing an outline, establishing the goal of the project and helping [her daughter] understand how to compare two works by different authors in somewhat different genres” (Interview). The point of allowing her daughter to first isolate herself is so that Susan can determine her level of understanding about the project.
“Allowing her literacy to develop first independently and then seeking help if no progress is made gives her the opportunity to understand individual research before seeking collaborative help.” In Susan’s home she attempts to exhaust independence, thus building strong literacy attainment.

*The Dunbars*

Tanesha and Taylor take pride in knowing that their pre-teen sons are “well-read.” As card toting members not only of Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, and Half-Price Bookstores, they are proud members of their local library.

We don’t think our sons require extra tools to understand or hone additional skills needed for various genres of text. My children are well read and well informed young men. In fact, we would say that they are sharp thinkers and they analyze every sentence [sometimes] of what they are writing or reading. (Interview)

Tanesha further explains, “They use the desktop PC [personal computer] or their IPod Touch [to develop] skills” to be competitive with those in their age group. Locating additional assignment [for my sons] is as simple as downloading an application for that subject.” Moreover, “my boys have additional resources at school.”

Although the boys have the advantage of attending a public school with additional resources, the Dunbars do not solely rely on the school when developing literacy in their children. “We are grossly aware of middle-class families who are not afforded the public educational advantage that our sons have. But that advantage cannot be taken for granted as the only avenue to enhance a child’s literacy” (Tanesha). The Dunbars approach the
Tanesha says, “The [the boys] need a good environment for homework [inclusive of] quiet, support and supervision.”

Tanesha explains “my children are preparing for standardized testing in math and language” and that is challenge with three boys. She continues:

I have helped them prepare by working or reading and math comprehension because that is important to being successful on any standardized test. I accomplish this daily by giving them grade appropriate worksheets I have created from everything the boys have worked on in school this year. Some of the material I include I access from various Internet educational websites. I do not see it as overload but I see it as my opportunity to play a role in their literacy journey. (Interview)

Because Tanesha and Taylor’s perception of literacy growth is embedded in their parental engagement and not their middle-class status their role in ensuring literacy achievement in the home is qualified by the amount of time they spend with their sons on literacy development in all areas.

Summary

In summary, two of the families (the Roberts and Austins) feel the impact of the recession in the way their middle-class children attain literacy development. In the beginning of this project the Roberts and Austin families both had different definitions for middle-class, literacy, and its impact on their family literacy development. With such varying gaps for the middle-class, opinions about literacy attainment or its impact on their children’s development as a result of the recession, and also their differences in defining literacy, their comments were more about the obstacles that hold them and their
family down. Each family’s perception was helpful in looking at the issue, but as far as finding a solution to better prepare their family in their literacy development during difficult economic times--they offer little suggestions.

The Dunbars could offer very little solutions because they, though in a lower tax bracket then five years ago, took a different approach. The biggest hurdle for Tanesha and Taylor was letting their private school education go for their children and trading it for a public school education. This move, though based on their economic state, did not change how their son’s literacy developed. In fact, what the change created was a more active role on the parents” part in ensuring their economic adjustment did not alter or impact the literacy attainment of the children. The Dunbars decided, although once they encompassed an income that afforded a private school education for their sons, that was distant memory; they now would attempt to get all they could from the public education system, and in their home life they would provide the privatized education their family was accustomed to. Their responses exemplify this ideology, thus lessening the impact of economics on the literacy development of their children.

The Roberts, the Austins and the Dunbars all consider themselves as middle-class. However, their approach to literacy development based on their economic status differs greatly. Various answers to the numerous questions about education, literacy development, employment, class status, and opinions on the school’s roles in this process, yielded an array of answers. Now that the results of each family’s responses have been examined, I will move on to answering my primary research question--has the recent crisis regarding the economy created a shift that affects how middle class family's gain access to literacy development in middle-class families? Has the economic decline
hindered how family literacy development matures in families? Additionally, will the
current state of the economy alter the approach of middle-class parental involvement in
obtaining literacy growth?
CHAPTER V
FINDINGS: THE ROBERTS, AUSTIN AND DUNBAR FAMILIES

Originally, the question propelling my research was if middle-class families are the group most affected by the economic downturn then how (if any) has the crisis changed the way middle-class families’ access literacy development. Since economics historically has been linked to improving life and education, I set out to examine the group of people most affected by the recession. While analyzing the results of the study, another question came to mind: If some middle-class families have to work more jobs, attend school, and clothe and feed their children how could they successfully remain engaged in their family’s literacy attainment?

*The Roberts*

Out of all the families the Roberts had a significantly higher hurdle to climb. Based on the evidence provided by Angie and Terrence, maintaining middle-class was slowly fading. The comments about occasional Internet access in the home, one car and the strain produced as results of their child’s school band involvement, suggest that they may or may not be able to attain a middle-class status. Looming over their head is this unpaid rent payment and the increasing debts of education.

Many of their responses like “we had a computer, but it was so old and outdated” and “I wish I would have had the funds” speaks volumes about the impact of economics
on this family’s literacy growth. Exhibiting the physical characteristics of a middle-class environment the Roberts’ comments on economics joblessness, and community, suggest that this family has made some adjustments that hinder their child’s literacy achievement.

Linda Flower discusses the Roberts “feeling with” position in her book *Community Literacy and Rhetoric of Public Engagement*. Flower’s contends, “when universities ask the questions „Why are we here? What are we doing?” the answers supplied by logics of mission, expertise, and compassion challenge us to look thoughtfully at the relationships and the practices” that brought us to this point (107). The Roberts family is facing adjusting to the harsh realities of answers to the questions of why and what. The transformation for this family is difficult but the reality of literacy success for their son should not be at risk.

Angie exhibits absolute frustration when her son has no technology access because she knows that the world of the Internet opens more doors to research and enhancement for her son. The Internet is the key to all levels of scholarly research on any topic he is studying. In the Roberts interview it was obvious that they disagreed on the damage lack of access to technology could have on their child’s literacy growth, but this was important to Angie because she was also a student. The connection to Internet was two-fold for Angie--it would improve (her and their son) literacy development.

It is clear if the recession does not make a turn for the better the Roberts family will make further adjustments. The adjustments they make will determine how their son’s literacy growth is enhanced. Although their son’s school environment is conducive to gain daily literacy enhancement; the region of South Carolina historically suffers with low performing schools. Thus, with difficulties at home in the literacy achievement
settings and at school, it is evident that their son may fall behind his peers in his literacy development quest.

For the Roberts, money plays a key role in how they access technology, social situations, and school events. The economic collapse challenges most social classes, but it has crippled this middle-class family. In short, the Roberts are experiencing the effects of the recession. The desire to access additional literacy attainment for their son’s growth is currently oppressed by their economic situation. The significant economic disparity has transformed how the Roberts family seeks assistance for the family’s literacy progression. Their quest for pedagogical implementation is hindered by the state of the economic crisis. Since their outflow is more than their inflow strengthening their literacy and that of their son’s is not within reach. Or is it?

The process for the Roberts would involve seeking a solution. Though the Roberts are aware of community they lack the initiative to incorporate community in the literacy achievement of their son. Flower contends, “difference exists not just in simple distinctions, such as, town/gown, rich/poor, black/white, but also in the alternative discourses, literate practices, goals, and values brought to an inquiry” (110). Thus, economics places the Roberts in a discourse that hinders the way seek literacy attainment for their son.

The Austins

The Austins, unlike the Roberts, consider themselves as lower middle-class. With both parents working full-time jobs and attending school full-time they approach literacy attainment for their family using a self-sufficient agenda. Therefore, this family is more aware of community and politics than the Roberts family. For example, Susan talks about
“emergency levies” and their impact on her child’s school education. Susan also suggests that “low wages for teachers” place her child at a disadvantage in the quest for higher literacy achievement. Susan, also unlike the Roberts, is starkly aware that regional changes affect the level of literacy growth with her child. For example, moving from a small southern affluent city to Ohio’s poorly funded school district affected the way her daughter approaches literacy attainment. The lack of interest observed in the teachers reflects on how her daughter advances in literacy success.

In other words, Susan is aware that many community and political factors affect how she and her family obtain literacy growth. Angie and Terrence were more focused on their family’s situation inside the home, rather than in a community setting. Susan, on the other hand was frustrated by the lack of funding afforded to her child’s district, which she concludes “will give my child a better literacy learning environment” if the funding increases teachers’ salaries.

Although Susan is as active as she can be in engaging with her daughter’s literacy journey. She expresses concerns about not spending more time in ensuring her daughter’s literacy gain is not affected by the downturn. However, both parents must work full-time in order to remain a part of the middle-class America. Susan is aware that five-years ago it took two incomes to be comfortable, but since 2008 those two incomes do not hold the same value. Therefore, the Austins are aware that in order to have a successful child that comprehends, analyzes, and gains literacy success there must be some dynamics in place. For instance, access to technology, tutors, or text must be available consistently. Teaching their daughter the importance of independent learning in their home is essential to her literacy development because the economy pressure the parents are under to
maintain a job, and upgrade their own literacy development is necessary in maintaining their economic status.

Logically, the Austins are aware of community concerns and social practices of those within their middle-class community, but the answer to the question of what and why are they are here, is not answered (107). Culturally this family is connected, but the methods of independence that is imposed on their child dictates assurance that her literacy success will be affected in the long term. As Flower’s suggests “strength also poses a problem,” and the literacy practices with the Austins daughter is depended on her independence of obtaining literacy success not guided by engagement from the parents (107).

*The Dunbars*

Having obvious distinguishable differences from the Roberts and Austin families, except status, the Dunbars are America’s middle-class family. So what do I mean by that? Although the Dunbars self-assess as middle-class, they accept diversions for what they are, but they always find their way back to the main road. When listening to the political rhetoric about middle-class characteristics the Dunbars fit into that definition. The Roberts and Austin family’s definition of middle-class in America varied about $20,000 less than the Dunbar’s. That salary gap alone distinguishes the Dunbars as at the upper end of the middle-class equality. Based on their definition of joint salaries in upwards of six figures provided by the Dunbars, and according to reports provided by the Census Bureau their income places them in the upper middle-class spectrum.

The Dunbars though obviously affected by the economic crisis, contend, “They have not noticed an impact on literacy as a result of the economic downturn.” Although
they moved their children from private education to public education they upped the ante with their engagement in ensuring literacy growth with their children. For example, the Dunbars spend time “planning learning activities that improve literacy for the boys.” In addition, the Dunbars seek literacy enhancement through “libraries, museums, and bookstore events” that require no money.

Moreover, the Dunbars take extra-time to instill the importance of “current, age appropriate news events, political jargon, and technology progression” that occurs daily in the world. They use every opportunity to expand their children’s growth in science, math, language, and life. They accomplish this by focusing less on the middle-class position, job, or community. Instead, their energy and engagement is on the development of their children’s literacy success.

Summary

When I started this project the families involved were eager to answer questions about how (if any) the economic crisis affected their families. In the beginning, I assumed each family in one way or another would have a deficiency in literacy attainment as a result of the downturn. Surprisingly, only the Roberts and the Austins have noticed ways in which the economy has affected the literacy development of their children. First, the Roberts at the lower end of middle-class spectrum seek daily ways for just to survive. By this I mean, because of Angie’s job loss, though the dichotomy of the family structure has not changed, the input has. Their daily routine is on everyday living necessities and which bill will be juggled this month. Their engagement in the growth of their son is minimal at best, thus indicating that the state of the economics has crippled the way this family accesses literacy development. Though the Dunbars have suggested “free”
approaches to gaining literacy enhancement, the Roberts are so overwhelmed with life issues they have no room for creative methods to literacy growth for their son. Therefore, the economics of this family certainly impacts the way they gain access to literacy achievement for their son. Thus, Flower’s says, “Cornel West calls his readers to affirm the agency and capability of the powerless--of the socially disenfranchised people that we tend to represent as victims, clients, or objects of someone else’s oppression or our charity” (188). Yet, are the Roberts really in control of their own destiny, and that of their sons? (Flower188). Establishing a resolve for their own fate will assist the parents in a resolve to ensure equality in literacy attainment for their son.

Secondly, the Austin’s middle-class obstacle is evident in the amount of time they have for engagement in the literacy practice with their child. In order to keep their place in middle-class circles or upgrade their position in the majority middle, it is pertinent for both parents to accomplish obtaining finances and obtaining an education. At the risk of loss is their engagement in the learning acquisition of their family. Simply put, the Austins play as active of a role as possible in the literacy enhancement of their daughter. Since “economics has made it impossible to live above the poverty line on one income, or even middle-class” thus, the reason both parents work full-time. Susan and John choose to multitask in hopes that the literacy development of their child is not at stake.

Third, the Dunbars at the high-end of middle-class, though impacted by the crisis, have chosen to associate the decline with their choice of school changes. This family is extremely engaged in the literacy attainment of their family more so than the other two families. Both Tanesha and Taylor work white collar jobs that afford them “flexible schedules” to participate in the public learning environment at their children’s school.
Throughout my interviews and observation I pondered why were the Dunbars more physically engaged than the Roberts and the Austins in the literacy achievement of their children?

The Dunbars were more determined to achieve equanimity for the literacy growth of their sons. In a way they approached the idea of literacy attainment like a competition. In fact, Tanesha said, “Although the children had to move to public education, it didn’t mean that they would be less educated. It only meant the individual attention they received in school would be lessened.” So, the economy only affected their economics slightly, but it in no way affected how her children acquired literacy, mastery or achievement.
CHAPTER VI

IMPLICATIONS

Initially, this study was intended to examine lower middle-class families and the access (or lack thereof) they have when obtaining literacy development since the economic crisis. However, what this study revealed was literacy attainment has little to do with the economic state of one’s environment, but it has everything to do with how families handle the challenges that could potentially affect the literacy growth of their children. Additionally, the study unveiled that the social class of middle-class families regardless of where they are on the chart is defined by not the political characteristics, but by the determination to ensure their children have the same, if not a better place in literacy achievement among others in their age group, class, and community. The next will explore the limitations of this study.

Limitations of the Study

Like many studies there are shortcomings and limitations. This study is no different. In fact, one noticeable limitation is the size classification of middle-class and the gap of income difference is enormous. The salary ranges of this studies families are in upwards of $20,000 differences, which leans an advantage for the children of the family in the upper middle-class category. The second obstacle was related to time. If I had followed these families before the economic crisis up to and during the crisis, I would have been able to examine specifically how this downturn impacted the literacy of the child(ren) since it’s onset in 2008. A longer study would have allotted more data
collection in other regions, more interviews with the family and the teachers of those regions, thus having a stronger gauge on progression (or lack of) due to literacy gains in middle-class families. My anticipation of one month should have been one year with the families. This would have yielded more data and a clearer understanding of the obstacles facing literacy in middle-class families brought on by the recession. Thirdly, additional families in different regions would have provided a better view of the economic impact of the literacy in middle-class families in America. However, it was important to keep this study small enough to complete it in accordance with the time frame allotted for this project. Finally, because motivation, aspiration, and expectation are different in every household, it was difficult to measure the parents in a group type setting.

In summary, this study’s focus is on three families in three regions. The Ohio region is Middle West, South Carolina is called the South Atlantic region, and Texas is the Southern region (Regions of the United States: Regions Defined). According to the Regions Defined website there are a total of 16 regions in the United States. The study examines one family in three regions out of 16, thus collecting only data amounting to $3/16^{th}$ of the total population in these various regions. The percentile of families interviewed does not provide adequate representation of all regions, or for that matter the region involved. It would be valuable to pool a larger number of participants including teachers and administrators inside those communities from each region to adequately evaluate the impact of the economic downturn on the middle-class in all regions. Following this section are the results of the study.
The Families

After the outcomes and discoveries of this study, the Roberts, Austins and Dunbars can learn several important techniques to ensure that their child’s literacy achievement is attained, regardless of the economic decline. First, parents not only need to make adjustments to outcomes of income deficit, but as a result of the dynamic of income loss, they must search alternative ways to ensure their child’s literacy development. For example, the restraints of income in the Roberts’ household is certainly a road block on the journey for literacy attainment; but the detour of researching alternative ways like the importance of public library membership is essential in literacy growth for the family. This creative approach would instill a value in the child that would last for a lifetime. Therefore, teaching the child that economic levity is certainly valuable and attainable is essential, but if financial resources are not available there exists additional ways to obtain the same or better results for literacy attainment. “Rhetoric places its bets on the power of transformative knowledge,” and when the Roberts engage in alternative methods to ensure consistence in literacy growth then it that will impact how well their child attains literacy development (Flower).

Determining how their child obtains literacy development is difficult for the Austins because discourse about literacy projects only take place if their child seeks their help on a project. Dialogue between parent and child does not occur spontaneously because the parent’s schedules do not allow spontaneity. Thus, their daughter’s literacy achievement is at risk of falling below her peers. Not because of economics, per se, but because of the parent’s lack of engagement. Opening the door to literacy achievement for the Austins daughter will give them an insight on the development of their child’s literacy
growth from year to year. Learning better time management, listening and speaking methods when engaging in discussion with their daughter (Flower), will establish consistent support not sporadic support, thus allowing the parents an insight on their daughter knowledge, attainment and literacy journey.

The Dunbars, rival in the knowledge and idea that they are providing every method possible for the literacy achievement of their sons. Since enrolling their sons in public schools, it is their assessment that the role of the parent is engagement in all aspects of their education and especially the area of literacy. In addition to engagement, the Dunbars technique reflects one similar to the John Dewey approach--reflection, progression, questioning, and critical intelligence--in the literacy achievement of their sons (Fishman). In the parents” reflection it is essential to make an obvious difference in the lives of their sons. Included is not a total dismissal of middle-class by definition, but rather a prioritized focus on literacy achievement, thus moving social class status out of the discourse.

Secondly, an implication for the Roberts” is increasing their role inside their community. Isolation from community is not value for literacy achievement. The Roberts” focus on economics overshadows the need to seek methods that assist in the development of their child”s literacy. A possible solution would be active engagement in community events, neighborhood centers, and public agencies that offer additional resources such as “free” tutoring, financial investment dialogue”s, and discourse about how to maneuver the pitfalls associated with the decline in economics and employment. Such engagement in community will “uncover the hidden interpretive logics and situated
knowledge of others,” thus increasing the progression of their child’s literacy formation (Flower).

Studying the Austins formation of literacy in community engagement was challenging. The literacy of their daughter is primarily obtained independently with little to no supervision. Though the parents are engaged with community government issues, they fail to include their daughter in learning about issues within community that can impact her literacy achievement. The independent nature of their child provides a false perception about individual knowledge of literacy attainment in the “context of literate practices” (Flower). Since an economic recession forces the parents to work full-time while attending higher-education classes to improve their economic state, the literacy growth of their daughter is mostly self-directed. Therefore, leaving the literacy engagement of their daughter, to the responsibility of the community, and school. I do not know of reasons whether this method stimulates literacy achievement or hinders their daughter in enormous ways.

In the case of the Dunbars community engagement, and the formation of literacy for their sons, both are inclusive of one another. They rely heavily on researchers inside public libraries and they take full advantage of story time, catalogue clarification teaching, and community theatre. An implication for the Dunbars is to have discourse in their community or an online community about what resources that are available to middle-class families affected by the economic crises. Since this couple sort different avenues to continue to provide top-notch literacy attainment for their sons they would be a positive resource for other family’s facing the dilemma of literacy attainment. Hence,
acknowledge the “need for a theoretical framework” for middle-class families to access literacy achievement regardless of economics (Flower).

Third, a reflection on class opportunities and one’s place within the middle-class discourse is essential to this study. When comparing the interviews of the Roberts’, Austin and Dunbar’s middle-class definitions two of the families’ responses were based solely on income. However, the Dunbars saw middle-class as not only income but also a joint effort of the parents to achieve educational attainment for their family. In fact, the Dunbars viewed literacy attainment significantly more relevant to life then their status in the social realm of community. Constantly seeking additional resources, the Dunbars exhausted their efforts in placing the literacy achievement of their sons as the highest component in their household. At the simplest approach the Dunbar’s resisted embracing oppressive ideologies that would hinder the literate progression of their children.

In the case study of the Dunbars creativity produce numerous ways to increase literacy through discourse, engagement, and involvement. Focusing on comprehension is key in the attainment of literacy growth, and the Dunbars approach comprehension with a unique technique. Regardless to what the boys are during, the parents are sure to engage their children in a dialogue about the discussion and in that process they are able to ascertain whether or not the children are retaining, analyzing and understanding the topic. Simply, the Dunbars make concentrated efforts to make a difference in the literacy development of their children, regardless to the current recession. “The rhetoric of making a difference is the work of empowered people” (Flower). The Dunbar’s offer their empowerment to their sons through engagement.
Discovering implications for the Austins' social class opportunities was easy. They are relaxed in their middle-class environment and social class status only exists in the community. They choose not to seek any free programs to support literacy growth for their daughter because those programs are for “others” that really need them. “When we encounter difference, we assume deficits” (Flower). Hence, a deficit in the Austin family is seeking the help in the first place. In other words, inside the home their daughter is taught to be independent because of the time management schedule in the home is a high priority. In most cases the Austins conveniently ask if homework is complete rather then check homework. When tracking their daughter’s progress in school, they simply log on to the school’s website. I suggest that in order to obtain an accurate analysis of literacy attainment for the daughter, an engaging conversation should take place with both the child and all “others” involved in helping her gain literacy attainment. If the Austin’s included a fifteen-minute window in which both parents at different times during the day engaged in discourse, then their daughter would benefit from thirty minutes of support in each day. Thus, Susan and John would have an insight on their daughter’s literacy progression first hand. Therefore, opening the discourse to improve their child’s literacy comprehension is critical to building her literacy confidence and literacy achievement.

In summary, future research should examine literacy achievement, success, and attainment of middle-class families’ post-the-recession. In its exploration, research should examine not only the families in this study but also additional families within the regions of this study and also include other regions. Following how middle-class families transform after the impact of economics will be crucial to the literacy achievement of future generations. Particularly, examining two of the family’s from this study who are
pursuing higher education degrees, and exploring how or if they increase literacy engagement with their children? It would also be valuable if future research follows the technique used by the Dunbars similar to Dewey's ideology of “reflective thinking” (Fishman 58). Will Dewey’s method “be unable to develop students’” moral judgment?” as some scholars suggest (Fishman). What role (if any) does moral judgment play in literacy attainment of middle-class families post-recession? Finally, how do the restraints imposed on families during the recession impact the literacy achievement of middle-class families post-recession? Researching these questions will provide information on the families in this study and also examine additional post-recession families. Following the recession this information will provide a to adequate scale as to whether economics impacts literacy attainment in middle-class families’ literacy development.
CHAPTER VII
CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the impact of the economy of the literacy development in middle-class families. The goal of the study was to examine if the recession had any impact on the literacy development, attainment or achievement for middle-class families. In the process of researching, I realized that I examined only a snapshot of middle-class population because I only studied three families from the largest social class in America. However, in that snapshot, I discovered that each family that self-defined as middle-class had a different definition of what constitutes middle-class classification. The difference in assimilation to middle-class between the three families derived mostly with community, region, education, ethnicity, and expectation. One family focused on the literacy attainment and achievement of their sons, and placed other attributes below the growth of their son’s literate space. This occurred not because they were at the high-end classification of middle-class or resisted acknowledging in some way they also felt the backlash of the economic crises; but because they are committed to engagement and reflection with their children.

The relationship between the families struggling to make ends meet and the family adjusting to the change of economics is drive, motivation, and creativity. Families that seek opportunities for attainment of literacy development beyond their child’s school are preparing and ensuring their children a secure advantage in the literacy race.
A race, which all children in this country can be active participants if given an equal opportunity to advance. Equanimity does not always exist in public education, but the rules of engagement do not cost a penny. Engagement may cost more time requirements of parents, but engagement in a sense can replace economics, if approached delicately. I discovered that one family had replaced economics with engagement, and they had did this successfully.

Ultimately, this research supports the typical analogy associated with people in middle-class communities on each level of status--lower, middle, and upper middle-class, thus, depending which category a family belongs to the family is defined by that category and the economics of said category. For example, the parents from the lower middle-class either had trouble seeking or didn’t bother seeking resources that would ensure that their child’s literacy progression was achieved or being attained. Taking race from the equation is can be appropriate, but replacing it with helplessness based on economics is also appropriate. Furthermore, when discussing middle-class, like the middle child syndrome characteristics (self-sufficient, independent, and only noticed when needed) families in the category survive on instinct, independence, and normalcy. Economics are significant but it does not define their place in social class, or achievement of any kind. Upper middle-class families exhaust efforts in literacy growth, because that is how they climbed the latter of achievement--through hard work and many nights of exhaustion. Finally, literacy development helps children critically analyze, examine, and explore not just text, but life. Because of these beneficial elements of literacy attainment for our children, we must ensure that the economic crisis” that has place middle-class families in the core of a bitter debate, does not impact the literacy achievement of our families. We
must as middle-class participants engage, create, encourage, and champion a progressive charge for the equality in literacy development regardless to social class.
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APPENDIX A

PARENTAL APPLICATION TO PARTICIPATE

1. What is your age?

2. What is your marital status?

3. Do you have any children? What are their ages?

4. Discuss your academic/educational journey?

5. Describe your community? Describe your role in community engagement?

6. Describe your child”s school academic background?

7. Describe your perception of the economic scale of the parents whose children
   attend school with your child?

8. What goals have you set for your children and why?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of middle class?
2. Do you consider yourself middle-class? Why or Why not?
3. What is your definition of literacy?
4. How do your family’s literacy skills compare to those within your same or other social setting?
5. What is the relationship between the literacy skills of your child before the economic downturn? Currently?
6. Describe how the current economic crisis has affected the literacy achievement of your child.
7. Can you name ways that the economic downturn has affected your family’s access to education?
8. How or have you ever been involved with your child’s education or school? In what way?
9. In your opinion how has the economic downturn affected the literacy progression of your child in school?
10. When observing your child, what is the relationship between the literacy and social skills of your child and those of others children in the same age, group, class and economic community.
11. How important are literacy tools in your assessment of your child’s growth as a literate person? For example, libraries, community centers, supervision, multimedia, or social sites) Explain? How has your child access to these tools change (if any) since the downturn?
12. What knowledge and skills are needed or (that you think your child possesses) for your child to understand comprehend and use information obtained from texts of any kind? For example, editorials, news stories, poems, fiction and the Internet?
13. Setting or environment for many children is the “key” to expanding literacy development. Describe a typical at home environment during study time?

14. What role has privacy played in the amount of time your child spends focusing on literacy development? Writing? Reading? Technology?

15. What school project is your child currently working on? What is your role in this developing project?

16. In your observation (of your child), describe your child’s writing process? What is your involvement?

17. In your observation, how much of the child’s process is affected by the economic downturn? If any. For example, lack of access to literacy development tools, cut backs on library funding, personal funding, public funding and public technology access.