WHAT PARENTS EXPERIENCE AS THEY NAVIGATE
HOME AND SCHOOL SHARED LITERACY PRACTICES
WITH THEIR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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By
Elizabeth Ritz
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A dissertation written by

Elizabeth Ritz

B.S.Ed., Kent State University, 1986

M.A.Ed., Baldwin-Wallace University, 1993

Ph.D., Kent State University, 2017

Approved by

_________________________________, Co-Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
William Bintz

_________________________________, Co-Director, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Timothy Rasinski

_________________________________, Member, Doctoral Dissertation Committee
Rebecca McElfresh

Accepted by

_________________________________, Director, School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies
Alexa Sandmann

_________________________________, Dean, College and Graduate School
James Hannon of Education, Health, and Human Services
WHAT PARENTS EXPERIENCE AS THEY NAVIGATE HOME AND SCHOOL SHARED LITERACY PRACTICES WITH THEIR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY (178 pp.)

Co-Directors of Dissertation: William P. Bintz, Ph.D.
Timothy V. Rasinski, Ph.D.

How six parents navigated home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children was the focus of this study. Participants’ lived stories were examined in three dimensions of space—backward–forward, inward–outward, and situated in place. Narrative inquiry yielded insights into the ways they prepared and assisted their children in navigating home and school literacy practices.

Findings from this narrative study are important to reduce the ambiguity parents perceive with regard to their role in preparing their children for formal schooling. Parents, researchers, and educators often have conflicting ideas about what role parents play as first teachers as well as differing perceptions about the value placed upon that role as a result of personal histories, lived experiences, and other cultural or economic factors.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to recognize my husband Dean Ritz, who suggested I return to school to earn my Ph.D. when my daughters were very young. Although doing so was impossible at the time, his suggestion rekindled a vision that I had held in my heart for many years. Words cannot accurately express the gratitude I feel for his unending support for my work and his incredible patience when I was so often unavailable while working to achieve this goal.

My daughters Ana and Tia were young girls when I began this journey, and they are now young women. They endured the loss of my attention and financial advantages as I have worked toward the completion of this degree. Knowing that they believed in me motivated and energized me to persevere. Thank you, Ana, for your understanding kindness and knowing how to help me stay on task. Thank you, Tia, for pulling no punches and refusing to accept any excuses. I am grateful for their patience as I worked toward my goal, and no words can perfectly describe my appreciation for their love and support.

My parents Barbara and William Coleman laid the foundation for me to achieve an advanced degree. They met and fell in love as undergraduates and supported each other through attainment of graduate degrees. Committed “lifelong learners,” they greet each day as one in which to seek and learn. I hope I have made you both proud.

Mom and Dad provided my brothers and me with the context in which to grow and learn. This created a desire in me for lifelong learning. As I detailed in the Author’s Story in Chapter 4, learning was embedded in my home life and continues to influence
every step I take today. By living their professional lives in public education, they unintentionally created a desire in me to follow in their footsteps. Both earned graduate degrees and were exceptionally qualified, but neither had the desire at the right time in their lives to obtain terminal degrees. I would like to think that my Ph.D. is the continuation of my formal education and in some small way theirs as well.

I must mention some of my teachers who impacted my thinking and pushed me along the way. Nancy Sharbaugh and Peggy Isaly gave me a good literacy foundation in elementary school. Mr. Davis made English lessons fun with his zany sense of humor and our Verb Bird art projects in fifth grade. In middle school Elizabeth Usher introduced me to Shakespeare, and I developed a lifelong love for poetry, which was further deepened with Mr. Saur in high school. Doc Beebe found a way to make world history come alive. In graduate school, Dr. Wise encouraged me to further develop my own collection of children’s literature. I am sure I have missed many who inspired me to learn more and ultimately influenced my desire to teach others.

As a new adjunct instructor, working to catch up with recent changes in education, I found myself researching literacy at a local bookstore. Time and again, I found myself choosing literacy materials written by Tim Rasinski. I was drawn to his common-sense approach to teaching and his appreciation of real teachers and the value of their work. When I realized that Tim was at Kent State University, my interest in pursuing my doctorate there increased. Meeting Tim several years later, I was struck by his humility and depth of knowledge on all things literacy.
Upon taking my first round of classes, I met Bill Bintz, who was the instructor in one of my literacy courses. I felt an immediate kinship with Bill because of his sense of humor and his relaxed approach to addressing complicated education issues; in addition, Bill’s depth of knowledge has been an immeasurable benefit in my coursework and graduate assistant work as well as during the writing process. Thank you, Bill, for your guidance from start to finish.

Rebecca McElfresh and I became acquainted early in my career when she and I were both classroom teachers at Roosevelt Elementary School. Several years later she became the principal there and led the staff in several progressive initiatives. I was delighted when we became reacquainted because I was in the process of completing my dissertation. Rebecca lent her mentorship, her humor, and her critical eye to this manuscript; and I would not have successfully completed this work without her unending friendship and guidance.

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Completing this manuscript would have been impossible without my years of experience teaching first and second grades. The students and their families whom I encountered during this time influenced my interest in family literacy. I related one of these encounters in my first vignette in Chapter 1, in which I related a conversation I had with the mother of a first-grade student of mine. This conversation resonated with me and influenced my practice over the years, ultimately leading me to writing this dissertation. I am indebted to this mother, who remains nameless, for her simple yet concise statement. Many students and their parents have contributed to what I know about education and the importance of the family in that role. I deeply appreciate their
willingness to share their children with me and to entrust me not only with their early learning but also with personal family details, facilitating my growth and understanding of the importance of the family in a child’s learning.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Problem

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people. (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3)

As a relatively new classroom teacher, I was in the middle of a parent–teacher conference with a mother of one of my first-grade students in the elementary school in the working-class community where I taught. Wanting to communicate the idea that we were a team, working together toward her son’s academic success, I asked what she thought would help motivate her son to read. Her response—“I’m not sure, Miss Coleman. You’re the expert!”—took me by surprise. I had graduated from college only recently, and with barely a few years of teaching experience under my belt, I hardly felt like an expert. I felt as if her trust—albeit appreciated—was a bit misplaced. I wondered why this mother placed so much value on my position as her son’s teacher and so little on her own role as his parent. This scenario replayed itself often during my years as an early childhood educator. Although it became a reoccurring theme, I must admit I always found the situation uncomfortable if not a little disheartening.

When my twins were born, I resigned from my teaching position to devote myself to full-time parenting. When my daughters entered kindergarten, I tutored struggling
elementary students in my middle-class community. As I met with parents, I explained the necessity for us to work together if reading success were to be achieved, a plan to which most parents readily agreed. While assessing and instructing struggling students, gaps in learning often became apparent to me. I believe I was compassionate as we discussed issues and their possible origins, but I found that some parents were disappointed with their own efforts in assisting their children in learning to read. “I should have read to him more” or “I should have realized that her ear infections were causing a learning delay” are typical of what I heard. Again I found myself reassuring parents who had done their best in preparing their son or daughter for school that a learning concern would not entirely define their child.

Some years later as a graduate student, I conducted a ministudy of family literacy with four middle-class families. I asked, “How do parents describe the reading routines they use with their own children?” Parents were asked to describe the routines they followed and the amount of time they spent reading with their children as well as what they believed were the benefits of family book sharing. As expected, all parents used reading at bedtime on a regular basis, usually nightly. Parents used the public library to borrow books that they read to their children and that their children read independently. Books were often given as gifts for birthdays and holidays, and an abundance of reading materials available in these homes. Parents said they believed the benefits of book sharing included success in school and their children’s overall enjoyment of reading.

A surprising finding was that three of the four parents mentioned their unease about knowing how to read with their children. One said, “But again like I said, I feel
like sometimes I struggle with am I doing the right things, you know, to help them? Just because I don’t know what I—you know—I don’t know the right things to do.”

After I’d assured another parent that reading with her children three or four times weekly was beneficial, she responded, “I mean, I don’t know—you don’t know if you’re doing anything right. You know what I mean? I don’t have any specialty in reading. I don’t know anything about—I just don’t know.”

A third parent mentioned that her intention was to read nightly with her children, but that it often didn’t happen. She hoped to try to do so regularly in the near future. Interestingly, these three parents were Caucasian and college educated with a reported total family income of over $100,000 per year. These were middle-class parents with arguably privileged lifestyles.

These vignettes illustrate a theme that I observed several times throughout my teaching career in conversations with parents of students from various backgrounds with whom I have worked. Most parents understood that reading with their children before formal schooling began is important and that once children entered the structured learning environment of elementary school, informal literacy support at home must continue. What was less clear to parents is whether this literacy support is “enough” and considered “right” by the educators who direct their children’s learning. Although parents seemed to accept the importance of shared literacy at home, considerable uncertainty about what this means and whether the family literacy their children encountered under their guidance was acceptable to teachers and administrators who retained authority in the structure of most schools.
In the first anecdote above, the mother saw our association as an unbalanced relationship in which I held the authority to influence her son’s learning. In this hierarchical context, the boy’s parent determined that she could not assist me with useful information because I was the expert. In the next anecdote, as I worked with the parents of children whom I tutored, some parents berated themselves for not having done enough to ensure the academic success of their children. In the final scenario above, although parents were advantaged both academically and economically, they struggled with feelings of inadequacy about their efforts with their children. These three stories shared a similarity irrespective of economic or educational factors; the parents I encountered were unsure about the value of work they had done with their children and whether or not it was indeed right or enough.

Perhaps parents have reason to be confused: They often receive mixed messages about their role in family literacy. For example, in *Read Aloud Handbook* Trelease (2006) asserted that a parent who waits until children are about to enter kindergarten to read aloud to them may have waited too long. Imagine a well-intentioned parent reading Trelease’s book for insights on preparing her child for school only to become discouraged, thinking she’d missed a crucial opportunity to do so. Trelease (2006) confirmed that beginning or continuing to read aloud at any age is beneficial. In fact, parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundation for learning to read. A parent is a child’s first guide through a vast and unfamiliar world. A parent is a child’s first mentor on what words mean and how to mean things with words. A parent is a child’s first tutor in unraveling the fascinating puzzle of
written language. A parent is a child’s one enduring source of faith that somehow, sooner or later, he or she will become a good reader. (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 27)

Finally, even a U. S. President emphasized the importance of parents in a child’s learning and specifically in learning to read:

To parents, we can’t tell our kids to do well in school and then fail to support them when they get home. You can’t just contract out parenting. For our kids to excel, we have to accept our responsibility to help them learn. That means putting away the Xbox and putting our kids to bed at a reasonable hour. It means attending those parent–teacher conferences and reading to our children and helping them with their homework.

—President Barack Obama (U. S. Department of Education, 2010)

Although most literacy experts have agreed with the previous statement by the President, the question to ask might be how many well-intentioned parents are not home in the evening to support their children as they complete homework, to read to them, or to make sure they get to bed at a reasonable hour? Imagine the angst of a parent who must choose between taking a job that ensures economic survival for the family and being present at night to tuck her child into bed.

Granted, a parent’s support cannot be underestimated as central to a child’s literacy success in the home and later in school (Anderson et al., 1985; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011; Durkin, 1966, 1974; Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Jalongo, 2014). The learning environment and experiences parents provide for
their children serve as a launching point for the literacy learning initiated during the early childhood years that persists throughout a child’s lifetime (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Calkins, 1997; Jalongo, 2014; D. Miller, 2002).

Parents can provide the attitude, the environment, and valuable learning experiences in the home that lay the foundation for literacy (Jalongo, 2014). The message is that parents and what they do with their children is important; however, what is missing is the perspective of parents. My purpose in this paper was to examine through the lens of narrative researcher the experiences of parents as they navigate home and school literacy practices with their preschool children. This study was carried out using a narrative inquiry approach to understand how parents experience literacy with their preschool children as they share their storied understandings.

**The Larger Problem: Dissonance Between Home and School**

Researchers have agreed that children whose parents provide the foundation for literacy learning at home will benefit when they enter the learning environment of a structured classroom (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Durkin, 1966; Jalongo, 2014; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002; Trelease, 2006). When questioned, however, some parents were unable to explain how they supported their children as they acquired literacy skills (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In fact, literacy learning often occurs through informal daily activities embedded in the lives of families (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Calkins, 1997; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Jalongo, 2014; Taylor, 1983, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), and parents can be unaware as to how these activities support literacy.
This dissonance in what educators endorse and the family literacy experienced in families can create uncertainty in parents as they navigate home and school literacy practices (Compton-Lilly, 2003). My goal for the information generated by the participants in this study was to assist teachers as they coach parents who support their children’s literacy learning. In addition, my hope was that the information also empowers those very parents while they engage in daily literacy activities. Findings from this study contribute to the existing body of research while informing families and educators and impacting best practice in collaboration involving school and home literacy practices with preschool children.

Parents and educators have agreed that literacy learning is essential; however, families can take “multiple roads to literacy” (Y. M. Goodman, 1997) in which they practice a multitude of methods and use literacy successfully. Aside from formal literacy events, various activities are embedded in daily contexts. The daily reading of magazines and newspapers and the writing of notes between family members are common examples (Y. M. Goodman, 1997; Taylor, 1983). In fact, Taylor (1997) identified numerous reading types and uses: conformational, educational, environmental, financial, historical, instrumental, interactional, news related, recreational, scientific, and technical. The writing types and uses are just as abundant: autobiographical, creative, educational, environmental, financial, instrumental, interactional, memory aids, recreational, scientific, substitutional, and technical (Taylor, 1997). Families use a range of literacy methods on a daily basis as they perform a variety of functions (K. S. Goodman & Goodman, 1979; Taylor, 1983, 1997).
Family literacy can vary considerably from one family to another according to cultural and economic factors (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000; Moll, Amanti, Neff, Gonzalez, 1992; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). For example, differences in language can affect the way in which children interact linguistically when they enter school (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1997). Heath (1983) noted two neighboring working-class communities with dissimilar language development patterns, which led to communication problems in both marginalized populations as they entered mainstream schools and workplaces. Heath contended that the teacher’s role was to create a bridge between home and school for students in relation to a child’s language and culture.

To further complicate matters, working-class and middle-class families often differ in the way they approach teachers. Lareau (2000) found that middle-class parents, often better educated and earning higher incomes than working-class counterparts, tend to be very enthusiastic in supporting their children’s learning. Borrowing the term cultural capital from Bourdieu (1977), Lareau (2000) explained that children from middle-class families have the upper hand over working-class children because of parent involvement. Middle-class families who invest their children with cultural capital provide every opportunity that many working-class families are unable to offer.

Working-class parents may lack the confidence and skills (i.e., cultural capital) to assist their children in becoming as academically successful as middle-class children (Lareau, 2000). In addition, many working-class families view school and home as separate spheres that do not interact as opposed to middle-class parents who see them as interconnected (Lareau, 2000). Working-class parents are more prone to see teachers as
professionals as opposed to middle-class parents who may have stronger academic skills and higher economic status and may be unafraid to dictate to teachers how their children should be instructed.

Regardless of research findings, parents from all cultural and economic backgrounds generally want their children to be successful learners (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983 Lareau, 2003; Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). The term funds of knowledge refers to “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 2). Funds of knowledge can be unique for each individual family using a variety of learning experiences and have the capacity to enhance literacy success (Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011; Jalongo, 2014; Taylor, 1983.

Wise teachers build upon these funds of knowledge that children bring to the classroom. Early childhood educators readily invite parents to be active partners in the literacy process (Lareau, 2000), often providing a bridge between home and school (Duke, Purcell-Gates, 2003; Heath, 1986; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Moll et al., 1992; Taylor, 1986). When parents are encouraged to join the home–school partnership, many are unsure about (a) the effectiveness of the literacy learning that their children have experienced under their guidance (Calkins, 1997; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau, 2000) and (b) winning approval of their coaching efforts from their child’s teacher (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).
An additional concern is that parents may feel intimidated by the expectations of their child’s teacher particularly if their own school experiences were unsuccessful (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Taylor, 1983). Quite often these parents are uncomfortable in the school setting altogether. Sometimes one negative experience with a child’s teacher or school in the early years can taint a parent’s attitude and make a constructive relationship between home and school difficult (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Swick, 2004; Taylor, 1983).

Further complicating this challenging connection are the government mandates requiring that home and school must work together for the benefit of the child. No Child Left Behind (U. S. Department of Education, 2001), which ushered in another layer of high stakes testing and required that educators initiate positive relationships with families, is included in most state and federal guidelines for public school districts. Although educators understand the importance of these relationships, time constraints resulting from an already demanding schedule can affect feasibility.

Although most children will eventually learn to read, the internal motivation one maintains throughout life is based largely on parents’ support of their children in the early years (Anderson et al., 1985; Jalongo, 2014; Trelease, 2006). Parents direct and mentor their children through the use of oral and written language as well as believing wholeheartedly in their child’s ability to become successfully literate (Anderson et al., 1985; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Parents provide enduring love and support in a manner that even the best classroom teacher cannot (Anderson et al., 1985).
If parents’ contributions are important and valued by educators, then common ground must be achieved. Parents need no mandated top-down instructions; they need a set of common understandings that both parents and educators may refer to as they support and guide early literacy learners. Finding out what preschool parents think about their children’s literacy learning both at home and at school is important. I am also interested in how their attitudes and experiences influence the valuable literacy learning that occurs in the home and school. Asking parents of preschoolers is important because their children are on the cusp of structured learning. I believe the findings from this study give parents a voice, align the academic expectations of families and educators, and impact best practice for their collaboration in school and home literacy practices with preschool children.

**Statement of the Problem**

What educators expect and the family literacy that is experienced at home can create uncertainty in parents as they navigate home and school literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In particular, I am interested in understanding what parents experience as they assist their preschool children in the exposure to and the experience of literacy skills at home and in preschool. I am also interested in the types of literacy activities parents may initiate with their children and how those activities have been influenced by their own earlier school experiences, teacher recommendations, or additional sources like friends and family members, parenting books, and the local library or Internet. Parents will describe their lived experiences as they initiate activities and support their children during experiences with literacy at home and in school.
This study is important for parents and other stakeholders because ambiguity often exists as parents anticipate their children’s literacy learning in formal schooling (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Taylor, 1983). Parents, educators, and researchers often have conflicting ideas about the part parents play as the first teacher. Understandings and perceptions about the role of parents in literacy learning varies with personal histories, lived experiences, and other cultural or economic factors. In this study I attempted to clarify the experiences of parents and give them a voice as they navigated this role as their preschool children experienced literacy in home and school environments.

**Research Question and Supporting Research Questions**

The central research question for this study was as follows: What do parents encounter as they navigate home and school shared literacy experiences with their preschool children? Five supporting questions listed below were developed to reflect Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space (see Table 1), situating this study in narrative inquiry.

1. **How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child?** Looking backward helps to understand how individuals’ personal lives, histories, and ideas for the future inform how they experience literacy with their children. Often parents use strategies and techniques from their own childhood experiences to inform the literacy practices they use with their children.

2. **How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?** Looking
Table 1

Supporting Research Questions in Three-Dimensional Space

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Space</th>
<th>Supporting Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Backward</td>
<td>How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inward</td>
<td>How does a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outward</td>
<td>How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated in Place</td>
<td>What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

forward shows how parents prepare their children for literacy learning with practices they hope will impact their child’s success in adult life.

3. How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child? Looking inward and outward yields information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceive their own identities as parents. They may rely on prior knowledge and interactions with school that impact their judgments about literacy learning.
4. How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child? Parents may have positive and negative relationships that impact their child’s literacy learning.

5. What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child? By situating this study in place, I intended to discover how context might influence parents’ experiences. Parents have a myriad of family, cultural, and other social influences that impact their ideas about experiencing literacy with their child.

**Significance of the Study**

Throughout my career in education, I have found parents questioning the value of literacy practices in which they were involved with their children. As demonstrated in the vignettes at the beginning of this paper, I have encountered parents who wondered whether the literacy practices in which they engaged with their children were right and whether those literacy practices were enough. By giving voice to those parents, I am hopeful that information collected from their storied experiences will help all parents navigate their interactions with educators regarding literacy practices as well as help those educators assist and support parents as they guide their children through these literacy practices.

Children spend roughly 7,800 hours a year out of school and 900 hours in school (Hart & Risley, 1995; Trelease, 2006). Is it conceivable that time spent outside the school day might be better used because it is often an untapped opportunity for parents to guide their children as they initiate, increase, and enhance their literacy abilities?
“Schools that are failing to single-handedly produce verifiable levels of academic improvement desperately need parents who believe they can help their children learn academic skills and content” (Long, 2011, pp. 48‒49). Strong literacy skills are the essential underpinning for academic success and lifelong learning and well-being. As the climate of student assessment and teacher accountability in the United States continues to increase, reflection on ways to improve family literacy learning and understand how best to expand upon it is a worthwhile endeavor for parents and educators alike.

The findings generated by this study have direct implications for early childhood educators and families with children in early learning environments. My hope is that the information generated by the parents in this study will assist educators as they coach parents with early literacy learners. Information may also be used to empower parents as they use their local knowledge and literacy skills to engage in daily literacy activities with their families. Taylor (1983) began the work of family literacy by observing families and describing the how literacy was used in the home. Although interviews with parents were part of his study, Taylor did not thoroughly explore parent perspectives on home and school literacies. The findings in my study deepen the understanding of both families and educators about best practice for the family members who navigate home and school literacy practices with their children as well as the educators who work with them.
Terms and Definitions

- Emergent literacy perspective: The view that children learn about reading and writing at a very early age by observing and interacting with adults and other children as they use literacy in everyday life (Christie, Enz, Vukelich, & Roskos, 2014)

- Experience: Knowledge based upon one’s previous learning (experiences) (Dewey, 1938/1997)

- Extended family: Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, foster family members, others who may assume responsibilities for the children in the family (Jalongo, 2014)

- Family literacy: The literacy activities that occur in the family context (Taylor, 1983)

- Funds of knowledge: The information that has accumulated in households and communities to value and support the continued learning of the children (Moll et al., 1992)

- Literacy: Any powerfully authentic instance of the use of language to convey meaning and understanding between a writer and reader (Vacca et al., 2006)

- Parent as the first teacher: The theory that literacy learning begins in the child’s home environment and is initiated by one or both parents (Anderson et al., 1985; Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011)

- Purposeful talk: Conversations and discussions that advance thinking (Allington & Johnston, 2002)

- Reading aloud: The act of an adult reading to a child at a level beyond what the child can read for himself or herself (Taberski, 2000)
- World knowledge: Learning experiences that lay the foundation for literacy learning (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997).
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Family Literacy Described

*Family literacy* is a term coined by Taylor (1983), who studied six families over the course of three years to determine how literacy activities in the home affected children learning to read and write. Asserting that such learning begins in the home as children engage in everyday activities in which literacy is naturally embedded, Taylor (1983) showed that writing and reading grocery lists, notes between family members, and journals or diaries are but a few of the ways literacy develops within families. Her work laid the foundation for an understanding of family literacy by illuminating the literacy practices families engage in at home; but my study was designed to deepen an understanding of the relationship between home and school literacy practices as well as parents’ experiences as they navigate this relationship.

Much information on family literacy and the connection between reading at home and academic success in school is available (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Durkin, 1966; Heath, 1983; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Taylor, 1983; Trelease, 2006). Taking many forms, family literacy might be incidental like the examples listed above or more structured like an adult reading aloud with a child (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Taylor, 1983). Children who are exposed to reading before they enter school have a head start over children who have had no reading experiences (Durkin, 1966). In addition, children whose parents have not read to them before they enter school may be at a disadvantage in the early grades and beyond.
(Durkin, 1966, 1974, 2006; Fox, 2008; Trelease, 2006). Although an abundance of research has been conducted to support the importance of a home and school connection, parents’ voices have generally remained unheard; thus in my study I aimed to fill the gap by examining the way parents experienced this relationship.

**Importance of Reading Aloud in Family Literacy**

Considerable research supports the idea that reading aloud to young children builds the background knowledge necessary for learning to read and reading success in school (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997; Clay, 1991; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Durkin, 1966; Fox, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Many families practice bedtime routines that include reading together as parents bond with their children as they prepare them for sleep (Calkins, 1997; Cunningham, 2005; Huck, 1999; Taylor, 1983; Trelease, 2006). When children reach school age, many teachers encourage parents to continue to read with their children on a daily basis as an essential means to support the literacy learning that occurs in school (Trelease, 2006).

Parents often refer to practices they have experienced to guide them as they read aloud with their children. They might remember their parents reading aloud to them (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Huck, 1999; Taylor, 1983) and do the same with their own children, or they might use more structured approaches like those learned in school from teachers (Compton-Lilly, 2003). With both scenarios the reading behaviors in which families engage are “contextualized within family and community histories” (Compton-Lilly, 2003, p. 79). Parents use what they know as they engage in literacy
experiences, and each interaction with their child is unique and continuously evolving (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

**Importance of Talking, Thinking, and World Knowledge in the Acquisition of Literacy**

Although reading aloud is important in strong early literacy learning, doing so is not the only way to achieve it (Y. M. Goodman, 1997). “The way to lift the level of our children’s oral language skill is to listen to what they say and to respond thoughtfully” (Calkins, 1997, p. 27). Research on parent interaction and its influence on early literacy learning has shown that students whose parents provide an abundant linguistic environment are more advanced intellectually, verbally, and academically; furthermore, the quality and quantity of home language interactions predict success. Children who hear the most words, are given positive feedback, and given the most thorough answers to their questions are at an advantage over others. Strong verbal interaction between child and parent and the resulting effects on the intellectual development of the child are indisputable (Hart & Risley, 1995).

“Children who engage in extended conversations at home that make them reflect upon experience learn to construct meaning from events. These children have a subsequent advantage in learning to read” (Anderson et al., 1985).

We have turned all our attention to their reading and writing, not realizing that talk is still the motor that propels their intellectual development. It is through talk that children learn to follow and tell stories, understand logical sequences, recognize causes, anticipate consequences, and explore options,
and consider motives. . . . Talk matters, and it’s not happening enough in our homes. (Calkins, 1997, p. 12)

As an essential component of literacy, talk increases the development of vocabulary and comprehension (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997, 2001). Parents can use talk as they ask questions about the text they read to facilitate meaning making (Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; D. Miller, 2002). A reader then uses “thoughtful literacy” to connect his [or her] existing knowledge with the text to arrive at a response (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 2001).

*Existing knowledge* is a term that may refer to world knowledge or information gained through life experiences that can be accessed during later reading sessions (Anderson et al., 1985). Readers make meaning as they connect what they are reading to what they already know (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000, 2007; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). Parents can initiate this process as they read aloud or share activities with children while asking open-ended questions about information being learned (Jalongo, 2014).

Providing an atmosphere in which to acquire world knowledge is essential for children to gain abilities that will later be transferred to classroom learning (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997). Parents can do so by making available a variety of reading materials in the home, including books, magazines, and computer games that support literacy. In addition, parents can encourage family members to give books as gifts for birthdays and holidays; furthermore, providing a time and a place in the home for reading will support the importance of reading. Setting a reading time when the family can read together provides parents with an opportunity to model a desirable behavior for their

Parents can provide children with learning activities and create a culture of learning that connects to the learning that takes place in the classroom. By providing children experiences in addition to reading like going to the zoo, visiting museums, taking walks together, and discussing those experiences, parents can provide opportunities for students to engage in meaning-making that will later serve them well as they read (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997, 2001; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007; D. Miller, 2002). When these activities are impossible because of time or economic factors, parents can help increase background knowledge useful for later literacy by reading aloud to their children from expository texts and periodicals. As their children’s first teachers parents can initiate and enhance opportunities for the acquisition of world knowledge (Anderson et al., 1985).

**Complexity of Family Literacy: Cultural and Economic Factors**

Family literacy learning can vary greatly from one family to another because of cultural and economic factors as well as differences in families (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2000, 2011; Moll et al., 1992; Taylor, 1997; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988); in addition, differences in language can affect the way in which children interact linguistically when they enter school (Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1997). For example, research on two textile mill communities in the Piedmont Carolinas highlighted the way language was learned in each community. Both working-class communities had
similar socioeconomic characteristics, but in the predominantly Black working-class community children were expected to learn language through immersion in the culture. In the predominately Caucasian working-class community language learning was more structured. Black and White children from mill communities were marginalized as they entered schools and sometimes had difficulty understanding others and being understood by teachers, who were typically members of the mainstream middle class. Issues continued as students left school and entered the workplace, which was most commonly the textile mill (Heath, 1983).

Economic factors also influence how well prepared children are for learning when they enter school (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau, 2000; 2011). Middle-class parents who are well educated and have high incomes and community status tend to be more successful at preparing their children for mainstream schooling (Lareau, 2000); they see home and school as interconnected and strive to provide opportunities that support learning. Working-class parents, who view school and home as separate entities, tend to admire teachers as professionals (Lareau, 2000). Thus, middle-class parents are comfortable assisting teachers, and working-class parents leave educating their children to teachers, a scenario that has implications for parent–teacher relationships as teachers make value judgments about parents who are uninvolved (E. T. Miller, 2010).

**Significance of Funds of Knowledge**

Although cultural and economic differences may exist in families, parents from a variety of backgrounds typically wish their children to be academically successful (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Hart & Risley, 1995; Heath, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines,
Parents use the funds of knowledge that have been collected in households and communities to value and support the continued learning of their children (Dewey, 1938/1997; Moll et al., 1992). Although these funds of knowledge can be unique for each family, a range of learning experiences often lead to literacy success for a given child (Taylor, 1983). Most early childhood educators know that they must build upon these funds of knowledge with parents of students in their classrooms by actively recruiting them to be involved in literacy learning (Lareau, 2000; Swick, 2009).

The term funds of knowledge has often been credited to research published in early 1990s (Moll et al., 1992), but as far back as the 1930s, Dewey noted the importance of “funded experiences of the past” (1938/1997, p. 42). The latter term speaks to the basis of all learning in (a) one’s own learning and (b) the previous learning of others: information developed in family and cultural communities that is crucial to a child’s learning and used as building blocks for further learning (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011; Dewey, 1938/1997; Heath, 1983; Moll et al., 1992; Taylor, 1997).

Although funds of knowledge are essential for learning, complex ways of knowing in families and communities are also vital (Taylor, 1997). In the home literacy environment, parents offer differing values about literacy, which they convey according to the cultural context in which they live (Jalongo, 2014). Educators must strive to value many kinds of literacy and the many kinds of families from which they develop instead of deficit-driven initiatives (E. T. Miller, 2010; Taylor, 1997); and most importantly,
parents must be a part of the collaborative conversation when family literacy initiatives are developed (Compton-Lilly & Greene, 2011; Rasinski, 1989).

In fact, the motivation behind Taylor’s *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration of Literacy* (1997) was the National Center for Family Literacy’s (NCFL) deficit position against parents. Taylor organized a forum on family literacy in October 1994 that included many leading researchers and educators associated with the field of family literacy with the intention of attempting to counteract the negative images of parents portrayed by NCFL as well as other public attitudes and opinions. Taylor stated, “Illiteracy is portrayed as a family problem, and the rhetoric indicates that many believe it is the family that must be fixed” (1997, p. xvi).

As a result, the international family literacy forum was organized as a means to support families and provide alternate ways of thinking about family literacy that valued multiple literacies. Key concepts addressed included (a) developing respectful and collaborative models of family literacy programs, (b) supporting an open dialogue between families and educators, and (c) finding alternate ways of thinking about family literacy not based on deficit talk. The text was developed as a result of this conference to provide leadership in the family literacy policies and practices built upon “the funds of knowledge—the languages, literacies, and complex problem-solving capabilities—that *all* families bring to *every* learning situation” (Taylor, 1997, p. xx).

**Parent Uncertainty**

Unfortunately, many parents are unsure about (a) what they bring to learning scenarios, (b) how successful their family literacy learning has been (Calkins, 1997;
Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau, 2000), and (c) whether their child’s teacher will approve of their coaching attempts (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). An additional issue is that parents feel intimidated by school expectations particularly if their own school experiences were unsuccessful (Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Taylor, 1983). Quite often these parents are uncomfortable in the school setting altogether. Sometimes one negative experience with a child’s teacher or school in the early years can taint a parent’s attitude and make a constructive relationship between home and school difficult (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Taylor, 1983). Further complicating this challenging connection are the government mandates requiring that home and school must work together for the benefit of the child. No Child Left Behind (U. S. Department of Education, 2001), which has ushered in another layer of high stakes testing, mandated that educators initiate positive relationships with parents, stipulated in most state and federal guidelines for school districts.

Although most children will eventually learn to read, the intrinsic motivation one maintains throughout life is based largely on the support provided by parents to their children in the early years (Anderson et al., 1985; Trelease, 2006). Parents direct and mentor their children by using oral and written language as well as believing wholeheartedly in their child’s ability to become successfully literate (Anderson et al., 1985; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Lareau, 2000; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Parents provide lasting love and support in a manner that even the best classroom teacher cannot (Anderson et al., 1985).
Children whose parents have laid the foundation for literacy learning in the home will benefit when they enter the structured learning environment of the classroom (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Durkin, 1966; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002; Swick, 2009); however, when questioned, many parents are unable to explain how they assisted their children as they acquired literacy skills (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In fact, literacy learning is often obtained through informal daily activities embedded in the lives of families (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Calkins, 1997; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Taylor, 1983; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), and parents are unaware of the manner in which these activities support literacy. Parents and families provide many valuable experiences that have the potential to enhance and support literacy learning (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Durkin, 1966; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002). Numerous studies have reflected the importance of parents who lay the foundation for successful literacy learning at school; however, what these studies have left unexplored is parents’ perspectives on engaging in home and school literacies with preschoolers. This narrative study is an effort to explore those experiences and to give parents a voice.

**Expectations of Professional Educators for Family Collaboration**

Valuing one’s family and its influence on learning is a departure from the traditional notion that teachers are the authorities on literacy learning: “For some years, parents were encouraged—no, directed—to leave the teaching of reading to teachers.” (Vukelich, 1984, p. 472). In fact, in a discussion of school notices prevalent in schools in the UK until the 1960s, many had posted signs on walls, stating, “No parents past this point” (Johnston, 1989, p. 352).
More recently, this hands-off approach has been recognized as neither educationally nor psychologically sound for the child. Educators know that parental involvement in the reading process begins long before the child arrives at school and should continue throughout the school years. (Vukelich, 1984, p. 472)

In addition, although educators often approach families with the best intentions, underlying biases can sometimes affect their interactions with parents (E. T. Miller, 2010). Teacher assumptions about lack of parental involvement can result from a lack of understanding of communities and cultures that differ from their own (E. T. Miller, 2010). Teacher attitude and disposition towards parents affects the quality of interactions between them and can result in difficulties unless teachers are proactive in their approach (Lareau, 2000; Swick et al., 1997).

In one parent involvement program, some issues that hindered home-school partnerships were examined and showed that when planning parent literacy workshops, issues like parents’ lack of knowledge about the program, time conflicts, lack of child care and transportation to the site, and inability to pay the workshop fee were listed as barriers to parent participation. Parents’ lack of interest and insecurity resulting from negative experiences as students themselves also contributed to lack of involvement (Allen & Freitag, 1988; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003).

Teachers want involvement but sometimes only on their terms. One researcher reported:

Teachers wanted parent involvement, but their actions strongly challenge the dominant view that teachers want a partnership with parents. By definition, a
partnership implies a relationship between equals where power and control is evenly distributed. Teachers did not, as Prescott teachers’ efforts to rebuff parents make clear, want to be equals with parents. Instead, they wanted parents to defer to them and to their decisions in the classroom. (Lareau, 2000, p. 35)

Teachers must understand the concept of partnership and negotiate their own struggles with power and control if they are to welcome families.

In addition to potential issues of power and control, another problem is the lack of definition of teacher expectations for parents. In the past, the roles of parent and teacher were clearly defined, and an agreed-upon assumption was that parents prepared children for school and teachers then educated them: “Mothers and fathers teach children good manners and proper behavior and turn over responsibility for education to the school” (Lareau, 2000, p. 49). In addition, teachers have varying expectations for involvement. Clarity is essential if parents are to understand teacher expectations about what their role is to be.

Parents and teachers must understand the potential for improving the education of the children they share through mutual agreement about the goals for children (Epstein, 1985). Teachers who have committed time and energy to parent involvement with school activities are more likely to have cooperation from parents of students who responded favorably to teachers’ commitment (Epstein, 1985).

In fact, the way parent involvement programs are structured is often problematic. “Programs designed to involve parents often fail. The reason for this is that parents are not usually involved in the conceptualization, design, or development of such programs”
(Rasinski, 1989, p. 228). In other words, if parents are expected to participate and contribute their valuable time to this effort, their voices must be heard in the planning process. An added problem with many family involvement programs is the lack of continuity from year to year. Parents must be involved in the planning as well as the implementation of successful programs if educators desire a continually successful commitment from them. The current study has given parents a voice in this process. Parents were interviewed and data were collected about their personal experiences as they navigated home and school literacies with their preschool children.

Much information exists about family literacy and how essential the connection is between reading at home and later academic success (Anderson et al., 1985; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Durkin, 1966; Jalongo, 2014; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002; Trelease, 2006). Family literacy takes many forms and might be incidental like the examples listed above or more structured like an adult reading aloud with a child (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Taylor, 1983; Trelease, 2006). Children who are exposed to reading before they enter school have a head start on children who have not had literacy experiences (Durkin, 1966). In addition, children whose parents have not read to them before they enter school may be at a disadvantage in the early grades and beyond (Durkin, 1966, 1974, 2006; Fox, 2008; Jalongo, 2014; Trelease, 2006).

The researchers who conducted the studies described above investigated family literacy, the importance of reading aloud at home, the importance of world knowledge in the acquisition of literacy, the complexity of family literacy and how funds of knowledge impact it, parent uncertainty about family literacy, and the expectations of educators for
family collaborations, but the body of extant research primarily reflects the perspectives of educators. In the current study I have attempted to understand the perspectives of parents of preschoolers as they navigated literacy practices both at home and at school by listening to their stories.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Following my experience with the ministudy of four middle-class parents noted in Chapter 1, I wished to explore in greater depth the gap that I believed existed between educators and families. More specifically, I wanted to investigate what parents experienced as they navigated home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children. I chose a narrative inquiry to give a voice to these parents, who relayed their experiences by telling their stories.

Initially, I intended to investigate the types of literacy activities parents might initiate with their children, the influence of earlier school experiences, teacher recommendations, or additional sources like friends and family members, parenting books, the local library, or Internet on those activities, and the role of cultural and economic factors in parents’ perceptions in the emergent literacy process. As the study progressed, however, I determined that including cultural and economic factors would send the study on another trajectory. In an effort to keep this study manageable, I decided to focus only on the literacy experiences of parents as they themselves had obtained literacy, how those experiences informed their experiences in parenting preschoolers, and finally what they experienced as they navigated home and school literacy practices with their preschool children.

The Interpretive–Constructivist Lens

Interpretive inquiry and constructivist inquiry are closely related, the terms often used interchangeably. “Interpretivists operate from the belief that all constructs are
equally important and valid” (Schram, 2006, p. 45), and their work has involved the “social meaning . . . created during interactions and the interpretations of interactions” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 36). With regard to the social constructivist worldview, “the researcher’s intent [is] to make sense of [or interpret] the meanings others have about the world” (Creswell, 2007, p. 8). In this study I attempted to apply both interpretive and constructivist inquiry to understand the storied experiences of parents and to illustrate how they experienced literacy interactions with their children.

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is an example of interpretive research with a focus on “the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). The goal of my inquiry was to capture participants’ stories of home and school literacy practices. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) situated a framework in a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (p. 54), which functions as a metaphor for the space that points the researcher backward and forward and inward and outward and is situated in place as the experiences are examined from each direction simultaneously. “The phrase *experiencing the experience* is a reminder that narrative inquiry is aimed at understanding and *making meaning* of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 80).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) were influenced by the work of Dewey and used his stance on the nature of experience as a framework for their work in narrative inquiry. They said, “Dewey’s work on experience is our imaginative touchstone for reminding us that in our work, the answer to the question, Why narrative? is, Because experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Dewey’s *(1938/1997)* *Experience and Education*
was a response to the misinterpretation held by many of his peers about his progressive ideals: his notion that experiential learning was essential to the learning process. In this work, Dewey asserted that the value of the learning experience itself must be considered and not merely the experience.

Dewey (1938/1997) clarified two concepts—interaction and continuity—in *Experience and Education*. His ideal of interaction emphasized the outward experience while taking into account a learner’s internal self. Educators must take the “responsibility for understanding the needs and capabilities of the individuals who are learning at a given time” (Dewey, 1938/1997, pp. 45–46). The concept of continuity is built upon the idea that learning must include the past, present, and future; “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (Dewey, 1938/1997, p. 35). These concepts relate directly to this study. Parents naturally use their own experiences to determine how to share literacy with their children (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). New learning is built upon what was learned in the past and what is occurring in the present; furthermore, it impacts how future learning unfolds.

Looking outward was a perspective I used to collect information about the participants’ physical environment; specifically, I asked did the family culture and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of parents as they initiated and supported early literacy learning. Looking inward was another perspective from which to collect data and to explore parents’ feelings and ideas about their roles as the first teacher
of their child. I asked in what ways parents experienced “internal conditions such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Parents who were asked to look inward helped me to gain an understanding of their thoughts and feelings about their identities as parents during the initiation, development, and reinforcement of home and school literacies with their children.

Looking backward and forward yielded data regarding experiences from the past, present, and future. Each of these directions existed in the dimension of context that marked the physical margins of the study. Looking backward, participants determined how previous experiences in their own childhoods may or may not have influenced how they perceived themselves as parents of literacy learners. Looking forward, they provided information about personal dispositions and what they valued as they prepared their children for future literacy learning and life experiences. “We tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as well as more current stories. All of these multi-dimensional stories offer possible plotlines for our futures” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60).

In this research I explored the experiences of preschool parents with an emphasis on the stories they told about literacy practices they shared with their children. Because “life is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). I used narrative research to give parents a voice in telling stories about their shared literacy practices.
Narrative inquiry was appropriate for this research because narrative methods are typically applied to understand “how people structure the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives” (Schram, 2006, p. 104). Parent participants shared the personal histories, lived experiences, and economic and cultural influences that impacted the decisions they made regarding the literacy of their preschool children. Narrative inquiry encompasses the “living, telling, retelling, and reliving stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 71); thus, this qualitative method was appropriate.

**Research Question**

The central research question for this study was as follows: “What do parents experience as they navigate home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children?” Five supporting questions were developed and investigated using Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) three-dimensional space. Looking forward and backward helped to understand how individuals’ personal life histories and ideas for the future informed their experiences with their children’s acquisition of home and school literacies. Looking inward and outward yielded information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceived their own identities as parents of literacy learners. By situating this study in place, I was able to discover how context influenced parent experiences with shared literacy.

**Supporting Research Questions**

The supporting questions were designed to produce understandings of storied experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in alignment with Dewey’s (1938/1997) theory
of experience, including an inward–outward interaction as well as the continuity of experience through past, present, and future structures

1. How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child? Looking backward helped to understand how individuals’ personal lives, histories, and ideas for the future informed how they experienced literacy with their children.

2. How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages? Looking forward showed how parents prepared their children for literacy learning with practices they hoped would impact their success in adult life.

3. How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child? Looking inward and outward yielded information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceived their own identities as parents.

4. How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child? Parents’ positive and negative relationships impacted their child’s literacy learning.

5. What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child? By situating this study in place, I intended to discover how context might influence parents’ experiences. Parents typically have a myriad of family, cultural, and other social influences that impact their ideas about experiencing literacy with their child.
Interview Prompts

The supporting research questions were the source of my interview prompts, which I used during interviews with participants as a guide to provide a similar format for each interview. (These questions also appear in Appendix A.) Interview prompts are listed below under each numbered supporting research question.

1. How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literacy practices with their child?
   What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school?

2. How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at home?
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at school?
   In your view, what is the most important piece of literacy learning (school, home, or both)?

3. How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?
   How do you feel about your own literacy learning as a child?
   How do you feel about your child’s literacy learning?
   What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?
4. How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?

How have you experienced your relationship with your child’s teacher and the school related to your child’s developing literacies?

Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with home and school literacies?

5. What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child??

What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?

**Data Sources**

I used a variety of data sources in this investigation, including field notes I kept, an initial meeting between participants and me, an interview with participants, written description of a literacy artifact by participants, a demographic survey completed by participants, and postinterview emails between participants and me. After interviews and during the transcription process, I compiled field notes in which I included my observations as both a participant and as an observer (Creswell, 2007) as well as notes I took in a spiral notebook because “journals are a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 102). These field notes covered observations of a reflective nature and were used later when narratives were constructed.
I scheduled an individual initial meeting with each participant in which I explained the IRB process and obtained signatures. At the next meeting I conducted an interview, which lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. I used an audio recorder to record each interview and then transcribed each one as soon as possible (see Appendix B for excerpts from interview transcripts). During the interview participants were asked to respond in writing to a literacy artifact of their child that held significance to them. Two participants responded to this request. In a follow-up email (see Appendix C), participants were asked to complete a demographic survey (see Appendix D) and to add any additional information that they may have not included during our interview or that they believed might assist my study. Five of the six participants completed the survey and provided additional information. See Table 2 for a summary of data sources.

Parents were invited to take the opportunity to share their stories about family literacy and how they navigated home and school literacy practices with their preschool children. Participants were asked to keep a literacy journal and follow-up emails were used to further deepen my understanding of their literacy stories.

**Participants**

Participants included six parents of preschool children, “purposefully selected” (Creswell, 2007, p. 178) from the parents of children who attended a suburban preschool in the Midwestern United States, a lab school connected with Midwestern University (pseudonym) with a long history of collaboration with parents on literacy skills. The six parents volunteered to participate in this study after teachers and administrators asked those parents who had previously had a positive relationship with the school. Because
Table 2

Summary of Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field notes and analytic memos</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Deepen data source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>Researcher,</td>
<td>Field entrance and rapport building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>Researcher,</td>
<td>Develop participant narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written description of literacy</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Deepen data source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>artifact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic Survey</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Global and individual perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion via email</td>
<td>Researcher,</td>
<td>Member checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This lab school was located on a college campus and all participants were connected to
Midwestern University professionally themselves or through a spouse, I anticipated their
acceptance of preschool literacy learning. Each participant held a Ph.D., was the spouse
of someone with a Ph.D., or was the spouse of someone who was currently in graduate
school working toward a doctorate. The location was associated with a positive learning
atmosphere and was chosen for this reason. See Table 3 for demographic information on
the participants.
Table 3

Demographic Information on Participants and Their Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Child’s Age</th>
<th>Child’s Gender</th>
<th>Other Children at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helga</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>3, 3</td>
<td>F, F</td>
<td>5, F; 8, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>41‒45</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>US (Midwest)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>8, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Eastern Europe</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olga</td>
<td>41‒45</td>
<td>M.A.</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Central Asia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12, M; 19, F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>41‒45</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>US (Midwest)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>11, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maha</td>
<td>31‒35</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>Stay-at-home parent, spouse of Ph.D. student</td>
<td>Northern Africa</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>5, M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: NR = No response

Data Collection

After receiving IRB approval from Midwestern University, I began this study by meeting individually with each participant. The purpose of this initial meeting was twofold: first, to outline the purpose of the study; and second, to explain exactly what participating in the study would entail. If the parents agreed to participate, I asked them to sign the IRB form and scheduled our next meeting, which included a 60-minute interview. Interview prompts are listed under each supporting research question below:
1. How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literacy practices with their child?
   What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school?

2. How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at home?
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at school?
   In your view, what is the most important piece of literacy learning (school, home, or both)?

3. How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?
   How do you feel about your own literacy learning as a child?
   How do you feel about your child’s literacy learning?
   What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?

4. How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?
   How have you experienced your relationship with your child’s teacher and the school related to your child’s developing literacies?
   Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with home and school literacies?
5. What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child?

What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?

During the interview, I asked participants to respond to a favorite literacy artifact, such as a special children’s book or their child’s written work. They later responded in writing in an email as to how this artifact had impacted them as parents of emerging literacy learners and helped “make sense of life as lived” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78).

In the follow-up email participants were asked to complete a demographic survey that described age range and level of schooling as well as answer several open-ended questions regarding their thoughts about reading and writing and their importance to their children.

Kept and compiled in a researcher’s journal with an attempt to maintain transparency and leave an audit trail (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), reflective, analytic memos were used “to enrich the analytic process, to make implicit thoughts explicit, and to expand the data corpus” (Creswell, 2007, p. 290). This documentation provided triangulation of the data set (Creswell, 2007) and were used to “build the in-depth case or the storied experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007), a process involving data collection, data analysis, and data report writing not as discrete
steps but as an interconnected progression that results in the final report of the findings. Specifically, I engaged in the process of moving in analytic circles (Creswell, 2007) in which data was continually analyzed through reading, reflecting, and interpreting the data set. This process involved multiple steps: data managing, reading transcripts, describing stories, coding data into meaningful segments, and finally writing a narrative for each participant.

Data managing (Creswell, 2007) was accomplished as I first organized my field notes, audio recorder, and laptop computer. I audiotaped each interview and listened to and transcribed them as soon as possible. This process involved listening to the audiotape numerous times as I transcribed the interviews. During the transcription process, I used my field notes to record the time of day the interviews took place, where they took place, and the rapport that was or was not established.

I then read and reread transcripts, listened to audio tapes, and made memos of the text of my transcripts as I formed initial codes (Creswell, 2007). These steps were not discrete but were interconnected spirals occurring simultaneously (Creswell, 2007).

Next, each story was described (Creswell, 2007) and placed in chronological order according to when each interview was completed for ease of record keeping and to prepare for writing each narrative. As I read and reread each story, I moved in analytic circles (Creswell, 2007) and noted initial epiphanies. Interpretations informed themes.

Finally, I constructed a narrative for each participant to illustrate their literacy stories and then read and reread each to ensure participants’ voices. I read the interview transcripts and listened to audiotapes as I constructed the narratives because “a narrative
inquirer spends many hours reading and rereading field texts in order to construct a chronicled or summarized account of what is contained within different sets of field texts” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 131). Narratives were written so that each had a beginning, a middle, and an end (Creswell, 2007).

**Data Coding**

Data were coded into meaningful segments and along with initial epiphanies were recorded on a data chart (Creswell, 2007). I listened to recorded interviews, read transcripts numerous times to familiarize myself with the stories of my participants, and wrote analytic memos during reviews of the interview data.

I developed themes according to three-dimensional space described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and informed by meaningful segments. Looking forward and backward helped to understand how individuals’ personal lives, histories, and ideas for the future informed how they experienced home and school literacies with their children. Looking inward and outward yielded information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceived their own identities as parents of literacy learners. Table 4 provides an example of how themes emanating from one question were organized in the data chart:

Each narrative was constructed after interview data was transcribed. As I wrote each narrative, I attempted to keep the words of Clandinin and Connelly in mind:

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and
**Table 4**

*Data and Emerging Themes*

| How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child? |
| Q1: What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school? |
| Helga: |
| - Vague remembrance but skipped a grade so school must have been good |
| - Pretty much left on your own; no one helped a child to read |
| - Ran her parents’ bakery at five years old |
| - School was very different in Germany than her children in US (small town of about 1000, first and second grade were together) |
| - Received a bad grade so father tutored her after school until reading skills improved |
| - Learning to read in Germany . . . was hard-core=decoding/traditional but easier since German is more decodable than English . . . KGN different than here Ger=Preschool (here) US=1st Grade |
| - Differences made H. “naïve” when oldest child started school |
| Marta: |
| - Doesn’t remember learning to read but assumes that one of her sisters taught her at around the age of four |
| - Remembers learning to read as being much easier than learning to write manuscript, no printing was taught (like in the US), and students began writing with manuscript |
| - Father helped her with homework every night after school, a practice she has continued with her daughter |
| Mark: |
| - Doesn’t remember this but was told by his parents that he taught himself to read at the age of three |
| - Major league baseball team had huge influence on Mark and his motivation to read. He remembers reading the sports page aloud to his father at the breakfast table |
| - Parents read to him nightly at bedtime |
| - Did not like the structured reading done at school during class reading time |
| Tara: |
| - Grew up in a family of readers |
| - Mother a remedial reading teacher, father visually impaired who listened to books on tape |
| - Fond memories of reading and describing newspaper comic strips to father while sitting on his lap when younger; as she got older she would read to him from the sports page |
- Read with her younger sister
- Home filled with newspapers, books, magazines, books on tape, etc.
- Strongly encouraged to read by parents
- Both grandmothers also

**Olga:**
- Fourth of five children and her older sisters used to read “all the time”
- Mother told her she taught herself to read at the age of five
- Olga assumes because they shared bedrooms, she was influenced by her older sisters to read
- Parents never read to her since they were always working and they didn’t have “that kind of life”
- Put in kindergarten that in US is considered daycare at the age of nine months. Transition from daycare to preschool and kindergarten was seamless since they were housed in the same building, and Olga remembers this time with fondness
- Transition to first grade was not as easy curriculum was “rigorous”

**Maha:**
- Grew up in Northern Africa, where books were scarce and most libraries offered only books available for adults. Children’s books were shared among friends and family members.
- Parents were very encouraging of Maha and her siblings with school but were very busy working
- Typical in her country to have only four or five years schooling and obtain no advanced degrees
- Most important word in her language (Arabic) is the word *read*

**A) Q1: First Epiphanies, Impressions**
- Reading with parents, siblings, grandparents
- U.S. schools different from those in Western Europe, Middle Eastern, and Soviet Bloc
- Value of reading very strong

progresses in the this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living people’s lives, both individual and social. (2000, p. 20)

I engaged in the process of restorying so that narrative stories would have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Creswell, 2007). Member checking was conducted after narratives were constructed via email with the six participants. Four participants responded with
comments, which were used and incorporated into the data analysis spiral (Creswell, 2007).

I used peer debriefing to determine whether findings were believable and rigorous (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). The peer debriefer was chosen because of her background in literacy and familiarity with Midwestern University’s stringent guidelines.

As narrative inquirers, “we work within the space not only with our participants but also ourselves. Working in this space means that we become visible with our own lived and told stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62). After composing my participants’ narratives I composed my own family literacy narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Creswell, 2007). Table 5 contains a timetable of the progress of this research.

**Limitations**

Certain limitations placed on the findings may have weakened the line of reasoning for this study. My role as a parent, former first-grade teacher, and doctoral candidate influenced my stance and how I was situated with families who participated in this narrative study. Using a purposeful sampling procedure has not necessarily produced generalizable results for all parents whose children are early literacy learners. The number of participants in this study—six—is a relatively small sample size and may not be representative of all parents with children in preschool.

In addition, participants may have been unwilling to honestly discuss lived experiences because of embarrassment or discomfort about how their parenting abilities would be perceived by the researcher. I attempted to apply measures of corroboration,
Table 5  

*Timeline of Narrative Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Steps Taken</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>Proposal meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2013</td>
<td>Proposal accepted, search for participants, IRB approval, wrote chapters 1, 2, 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>Met with parents for initial meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2013</td>
<td>Second meeting, began interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2013</td>
<td>Transcription of interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013–Spring 2016</td>
<td>Continued data analysis and writing, edited Chapters 1–3, began writing Chapter 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer 2016</td>
<td>Continued editing Chapters 1–3, edited Chapter 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2016</td>
<td>Writing Chapter 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2017</td>
<td>Peer review and editing entire manuscript</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

such as looking for similar themes in participant journals, interviews, and transcriptions; however, I had no definitive way to determine whether participants were being completely truthful about their experiences.

A further limitation was the result of the identities of the participants, who were chosen from Midwestern University’s on-campus preschool. Those who agreed to participate were parents of preschool age children currently enrolled in the lab school and may have been more likely to participate because of their expected acceptance of
preschool literacy learning. Because this preschool was located on a college campus, a limitation may have been the result of the positive learning atmosphere at the location. Another limitation was that all participants were professionally connected to Midwestern University themselves or through a spouse.

In addition, the process of conducting interpretive research implies researcher selectivity. “When a researcher encourages response and discussion on one point, still other points are left uncovered or less well developed. The field text is shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of researcher or participant (or both)” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 94).

While working in three-dimensional spaces of the narrative inquiry method, narrative inquirers work “within the space not only with [their] participants but also with [them]selves” (Clandin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61). As I navigated the spaces of my participants’ lives and retold their stories, I remained aware that “confronting ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public” (Clandinan & Connelly, 2000, p. 62).
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter was to present findings derived from the data collected during this study. It opens with a table that represents the entire data set collected from this study (see Table 6). Next, the purpose of the study as well as the context in which it took place are explained. A short description of the participants and their demographic data follow. Narratives constructed from interview transcripts appear next as a means to share the storied experiences of the participants. Included in this section is my own narrative constructed from my life experiences in an effort to identify how they impacted my literacy learning. Finally, this chapter contains the findings of this study.

Often the expectations of education professionals and the lived experiences related to family literacy occurring in the home can create ambiguity for parents as they navigate home and school literacy practices. This qualitative study was designed to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of parents as they assisted their preschool children in the experience of literacy skills at home and in preschool. Data collection was designed to gain an appreciation of the types of literacy activities parents may have initiated with their children and to discover how those activities were influenced by their own school experiences, teacher recommendations, friends and family members, parenting books, the local library, the Internet, and the influence of cultural and economic factors.
Table 6

*Entire Data Set*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Data Collected</th>
<th>Number of Pages</th>
<th>Number of Minutes with Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytic memos</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 1/Helga</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1:18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy artifact description</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 2/Marta</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy artifact description</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 3/Mark</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy artifact description</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 4/Olga</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy artifact description</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 5/Tara</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial meeting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1:12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy artifact description</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic survey</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postinterview discussion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this study I attempted to clarify the ambiguity in home and preschool literacy practices; doing so was important for parents and other education stakeholders because parents, educators, and researchers often have conflicting ideas about the role parents play as the first teacher. Understandings and perceptions of parents’ roles in literacy learning vary as a result of personal histories and lived experiences. In this study I attempted to explain the experiences of parents as they navigated this role while their preschool children experienced literacy in home and school environments.

**Context of the Study**

Participants were parents who had children enrolled or would have liked them to be enrolled in the university-run preschool located on a state university campus in a Midwestern state. Established over a century ago to train public school teachers, Midwestern University was at the time of this writing a public research university with seven regional campuses.

The main campus housed the Early Childhood Learning Center, hereafter called the lab school, where participants were purposefully selected. Its mission statement, located on its website, stated that parents were considered “full partners in the education of their children.” Thus, I chose the lab school as the site for this study.
The lab school was widely used by faculty, staff members, students, and families from the community to educate and care for their young children, who ranged in age from 18 months to six years. Two toddler classrooms accommodated children ranging in age from 18 months to three years; four preschool classrooms, children ranging in age from three to five; and one kindergarten classroom, children six years of age. Located on Midwestern University’s campus, the lab school was ideal for parents who attended classes or were employed at the University.

Another benefit was that the early childhood education program at the university required field work in which undergraduate students completed a minimum of one semester at the lab school. This policy ensured that best practices of early childhood teaching and learning as well as innovative educational strategies were used in the classrooms. The following message appeared on the lab school website: “We welcome the children of [Midwestern University] students, faculty, staff, and members of the greater community. We value the deep relationships that form when children, families, and teachers work to create an environment for learning together.” The preschool had been in operation since 1972 and had earned national acclaim for its constructivist approach to early childhood education.

Participants

Participants were volunteers suggested by preschool teachers and administrators as parents having had a previously successful relationship with the school. All families had other children in addition to the one in preschool. Maha, Mark, Tara, and Marta were the parents of two children; Olga, three children; and Helga, four children. The children
ranged in age from two to 19 years old. Five families were two-parent families and one family had a single mother. All participants had full guardianship of their children.

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) notion of three-dimensional space informed the narratives. Looking backward and forward helped to ascertain how parents’ personal life histories and ideas for the future influenced the way they experienced their children’s acquisition of home and school literacies. Looking inward and outward yielded information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceived their own identities as parents of literacy learners. By situating this study in place, I discovered how context influenced parent experiences with shared literacy practices.

**Participant Narratives**

In this section, I have included participant narratives, constructed using the framework referred to as restorying by Creswell (2007), a framework in which a chronological sequence is used to tell participants’ stories so that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end (Creswell, 2007).

**Helga, the Code Reader**

Language and language learning starts the moment they are born if not earlier.

— Helga

Helga began her life in Germany in a small town of 1,000 inhabitants. As the daughter of working-class parents who ran a local bakery, she believed that being in the bakery enabled her to engage in authentic reading and math experiences. As early as the age of five, she was often left for short periods of time to run the bakery for her family.
The townspeople were helpful when she waited on them often helping her to count change and read boxes of cereal, and attend to the other simple tasks required of her. Her early experiences with formal literacy learning must have been successful because she skipped part of first grade. Helga described the school experience as very different from what her children experienced here in the United States. Education procedures in Germany were very challenging. Helga said,

So I would say the first two years of everything, I was pretty much left on my own. I mean, you had the things that you had to do like homework or something. . . . You had to practice letters, . . . but otherwise there was no—nothing compared to what’s out nowadays to help a child to read.

Helga’s description hints at her understanding of the differences in her and her children’s early literacy experiences.

The village in which Helga grew up was a very small community of 1,000 residents (she now lives in a community of 3,500 inhabitants). The school that Helga attended employed two teachers who taught first and second grades combined. Her recollections of this time were very positive because she experienced initial success at the school. She said, “And, I mean, I skipped half a school year actually. . . . I skipped it. They decided I’m smart enough to skip first grade or something!” Although it was much different from what was available in the United States at the time, she believed that the education she and her classmates received was satisfactory.

Helga’s first negative experience with learning that she was able to recall involved getting a “bad grade” in reading in the third grade. As a result, her father
required her to read with him at the bakery every day for an hour after school until her reading skills improved. Helga described the reading in Germany as “hard-core reading” that did not include an abundance of child-friendly materials. Helga also believed learning to read was much easier in the German language because the words were more easily decodable than in English. She also believed that her children had more picture books that provided pictorial cues and reinforced early reading than she had as a child.

Another difference in German and English learning was the interpretation of kindergarten. In Germany, kindergarten resembled preschool; in the United States kindergarten had evolved into what was once first grade. Helga admitted that this concept was totally unknown to her and described herself as naïve when her first child entered kindergarten and experienced difficulties learning to read in first grade.

Although Helga acknowledged differences in the two countries and their approach to learning, she believed ultimately that the system in which her children were learning was a good one. She said,

But . . . see, people say here that the school system here in America is so bad, that children don’t learn anything, and I don’t think so. I think it’s actually much more child-centered than in Germany. It’s much more project oriented.

She then described in detail how her son had a biography project that he did on George Washington in which he did research, wrote a report, made a poster, and dressed as the first president to present the material.

Helga believed that each child is different and has an innate desire to learn or not to learn. She believed that giving them opportunities to explore and teaching them that
the world would open up to them when they read constituted her role in the literacy process. “Learning and literacy does not just happen on a piece of paper scribbling notes and numbers but going outside and experiencing [a] science museum or going to the police department, and that’s literacy too!” It did not matter to her where they learn to read—at home or at school—because all children eventually learn to read as a necessity to function in the outside world.

The single mother of four children, Helga had many experiences during the process of her children’s acquisition of literacy skills. Her oldest child attended the lab school for preschool and kindergarten, where a constructivist approach to learning was the guiding philosophy. He seemed to do well in this environment and showed no indication of a delay in learning; however, for first grade her son attended their neighborhood school, much more traditional than the lab school in its approach to learning. As a result her son was identified for the Title I supplemental instruction program. This was quite surprising for Helga because the teachers who had provided his preceding academic reports during preschool and kindergarten had not raised any serious academic concerns.

This first experience Helga and her oldest child had with formal schooling was very negative. Her son, who had previously been happy and excited about going to preschool and kindergarten, did not want to attend first grade at all. During this challenging time, Helga struggled to keep her son interested in school. She experienced great concern with him because he did not see the purpose of reading and was unhappy about the homework he was required to complete. She said:
The first year in school was a fricking nightmare; I tell you, it was horrible! And then he couldn’t do it. He didn’t like to do it. For five minutes of homework, of work reading, he gave me three hours of grief, right? Fight after fight after fight after fight: “I don’t want to do this. I’m not doing this. I’m in school, and that’s good enough!”

Helga’s son experienced a typical reaction to a challenging academic situation. He was working at full capacity during the day, but by homework time he had no energy left to complete it.

Although this was a difficult time for Helga and her oldest child, she believed that the experience helped her to gain an appreciation of what formal schooling required and better prepared her to assist her younger three children with their in-school learning. One of the tools she found helpful with this preparation was the iPad, a relatively uncomplicated, inexpensive electronic device that offered a wide variety of easily downloadable learning programs for her youngest three children to use.

With her second child, a daughter, Helga decided to allow her to complete kindergarten at the lab school and then repeat kindergarten at the school in her local district. Although she believed that the lab school was too unstructured, she also believed that the local school was too structured with regard to homework and behavior expectations. Her daughter had been punished for poor conduct (excessive talking) and received a red owl as a warning. Helga said:

She got a red owl. Actually for me this means she is comfortable there. I mean, she is talking. She has friends there. They are chatting. It’s actually a
good sign for me! For the school, it’s bad. For the teacher, it’s bad. She is not focused on the group, I mean, building a group atmosphere. It’s always just the single child. So she has one lollipop, and so, “The child who behaves best today gets a lollipop.” It’s horrible for 20 children. . . .

Kelly came home crying. “I was so good all day. Why did I not get a lollipop?” It’s bad. It’s just bad, huh? It’s one against the rest. Helga believed this was silly. She believed an important component of school was socialization and getting along with one’s peers, that language was a significant part of literacy.

Helga’s youngest children were twin girls, who attended the lab school preschool. One positive aspect of these daughters and their preschool experience was that they played outside and took field trips quite regularly. Helga was satisfied that they had many experiences preparing them for literacy learning, but she believed that the program leaders should take greater advantage of the college campus environment.

Helga shared a story with me that she believed illustrated the importance of her role in literacy learning. One day her preschooler asked her how she knew how to play a certain game. She responded to her daughter that she knew because she had read the directions. Her daughter seemed fascinated that reading the directions would give her the information she needed for that particular task. She said:

I mean, my children do not need to learn to read at home. I hope that they gain, you know, something that is fun and they can learn something the world opens to them when they can read.
When Sara asked me, what did she ask me? “Mom, how did you know how this works?”

“Sara, I can read I just read the description.”

She said, “Ahhh, that’s how you know that!” That’s how you know, and it makes sense to her.

Ultimately, Helga believed that the majority of her children’s learning should have been accomplished while they were at school.

Okay, if my child goes to kindergarten, he should get—he or she should get—the main ideas from school. I feel that I can feed into that and say, “Okay, . . . read the book or something”; but I think the learning should be done during the day [because] they are there from 9 to 3!

Once there, she believed they would acquire the skills that would prepare them for a future career they would enjoy. Helga hoped that her children would contribute to society in a significant way in careers exciting and enjoyable for them and that literacy would lead the way.

**Marta, the Teacher**

[My daughter] likes learning things, and for her it’s fun; and my father used to always do homework with me, so for me it’s what is natural for me. If I get some time to spend with my child, this is what I will be doing. . . . So we repeat what we’ve learned from our parents.

—Marta
Marta began her life in Soviet Bloc Europe. When pressed about the specifics, she did not remember how she learned to read but assumed that one of her older sisters must have taught her before she entered kindergarten. She did not remember any specific examples of her family members reading to her but assumed they must have done so. Marta recalled that learning to read was much easier for her than learning how to write: “Umm, it was a little bit difficult to write letters for me because we were taught writing the handwriting way.” She remembered having more difficulty in learning to write than her daughter, who was taught to print before learning cursive writing.

As she grew older, Marta enjoyed reading classic authors, such as Rudyard Kipling, Astrid Lindgren, and Alexander Dumas, who were typically used for educational purposes in her country and were “very popular in Europe.” Her father helped her with reading and homework every evening after school, a routine that Marta continued with her daughter: “So we repeat what we’ve learned from our parents.”

Marta’s four-year-old daughter enjoyed being read to and was curious about every word on every page. Marta believed that her motivation to hear every word and learn them for herself was a good indication that she would do well in school. She believed that her daughter’s main goal at the time of this study was to learn to read so that she would be able to read to herself without any assistance. In preparation for kindergarten, Marta built upon the enthusiasm that her child already had for reading and used several techniques to support her literacy learning.

Following a suggestion from a parent of a kindergartner at the lab school, Marta used a book entitled *Teach Your Child to Learn to Read in One Hundred Easy Lessons* to
work with her daughter in preparation for kindergarten. The parent had related to Marta that her son did not enjoy using this book, that the lessons lasted about 40 minutes each, and that they had struggled using this book together. In fact, Marta herself found the book to be “a bit stupid.” In retrospect, Marta explained that she probably should have chosen another book to use with her daughter because the lessons were dull and lacked creativity. Although both Marta and her daughter found this book to be uninteresting, they made adjustments so that it worked for them.

Instead of taking the role of teacher, Marta allowed her daughter to take the lead and become the teacher; and according to Marta her daughter did well with this technique. She explained:

She will not learn. She will not want to learn—so yes, she is my teacher, and we go very, very fast. She’s very good at it. If we go slow as the book suggests, umm, there’s no point. She loses interest in less than one minute.

By flipping the script, Marta played the student and allowed her daughter to gain confidence by being in control. Her daughter enjoyed this technique, and Marta was satisfied that her child gained the literacy skills needed for kindergarten by instructing her mother with the phonics lessons this book provided.

In addition to the structured learning time Marta and her daughter shared, they also played educational games together. Admitting that she was not good at playing games, Marta said that one requirement was that the games must include a learning component. Playing games was Marta’s way of teaching her child while building upon her daughter’s natural curiosity.
Because both Marta and her husband worked full time, they employed a nanny to attend to the daily needs of their two children. The nanny was a recent graduate of Midwestern University and used many informal approaches to teach literacy that she had learned during her early childhood program. Marta stated that she did not understand the simplicity of the nanny’s choice of books and activities, like books that isolated sounds or counting buttons. She admitted that perhaps her inexperience with early childhood learning made her wonder about the value of these activities: “I have never worked with little children like this, so I suppose I just have to examine what’s there [children’s books in the library] for little children.”

Marta hoped that her children would learn to read so that they could read to learn. She believed that by continuing at the lab school for preschool, both her children would receive the foundation they would need for more formal learning in kindergarten and beyond.

**Mark, the Lifelong Learner**

So, I would hope for [my children] that [reading] becomes something that—that they enjoy because, you know, it unlocks so many doors throughout life to be able to read, to enjoy reading, to be able to educate yourself. I really see it as the cornerstone of being a lifelong learner—being proficient in reading [and] enjoying reading.

—Mark

Mark grew up in a small town in southwestern Ohio, where he was the youngest of three siblings. When asked about when he learned to read, Mark said his parents had
told him that he had taught himself to read at about age three. Mark’s parents described how he took a book into his bedroom, read by himself, and when he didn’t know a word, he came out and asked them to identify the unknown word for him. Mark remembered being very interested in reading and fascinated by the idea that the words on the page held meaning. He believed this enthusiasm for learning had served him well in his career as a university professor. He said:

   In terms of my own development, you know, my parents always liked to read, especially my dad. To this day, he’s a voracious reader, and so we had books all over the house. And we were always encouraged, and . . . so I think watching him, it was clear that it was something that was valued. And it was very strongly encouraged, and again, my parents took us to the library all the time. And we could get as many books as we wanted, and it was great. It was fantastic to be able to explore all those things that you were curious about. And one of the things that my parents always laugh about—they bought an encyclopedia set.

   This was back in the day when we had, you know, dead-tree encyclopedias.

The major league baseball team close to Mark’s hometown was a strong influence on many of his family members and friends. Mark recalled reading the sports page aloud to his father at the breakfast table. Being able to read about how the baseball team had done the night before was a “huge motivation” for him to learn to read. Mark also remembered being read to at bedtime by both his parents, a practice that he and his wife continued to do with both of their children.
By the time Mark began formal schooling, he believed that he was a fairly strong reader. He remembered feeling very indifferent to the kinds of structured reading activities that were a part of his reading instruction and being extremely uninterested in the reading assignments. He also noted the lack of variety in the reading material offered at school. As he grew older, he and a friend placed their own books inside the textbook and sat in the back of the classroom. In retrospect, he acknowledged this was a poor choice, but it distracted him and kept him from making trouble during class because of his lack of interest in the lesson.

Mark saw the role of school as almost secondary to what he and his wife had done and continued to do with their two children. From the time his children were several months old, they were read to; and his son turned the pages of board books on his own at about six months old. Both children had been exposed to rhyming games and the isolation of letter sounds as a preparation for learning to read. Mark and his wife had purchased the Bob Books to introduce and reinforce letter sounds. He said:

I love [the Bob Books] because they give very simple frames. They give very restricted number of sounds because vowels are just . . . insane in English because, you know, it’s terrible to ask a kid, “What sound does this letter make?” And you show him a letter $a$, and it can make 900 sounds. That restricted phoneme symbol mapping was really helpful. He loved that--- and once he started to get it, he became even more motivated; and he picked it up rather quickly.
Mark believed a major part of learning to read is the motivation to want to read and the enjoyment of it. To support interest in reading, he and his wife provided many books in their home; and both children had their own bookshelves in their bedrooms. Library visits were also important to the family, and the children were permitted to check out an unlimited number of books to supplement their bookshelves at home.

Mark and his wife did not believe in pushing their children to learn to read. Instead, they provided opportunities to read at home by having an abundance of books there. These books belonged to the local library, his children, and to him and his wife. In fact, Mark found their three-year-old “reading” a book of his about Charles Darwin. When asked whether she was reading about Darwin, she replied, “Yep!” Mark’s daughter also enjoyed “reading” her books in what Mark described as “Spanish pig Latin.” She watched *Dora [the Explorer]*, a children’s television program and learned some Spanish words in preschool and believed that she knew Spanish. Without specifically mentioning print concepts, Mark realized that his daughter had an understanding of the purpose of the written word. Her purpose for reading seemed to be firmly established by the behavior she exhibited. The exposure to books that Mark and his wife provided for their children allowed this interest to develop naturally.

Mark also believed in the importance of providing opportunities for his children to explore interests that support literacy and math skills. For example, he and his son conducted science experiments together, and they read the directions together as they determined how to proceed. Mark believed that the skill set his son acquired while reading the language of the directions would help him develop experience with reading
different types of text as he encountered a variety of texts and genres while reading in school. He said:

We try to [find what the children are interested and build upon that.] There are some things that, of course—they don’t know what’s out there. So you have to introduce things to them they might be interested in. . . . So we try not to make it completely directed. We try to make it not completely following their interests because, you know, with my son, he’d just be playing video games the whole time or watching TV. . . . But if you can pique their curiosity about these things, so we do lots of science projects, and again along the way, especially for my son, who is older, there’s a lot of other things that come along with it. Reading is a big component of it, so it’s, “Let’s read the instructions for this experiment.” And giving him experience with more technical text instead of reading for pleasure text, and again that’s another skill set; but it’s an important one.

Although Mark and his wife were supportive of both schools attended by their children, they had mixed feelings about one of the schools. Mark did not believe his son was challenged enough in second grade. Before moving to this school district, his son had a teacher who offered a wide variety of independent reading options. Each child took home a book bag on a weekly basis that included books on their instructional level in addition to those on the independent level as well. This first grade teacher often included books above his reading level to challenge him. This was not the case in the second-grade classroom. Instead of book bags filled with a variety of reading material, his son was given some reading and low-level comprehension worksheets for homework. The
boy often completed these worksheets before leaving school, resulting in very little reading homework at all. In addition, the comprehension worksheets were simply a recalling of facts with little synthesis of information:

Mark stated:

Every week that’s their weekly reading assignment that they have to do comprehension, and but the comprehension’s incredibly low-level; so it’s kind of . . . “Go back and pick out the sentence that says this” rather than “Is there a thematic way that these are going together?” or “Find something that’s not explicitly stated in the text.” And so, naturally, it almost always reminds me to go “So I want you to read this. Summarize it for me!”

Mark’s son’s situation contrasted with that of his daughter and her experiences with literacy in preschool. Mark’s daughter attended the preschool at Midwestern University’s lab school, located on the campus where mark and his wife were both employed. The preschool teachers read aloud to the students frequently in a manner Mark described as “engaged reading.” Books were the focus of other activities in which the children were engaged and based on the school’s philosophy of social constructivism. Mark said:

At the lab school they do a lot of reading to the kids, and that’s great and engaged reading with the kids. They tell them the stories but ask them lots of questions about what’s going on in the book, and they use it as a jumping off point for other activities; and I can’t say enough good things about the lab school. I love it! And
she loves it there, and they have great teachers; so but I think that’s been very helpful in fostering her motivation to read.

Students enrolled at the lab school experienced literacy according to the center’s philosophy of social constructivism. Children constructed knowledge through an active process of inquiry that prioritizes exploration, communication, meaningful relationships, and play. This lab school concept mirrored the attitude embraced by Mark, who enjoyed teaching his children; and reading with them was his favorite activity with them. Mark saw reading together as both enjoyable and essential to lifelong learning; furthermore, he saw his role as having fun during this process so that once his children learned to read they would be able to educate themselves. He said, “I really see [reading] as the cornerstone of being a lifelong learner is being proficient in reading, enjoying reading.”

Mark believed that having strong literacy skills was sine qua non of self-education.

**Tara, “Reading is a Feeling”**

I’ve always thought that reading is a feeling. It’s the feeling my kids get when they cuddle up against me. It’s the feeling they get of warmth and togetherness and me rubbing my son’s back while I read a story.

—Tara

Tara grew up in southeastern Ohio in what she described as a family of readers. Her mother was a remedial reading teacher, who always brought home the Scholastic Book order forms so that she and her sister could order paperback books. Tara described a home where much reading of magazines, books, and listening to books on tape took place regularly. She and her younger sister often read together, encouraged by their
parents to participate in and enjoy reading. As an adult she always carried a book with her for the few spare moments she may have to read. She said:

I mean, my mother from early on, when we would go to a restaurant, we always had a stack of books with us to read. Or in the car, or just anywhere we would go, and so I’m never—to this day I’ll usually have a book with me wherever I go.

Her father was visually impaired, and Tara recalls sitting with him in his recliner and sharing newspaper comic strips with him. She recalls as a very young girl simply looking at the pictures and making up stories to go with the comic strips before she was actually able to read them. As Tara grew older and became a better reader, she read to her father the baseball league leaders from the local paper and had fond memories of this shared reading time together. Although her father did not read in the traditional sense, he regularly enjoyed listening to books on tape.

Tara recalled that reading was strongly encouraged by both her grandmothers as well. One grandmother lived within walking distance of the local library, which was also the site of the county historical society. She described an enormous bookcase filled with books in her maternal grandmother’s home. It stood next to a bay window, where they read together regularly. Tara’s grandmother loved the poetry of Robert Frost and read his poems to her. Tara recalled her favorite poem: “Fire and Ice.” When her grandmother’s eyesight failed, Tara read Frost’s poetry to her.

Tara’s other grandmother was an Irish immigrant with whom she lived during the first portion of her first-grade year. Her paternal grandmother’s home had fewer bookcases, but Tara understood that reading was of significant value to her as well. Tara
and her grandmother sat together in a green rocking chair, and Tara read to her from her church magazine and Catholic Digest. Even before she could read, Tara remembered unconditional acceptance as she attempted to read with her. She remembered these times as “real loving and warm.”

When Tara transferred midyear to a new school in her hometown to attend first grade, she was disappointed to learn that she would not be in the top reading group. She remembered reacting strongly to placement in a reading group whose members could not yet read. She was upset because her group merely worked on skills, and she was eager to practice reading because she believed that she already knew how to read. Tara’s mother tried to reassure her daughter by telling her that her teacher would soon realize what a great reader she was and to be patient and try not to worry.

Tara used this accepting, loving approach with her own children as they acquired literacy skills. She described bedtime as a bonding time—with her son when he was an only child and with her daughter particularly when she reached the age of three. The bedtime routine with her son was often spent simply rubbing his back because he was less inclined as he grew older to ask to read with her.

Tara also believed that she and her husband were reading role models as the adults in her childhood had been for her. They both enjoyed a good book at bedtime and read trivia books to each other while travelling in the car. She said:

So I think in a way my husband and I—we read to each other when we’re in the car, and we read audiobooks, and we do little trivia things with books and so on and so. That’s why I try—we always have books in our car, you know, in our
van. And we’ve always had, you know—I started when my son was in
kindergarten getting audiobooks. Even though our van had one of those VCR
things, DVD things, movie things, I didn’t want him watching movies on his way
to kindergarten or preschool, so I would always have an audiobook or books for
him to read.

The family also listened to books on tape in the car while on family vacations.

Tara used books as valuable resources when engaging in a new hobby, trying a
new recipe, or learning more about gardening. When she discovered she was pregnant,
Tara checked out many books from the library to educate herself about her pregnancy and
the birthing process. In addition, the family always used the library when planning a trip.
The librarians from their local library put together a kit filled with books, children’s
travel books, activity sheets, and word puzzle books for each child to take along. Tara’s
home overflowed with reading material and books. She described many bookshelves in
her home, several devoted exclusively to children’s books.

Both Tara’s children attended the lab school associated with Midwestern
University, where she was a professor. The experiences that both children had were
positive and reflected Tara’s authentic approach to learning. Both children had success at
the lab school, but when her son entered first grade at the local public school after
attending the university preschool and kindergarten, Tara was told he qualified for the
Title I reading. This was incredibly disturbing to her because she’d been told that her son
was one of the few who could read some of the words in the classroom at the beginning
of the school year. In fact, he was able to read part of the letter sent home to her: “Dear Parents.”

After receiving the informational letter regarding the Title I program, Tara was confused. Her son had been reading some words since the age of four and was able to read repetitive sequence books. After some investigation, she learned that her son had been placed in the remedial program as a result of one phonics assessment. In an effort to explain why she had recommended Tara’s son for remediation, the boy’s teacher added that his behavior was noncompliant: He had trouble sitting still and completing his seatwork, and his handwriting and desk were messy. This experience had a negative effect on Tara’s son. She said:

Even though my son is in sixth grade, this poor beginning in first, second, and third grade has haunted him. First grade—first grade—it was a disaster. And he was so looking forward to first grade. He was so excited about it, and he went for about two weeks, and we started having crying jags. He didn’t want to go. . . . I mean, it was just horrible. From there [school] was just a horrible experience: first, second, and third grade.

After a thorough search for a new school, Tara’s son applied and was accepted at a performing arts school, where he has had academic success since enrolling there. Tara and her husband believed this school was a much better fit for his learning style and personality, attributing his difficulties not only to the mismatch with his neighborhood school but also to the amount of activity and hands-on learning that had taken place at the
lab school. The performing arts school suited her son, who played a musical instrument. He enjoyed participating in expressive arts and reading song lyrics instead of basal texts.

Tara’s daughter was a preschooler, who enjoyed attending the lab school, where literacy learning was more authentic than at most public schools according to Tara and her description of her son’s experience there. Her daughter showed interest in writing for real purposes. Tara discovered her scribbling on a piece of paper, and when questioned about her writing, her daughter told her it was a story about two girls, who were friends. On another day as they were driving to school her daughter declared, “I’m going to make Grandpa a card!”

Tara believed the lab school was responsible for her daughter’s use of literacy because of the teachers’ emphasis on reading and writing in authentic ways and for communication purposes:

It’s authentic, and it’s empowering. And the way that they do it, it’s really, I mean, it’s nothing worksheety or dumb. It’s done in authentic ways. . . . She’s like, “Oh, I have power now. I can write something, and this is what it says, and I can tell somebody something!”

Tara supported this preschool learning by asking her daughter to help with literacy tasks associated with household chores. She might ask her daughter to assist her in writing a grocery list. She also believed it was important to continue at home the learning that had been introduced at the lab school. If her daughter began to tell her a story, she might encourage her to get some paper and write it down, for example. Another way Tara supported literacy at home was by suggesting that she and her
11-year-old make a list to help him be more successful at school.

Tara held a strong conviction that each child was unique and developed in his or her own distinctive manner. This idea laid the foundation for her philosophical belief that literacy learning must be authentic and involve the strengths that the child possessed. She believed the mentor must set up a failure-free environment in which the child was able to gain confidence with her or his gradually increasing skills. Tara hoped that her children would continue to find success with their literacy skills and use reading as a valuable resource, not only in their academic work but in their lives as well.

**Olga, the Gardener**

Maybe it’s something with me. I have never been concentrated on learning or teaching the children—never. I wanted them to move as much as they could, to play outside the way I wanted them to experience as much as they could with their bodies. That way, I thought, I am preparing the body for that later ability to focus. I’m again—I am putting the seeds for that—for future development because of that environment that I create around them. That’s what I think for me: [The] child is a seed you put it in the ground, but I am the gardener. . . . I create the environment, and the child learns on their own. I’m not doing anything [because] they learn on their own.

—Olga

Olga grew up as the fourth child in a family of five children in a collectivist country controlled by the Soviet Union. Her mother told Olga that she had taught herself to read when she was five years old. Olga assumed she started reading because her older
sisters were “reading all the time,” and as a younger sibling she looked up to them. The children in her family had never had their own bedrooms, and Olga did not remember her parents reading to her because they were always busy working. She said, “We didn’t have that kind of life.” Olga’s parents provided for the family by working outside the home in the central Asian country in which she grew up.

At the age of nine months, Olga’s mother put her in a Soviet-run kindergarten, the equivalent of a daycare in the US. The building that housed the daycare included a preschool and kindergarten as well, so the transition from what is considered daycare in the US to preschool and kindergarten was smooth. Olga remembered this time in her life with great affection: She enjoyed going to school and was unhappy if she were ill and unable to attend. Music filled the daycare center as the children arrived, and Olga remembered singing, dancing, and listening to fairy tales that were played on large tape decks. Olga recounted these memories with great fondness:

I would say that I remember something from my kindergarten. . . . You know, in kindergarten we used to sing a lot—dance—um. We had a music teacher: I remember that. I remember listening [to] fairy tales on the tape. I remember one morning, and I came there, and there was the “Three Little Pigs” on the CD. It wasn’t CD—so I loved to listen that. It was quiet in the morning, and I loved all the time in the morning. They used to turn on that . . . while the kids are coming. They can listen [to] the story while they are playing.

This peaceful way of learning changed when she entered the first grade, when the curriculum became very rigorous. A requirement in the first grade was to memorize a
four-line poem, which was then to be recited in front of the class. If a student made an error, she or he had to begin reciting the poem all over again, which many might think resulted in great anxiety for some children. “If you stop one time, then your grade will be lowered. So you can’t stop,” Olga said. When questioned about whether or not this made her anxious, Olga responded that this was simply the expected way of doing things. Olga said that in her home, “school was always first in our family,” so perhaps this contributed to her willingness to participate so enthusiastically. In addition Olga had lived in the Soviet Union, where no one questioned government authority of any kind.

Regardless of the competitive nature of her schooling, Olga enjoyed the process of learning and reported that she always tried to be the best in everything she attempted. Reflecting years later, Olga realized that the methods used in her schooling were rigorous; but at the time this was not an issue because it was the only method of learning to which she and her siblings had been exposed. Olga “loved to learn,” and as far back as she could remember, she enjoyed attending school. She recalled crying when school was cancelled because of the weather or when she was too ill to attend. Olga described her feelings about her school days like this: “I loved to learn. I don’t know why I was excited about that, and I always wanted to excel!” She related that in her culture academic competition was very strong: She enjoyed this and always wanted to be first in everything academic.

In about the fourth grade Olga was exposed to Pushkin, Lermontov, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky: Reading was considered the path to world knowledge. Olga was thankful to both her parents and her teachers because the learning she acquired
helped her develop self-confidence, expanded her world view, and gave her the skills she needed to be successful as an adult.

Having less technology than children do today was another reason Olga believed she read so much. Reading was an enjoyable activity that allowed her and her siblings to read as a way to escape the reality of a difficult life. She performed her chores, milking the cows and working in the garden, very quickly so that she could get back to reading whatever book she had. She described the action of reading a book as analogous to eating a piece of cake. Olga completed her daily chores quickly so that she could relax and enjoy her book as she would enjoy a treasured dessert.

In college Olga trained to be a preschool teacher. In fact, she opened and ran her own preschool for several years before coming to the United States. Then, when her second child, a son, was of preschool age, she took him with her to her preschool. Several years later, Olga’s husband had an opportunity to earn his Ph.D. in the US, which resulted in the family’s move from their native country. Now in the US with her third child, who is of preschool age, they cannot afford the cost of placing her in the lab school; however, Olga believed that the home environment provided the exposure to activities that would lay the foundation for formal schooling.

Olga’s three-year-old daughter learned through the activities in which her siblings and parents engaged. With an older brother in high school, her sister an undergraduate, and her parents graduate students, her entire family modeled an attitude toward learning that Olga believed her youngest child watched and absorbed. Olga believed that her youngest daughter had learning models in her older siblings, whom she saw studying for
school, reading for pleasure, and playing musical instruments, creating a rich
environment for her to learn and grow.

With the older two children, Olga believed she was not as deliberate with learning
done at home. Living in the Soviet collectivist system was very different from living in
the US. Following the accepted way in her culture, Olga entrusted the teachers to do
what was best for her children. In fact, she never intentionally taught her older children
to read because the assumption was that reading began after they entered school.

With her youngest child, Olga was more purposeful in what she did to provide a
learning environment for her daughter, reading to her regularly in preparation for school.
She did not teach specific skills but created a learning environment in which her daughter
developed an attitude toward learning that would lay the foundation for later learning.
Olga spoke of encouraging play outside, working with clay, and singing songs together as
a means to prepare the body for learning. These activities, in addition to reading
together, created an environment conducive to focusing on a task at hand. This learning
strategy, she believed, would benefit her daughter as she began formal learning in school.

Olga hoped that books would open the world for her daughter but not with letters
and sounds. She hoped her daughter would have a teacher who “appeal[ed] to her
emotions” and helped her to see that “reading is a journey,” not about letters and words
but about the world. Olga spoke of reading as a “path to knowledge” that would develop
after the learning environment had been created by her. The child, with her nurturing and
support, would naturally learn on her own.
Olga used a metaphor to illustrate learning in her child: She saw herself as a parent who planted the seeds of learning with her daughter; she was the gardener who could then nurture that growth. The growth occurred when the seed was watered through exposure to activities that encouraged its growth. Water, like Olga’s positive attitude toward learning and reading to her nightly, contributed to the healthy growth of the plant—her child.

**Maha, “Reading is the Key”**

School without home doesn’t make sense, and home without school doesn’t make sense.

—Maha

Maha grew up speaking Arabic in northern Africa in a country where books were scarce and very expensive. She recalled owning only a few books and then trading with her friends to have a larger reading selection. Libraries contained only books for adults, and children’s books were expensive and difficult to acquire. Maha’s parents were very encouraging with her learning, both parents encouraging her and her siblings the best they could despite their preoccupation with providing a living for the family. In Maha’s home country in North Africa, adults typically had only four to five years’ formal schooling with very few people earning advanced degrees.

Maha and her husband lived in the US while he completed a doctorate in computer science. They believed in the importance of their children learning both Arabic and English, the latter essential for their life in the United States; but if and when they returned to Libya, the children had to be able to function in their native language. Maha
spent between one and two hours nightly teaching her children to read and write Arabic. She also spent time on English but believed that her children received the majority of their instruction in English at school.

Maha stated that the word *read* was the most important word in their language. They had been taught that “reading is the key for everything in this world!” She believed her role was to give her children this key. She did so by directing their reading instruction and by encouraging them to read on their own. She said:

You know, for reading, you ask about reading at home? It is very important for kids. You know? The home is the first school for them. You have to be with your kids. . . . You know, these days we are very busy with working or studying, so it is good for a parent to take from their time to give to their kids. Sharing with kids, it will build relationship between us.

Author’s Story, “Learning is Life”

In narrative inquiry, “the study reflects the history, culture, and personal experiences of the researcher” (Creswell, 2007). In an effort to comprehend participants’ stories and how individual interactions between home and school were understood, I composed my own family literacy narrative, which appears in this section. I have attempted to develop “self-awareness—that is examining what I know and how I know it” (Schram, 2006).

In choosing narrative inquiry for this research study, I realized that narrative researchers often choose this method as a result of their own experiences. “Our research
interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121).

I grew up in a Midwestern town located on Lake Erie in an inner-ring suburb of Cleveland, Ohio, in which both my father and paternal grandmother had grown up. The last of five children, I spent my early years simply.

My mother stayed at home to care for the children and handle day-to-day household responsibilities while my father taught biology at the local high school. At that time a teacher’s salary was modest without pay during the summer months, so my father worked a variety of jobs during the summer months like teaching summer school, working for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, and the Department of Agriculture and driving a bulldozer in a stone quarry, to name a few.

When I entered first grade, my mother joined the work force as a library aide in one of the elementary schools in our town. This was a difficult transition for me; my early school years were characterized by a feeling of abandonment. Although my parents encouraged learning and critical thinking, I was an insecure child and an average student at school. I realized the advantage of my experience many years later as an empathetic first-grade teacher, quickly able to recognize students who struggled with family changes.

Although I do not recall learning to read as an event of much significance, I remember reading with my mother quite frequently before entering school. Because she worked in an elementary school library during my early school years, she knew what
books children my age read and often borrowed books for me that she thought I might enjoy. One of my favorites was and still is E. B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web*.

Our home was filled with reading material to support our thinking: a set of encyclopedias my parents had sacrificed to purchase, an antique bookcase filled with volumes my father had inherited from his grandfather, and periodicals like *National Geographic* that were regularly delivered to our home. Because my parents had both been zoology majors in college, many field guides for flowers, plants, birds, insects, reptiles, rocks and minerals, and trees were also available to us. As members of Smithsonian Institution, Cousteau Society, Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation, Kirtlandia Society, Sierra Club, the National Science Foundation, and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, they received much reading material from each organization. Our home was cluttered with these informative texts that influenced my thinking and encouraged me to learn on my own. Although school and learning were not specifically discussed often, my brothers and I knew that our learning was valued by our parents. We were encouraged to be critical thinkers.

Life was busy and summers were filled with visits to our cottage on Lake Erie during July and August after the six-week session of swimming lessons had ended. My parents purchased a Civil War-era home, which was our respite from city living. The cottage was and remains a source of my best childhood memories.

Since the cottage had no running water or electricity, we spent much time together doing chores necessary for our summer survival. Getting ice for the ice chest, which had previously belonged to my paternal great-grandmother, was a daily activity. In late
afternoon every day we piled into the car and drove to one of the limestone quarries to bathe. We filled gallon jugs on a weekly basis as our water supply for cooking and washing dishes. These chores led to an interdependence and family unity necessary for our summer survival. I learned how to make do with less and be creative when I needed the comfort or conveniences of the modern world. Engaging in these learning experiences gave me a unique view of the world that has served me well over the years. Even though my husband and I have provided a more financially secure foundation for our children than I had growing up, these core values are still very much in my consciousness.

After graduating from high school, I attended Kent State and earned a degree in elementary education. I eventually became a first-grade teacher and thoroughly enjoyed the position for 11 years. As an early childhood teacher, I spent the majority of my school day teaching children to read. I watched with delight as my students gained their literacy wings during the very important first-grade year. I soon realized how much I enjoyed this part of my day and decided to work towards a master’s degree in reading.

As a classroom teacher attending graduate classes and learning about best practices in reading and writing, I was passionate about implementing new instructional strategies with my first graders. I was inspired to assess students and determine their individual literacy needs and work with their parents to help their children achieve success. I viewed my work in a more professional manner and saw myself as a literacy educator.
When my daughters Ana and Tia were born, my initial plan was to take time off and eventually return to work. My husband and I tried to find a responsible, affordable childcare provider. After several unsuccessful attempts to make the plan work, I made the agonizing decision to leave my tenured position. Although I was heartbroken about leaving a profession that I lived and breathed, I knew in my heart my family must be my priority. I became a stay-at-home mom and created a learning center in my basement for the girls.

Even though Ana and Tia attended preschool, I fully embraced my role as their first teacher. We sang songs as we drove in the car, dressed, picked up toys from the floor, or played a game. They listened to classical music as they enjoyed building blocks, Play-Doh, and various craft supplies. Sometimes I gave them an idea for a project, but often I simply sat back and watched them amuse themselves with their creations.

As they grew older, I placed an alphabet and a sight word poster on the wall so that they could practice writing letters and words when they were interested in doing so. They had order pads and waitress aprons from a family member with a restaurant and wrote down our orders as we dined in their pretend café. They often wrote stories, more like scribbling, and illustrated them with pictures. I have several of these stories that the girls read to me on videotape, and they are priceless.

Of course, an abundance of reading and books characterized our home. We went to the library regularly to choose books that they checked out. We tried going to the story hour but gave up on it when I saw that the librarian’s read-aloud techniques were less than engaging. In addition to library books, we also borrowed books on tape. A section
of the children’s library offered books, books on tape, and songs in languages other than English. We primarily chose items in Italian and German so the girls would know a bit about both my husband’s and my heritage.

As my girls grew, I had the advantage of a front row seat to their learning. I was present in the morning to pack their lunches, do their hair, and send them off to school on the bus. I was there when they arrived home after school to make snacks and help with homework. I was available to be a room mom and pick them up immediately when they were sick and needed a warm lap for cuddling. I was able to be present with my children in a way I am certain I would not have been if I had been a full-time working mom.

I watched my girls surpass my learning in the content areas like math and science as they grew older. Today, as college juniors they take courses about which I have absolutely no knowledge: trigonometry, chemistry, physics. One is a chemical engineering major, and the other is an adolescence and young adulthood science major. I am amazed at their abilities and proud beyond measure of their maturity and ability to navigate in the academic world.

When my daughters were very young, I attempted to expose them to as many learning experiences as I could, emphasizing joy as they learned new things and tapped into literacy skills whenever possible. We talked about everything that was happening as we lived our lives and engaged in purposeful talk (Allington & Johnston, 2002). I asked them how they felt about everything, what they thought about the weather, the television show they were watching, the macaroni and cheese they were eating, their favorite ice cream flavors, or who they played with most often at school.
Although I was not specifically trying to instruct them, I wanted them to experience the same kind of authentic learning that I had experienced when I was a child by helping them learn about the world. I made a conscious effort to provide them opportunities to learn about music by playing various genres of music, teaching them nursery rhymes and songs, and making up our own music together. They took dance lessons and learned to play the piano. They played a wide variety of sports like soccer, volleyball, t-ball, and even took fencing lessons with their father. We visited museums, and they received educational periodicals in the mail. I hoped this wide variety of experiences would expose them to many activities and people and help them to develop skill sets that would serve them well as they later navigated life on their own.

I hoped that like my husband and me, my children would become voracious readers who not only read for instructional purposes but for their own enjoyment as well. I hoped that they would use the skills they had acquired at home and at school not only to have successful academic years but also to be successful in their chosen careers and beyond. Both girls have found success in college majors that were exclusive to males just a generation or two ago, which is very exciting. My daughters have reached and surpassed my expectations for them academically, and I am eager to see what the future holds for them.

In the near future, they will graduate from college and secure employment in their chosen fields. As they progress through their adult lives, I am enthusiastic about what the future holds for them both. I believe my husband and I have given them a firm academic foundation that was enhanced during their years of formal schooling. I am confident that
they will find success in their chosen careers and do great things, but more importantly, I hope they will be lifelong learners and continually strive to know more about the world they inhabit.

**Narrative Analysis**

The previous section provided rich data for analysis, which is discussed in this section. The focus of narrative inquiry was on “the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals” (Creswell, 2007, p. 54) while the goal of this inquiry was to capture participants’ stories of home and school literacy practices within a framework known as three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This framework functions as a metaphor that describes the space that points the researcher backward and forward, inward and outward, and is situated in place as experiences are examined from each direction simultaneously. Narrative inquiry was well suited for this study because parents shared stories regarding their own acquisition of literacy as well as stories of their children’s literacy experiences.

“We tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as well as more current stories. All of these stories offer possible plotlines for our futures” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). As parents discussed their individual histories, they activated background knowledge about their own literacy learning. This information informed and acted as a platform for current literacy learning and future literacy histories for their own children. Parents set the stage for their children’s literacy learning in part as a result of the wide variety of experiences they had with their own literacy learning. I attempted to
ask open-ended questions that allowed those interpretations and experiences to be discussed.

After interviews were completed, I transcribed them and wrote narratives. I then constructed data charts that included each interview question. Each participant’s answer was placed in the data chart, and I recorded first epiphanies and initial impressions for each question asked. Themes emerged from participants’ answers. Recorded and transcribed interviews, narratives, follow-up emails, field notes, and data charts were read and reread to gain an accurate understanding of participants’ ideas about their role in their child’s literacy learning, which may have been influenced by their personal histories and lived experiences.

This study was informed by the methods of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and their three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. I constructed supporting questions so that lived experiences could be examined by looking backward and forward, inward and outward, and situated in place. Table 7 illustrates how supporting questions were aligned with three-dimensional inquiry space around my major research question: “What do parents experience as they navigate home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children?” Questions asked during interviews are noted in the column labeled Interview Prompts.

The next section of this chapter includes themes developed after coded data were divided into meaningful segments with reference to three-dimensional space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Looking forward and backward helped to understand how individuals’ personal life histories and ideas for the future informed their experiences
Table 7

*Themes Developed From Meaningful Segments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension of Space</th>
<th>Supporting Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Prompts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Backward</td>
<td>How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child?</td>
<td>What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forward</td>
<td>How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?</td>
<td>What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at home? What do you hope your child will gain from Learning to read at school? In your view, what is the most important piece of literacy learning (at home, at school, or both?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inward</td>
<td>How do a parent’s thoughts feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?</td>
<td>How do you feel about literacy learning as a child? How do you feel about your child’s literacy learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outward</td>
<td>How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?</td>
<td>How have you experienced the relationship with your child’s teacher as related to your child’s developing literacy?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated in Place</td>
<td>What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child?</td>
<td>What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
with their children’s acquisition of home and school literacies. Looking inward and outward yielded information to enhance understanding of the way parents perceived their own identities as parents of literacy learners. By situating this study in place, I was able to discover how context influenced parent experiences with shared literacy. Themes are organized by using supporting research questions and interview prompts as a framework.

**Theme 1: The Value of Literacy**

In this research one of the questions I intended to answer was the following: How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child? In order to encourage the participants to look backward, I asked in interviews, “What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school?”

All participants mentioned that literacy was an important part of their childhood. Parents, grandparents, and siblings valued reading and engaged in it. They shared stories of grandparents reading to children and children reading to grandparents; parents read to their children and asked their children to read to them. Siblings were also included in shared reading experiences in participants’ homes.

Taylor (1983) was the first researcher to use the term *family literacy* in her seminal work *Family Literacy: Young Children Learning to Read and Write*. She followed six families over three years, documenting the family literacy encountered in everyday experiences like writing and reading grocery lists. Although this work initiated the discussion about types of family literacy in the home, Taylor did not explore how home literacy translated to school literacy, how parents experienced this process, or whether parents’ own literacy experiences might inform the literacy practices in which
they engaged with their children. In this study I used parent narratives to create an understanding of these issues.

Although participants did not remember the age they learned to read, most had been told by family members that they had done so between the ages of three and five. Another concept repeated often was their consistent interest in reading and learning.

When parents were asked about their personal experiences, several commonalities emerged. First and foremost, the value of reading in every family was very strongly in evidence and was supported by the activities in which they engaged with family members. Participants shared stories about reading with parents, siblings, and grandparents with much warmth and affection and discussed the frequency with which these events occurred. Tara discussed favorable feelings with her father and grandmothers, which she then repeated with her own children. She emphasized that reading created “a feeling of warmth and tenderness.”

In addition, attending school was of considerable importance. Tara relayed the story of her parents sending her to live with a grandmother out of state so that she could begin kindergarten earlier than in her home state. Homework was completed after school and with great pride. Helga related that when she was having trouble in one of her early school years, her father insisted that she read with him every day after school for one hour to increase her skill set.

Children gain a head start when exposed to reading in the home before attending school; furthermore, those who have not been read to by parents before they enter school may be at a disadvantage in the early grades and beyond (Durkin, 1966, 1974, 2006; Fox,
2008; Trelease, 2006). Although an abundance of research supports the importance of a home–school connection, the voices of parents in this relationship are generally silent; thus, in this study I offered them an opportunity to be heard.

**Theme 2: Literacy and Its Role in Lifelong Success**

In this research another question I intended to answer was the following: How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages? In order to encourage the participants to look forward, I asked in interviews, “What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at home? What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at school?” Six participants mentioned that their goal for their children was lifelong success with literacy. Tara wanted her children to become “lifelong readers”; she wanted reading to bring them happiness, to serve as “a place to go” for comfort, to answer their questions, and to become a pastime they would enjoy. Olga saw reading as the foundation for healthy intellectual well-being. Mark wanted his children to become proficient readers who love to read and who are able to educate themselves. He believed reading is “the cornerstone of being a lifelong learner.” Both Mark and Maha referred to reading as the key to learning. “Reading unlocks so many doors throughout life,” said Mark; and Maha believed that “reading is the key for everything in this world.”

Although they also highly valued the importance of reading in their children’s lives, Marta and Helga had a slightly different view of the experience of learning to read. Marta used a very structured phonics book that she purchased to assist her preschooler
prepare for kindergarten. Helga, a mathematician, saw literacy as a code that one uses to accomplish tasks.

Tara and Maha specifically mentioned academic success. Olga hoped that when her daughter went to school that teachers would build upon what she already had and she would develop further academically. She said she wished that [her] children will open themselves with the book, to enjoy reading, and to have a teacher who will open the world for [them], not through formal reading letters . . . but [through] appeal[ing] to [their] emotions and connect[ing].

Reading is a journey.

Participants in this study saw literacy as a means to be academically successful and more. They cited reading not only as a teaching tool but also as a skill that opened up an intellectual world for them.

The goal, then, should be not a strong vocabulary but a strong engagement with the world. Children who talk and listen easily are also children who know how to make insights out of observations, to make meaning out of their lives. These are children who can think more confidently about language, about their ideas, and about the ideas of others. The best way to strengthen children’s learning is to let children live like richly literate people the world over. (Calkins, 1997, p. 30)

**Theme 3: Parent as the First Teacher**

The third question I intended to answer in this research was the following: How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child? In order to
encourage the participants to look inward, I asked in interviews, “In your view, what is the most important piece of literacy learning (school, home, or both)?” When asked this question, Helga said she realized the connection between language and literacy after her two youngest children were born and grew. She stated:

You know, especially with the twins’ language [I realized that] language learning starts the moment they are born if not earlier. Literacy starts so much earlier, so much earlier than we are thinking about it—preschool if not younger. . . . Language, sign language, that’s literacy—literacy is the words, uh-huh . . . or uh-huh? This is literacy! And to see this in little children is so much better; literacy starts so much earlier.

Mark believed that learning begins early as well and also in the home; he wanted the experience of formal schooling to support and guide his children’s learning. He said:

I see it as home. I see school as being almost secondary to what we should be doing. I know that’s probably weird thing to say, but I see it as, you know, they’re our kids; and I see it as, you know, as a very, very, very important job to make sure that they know how to read, they know how to do math, you know. School is a very, very good secondary resource. I know that’s probably weird to say but—I see us as being very, very responsible for this. And, you know, again, you know, if they are interested in doing something that’s beyond doing what they’re doing in school, it doesn’t matter to me. I’m very, very happy to help them pursue that.
Tara’s view reflected her own childhood literacy story as well as her training in education and library science. She saw the essential piece to literacy as making a connection to the child’s life. She said:

They have to be able to put a feeling to it. It has to be a memory. It has to be—like the things that children got most excited about were the things present in their own lives that they were relating to in their home life. And, I think, so much of the times in public education, the literacy is so separate it’s like there is a school piece and a home piece.

Tara believed that school and home literacy must be connected through the child’s interests and must include an emotional piece.

Parent interpretation of reading and the purposes of reading directly influenced how literacy was carried out in the homes of the participants in this study. All parents discussed the importance of reading for both themselves and their children. Similarly, all participants discussed providing opportunities for literacy learning by planning for a time and a place to read in addition to providing reading materials.

Mark and his wife made a conscious decision to read aloud to their son nightly beginning when he was three months old. He recalled that his son started turning the pages of board books at around six months of age. In addition, they purchased a set of phonics-based easy-to-read books to encourage the learning of letter sounds. Mark believed in acquiring the ability to isolate sounds and playing rhyming games as a means to prepare his children for learning to read as well as for the enjoyment of reading. He saw this as essential. He said he believed that reading “unlocks so many doors
throughout life. To be able to read, to be able to educate yourself—I really see it as the cornerstone of being a lifelong learner, . . . being proficient in reading, enjoying reading.”

As a mathematician, Helga saw reading as the deciphering of a code and believed in providing an iPad to reinforce this concept because of the numerous learning apps that emphasize early literacy concepts. Her hope for her children was that they find “meaningful” work as adults and are able to contribute successfully to society as a whole. Helga consciously engaged in conversation, and in doing so helped her children understand the purpose of language. Another way that Helga supported literacy learning was by modeling for her children that reading the directions for a game or putting together a toy gave her the information needed to play the game or construct the toy.

Marta’s father regularly did homework with her every day after school and believed this was the reason she spent time with her preschool daughter on academic pursuits. Marta admitted that she was “not good at games” but had devised an ingenious way to use a reading resource with her daughter. Because it was a scripted phonics book written for parents, it was in Marta’s words “boring”; however, she did not use it as suggested and allowed her daughter to teach her as a way to learn phonetic concepts. She had skillfully allowed her daughter to be the teacher, changing the balance of control and making learning more interesting for both learner and teacher. For someone who believed she was “not good at games,” I believe she had found a clever way to contribute to her daughter’s literacy learning.

Maha’s outlook was based on her belief that “the key for everything in this world is related to reading.” She said:
Reading is the key for all the scientists and for everything in this world. So I hope my kids in the future will learn everything, but I have to give them key in his hand. What is this key for me? It is reading. So I encourage them to read by themselves.

Olga saw herself as the “gardener” of her children in that she provided an atmosphere for learning to take place, but the child must motivate herself. She believed that she had provided a foundational learning environment for her daughter in which she was exposed to her family’s native language, she heard her older siblings playing the cello and the violin, and she was read to at bedtime. Olga saw this as development of the “habit” of learning. She said:

We establish habit, an attitude, character, paying attention, sitting and reading, and exposing her to different activities. Reading to her at bedtime plants the seeds. I am putting the foundation—planting the seeds—for healthy growth [both] intellectual and physical.

Tara wanted her children to become “lifelong readers” who derive joy and happiness from reading and are able to use books to find answers about questions they may have. One way that Tara provided reading materials was by making regular trips to the library to keep her children supplied with books about their interests and books on tape to listen to while they rode in the car. She also modeled the purpose of reading for her children by using books as an essential resource when preparing to take a trip, cooking from a recipe, working in her garden, or beginning a new hobby.
Participants seemed to run the spectrum from giving specific directions to providing an atmosphere that allowed for learning, but regardless of their method, the focus on reading was consistently very strong in the home. Participants also had very strong ideas regarding the benefits of what their children could gain from reading abilities acquired in school. The most obvious response that was consistent among all participants was that for children to be successful academically, they must be proficient in literacy, particularly reading skills. They saw reading at school as a natural continuation of what was done in the home, and according to Maha, “School without home doesn’t make sense, and home without school doesn’t make sense.”

Whether by spoken word, or by the literacy activities in which parents engaged with their children, they believed that they were their child’s first teacher. This notion aligned with the idea as it was first purported in *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson et al., 1985).

**Theme 4: It Takes a Village**

The fourth question I intended to answer in this research was the following: How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child? In order to encourage the participants to look outward, I asked that question in interviews.

All participants discussed reading with family members: parents, grandparents, and siblings. Families placed very strong importance on learning to read for success in school and in life. Tara spoke at length about the warmth she felt as a child reading with
her sister, her father, and both of her grandmothers. She said the following about one grandmother:

From an early age she asked me to read . . . to her. And so, I would. Again it was sort of reading . . . . Anything I did my grandma—it was like—she thought I was wonderful. I was the youngest grandchild, but she gave you such a great feeling of confidence because she thought you were wonderful. So you were wonderful, you know? We didn’t have to misbehave to get attention, and so that encouragement—we would sit—again it was like—she had a green rocker, and she would hold me on her lap, and I would read the Catholic Digest to her even though I probably couldn’t read it. I would pick out the words and read to her and again it was—my Grandma was real loving and warm and hugging me, and so I think that was the feeling. And so she—because she thought you were wonderful, too, you didn’t want to let her down. So she—I think a lot of my reading experiences are that warm, loving, bonding experience.

School experiences were mentioned, but two stories had opposing themes. Mark discussed how little he liked the structured reading done during reading time during the class day and was very uninterested with the reading material itself.

In contrast, Olga discussed how much she loved going to school and was upset when school was cancelled because of weather. She said:

I always liked to learn. I did. And I always liked to go to kindergarten, and I always—I used to cry when we had to stay home because of the weather or
something like that or we’d get sick. But I always wanted to go to school.

Always wanted to go to kindergarten. I loved to learn.

Olga saw going to school as a way to prepare for life outside of school. She explained how much she enjoyed learning:

I think it’s important to be able to read. I was thankful to my school and thankful to my parents that I have that experience because, umm, it opens you again [to] the world, another world. It expands your view. You become more confident when, you know—it’s a path to the knowledge. Basically it’s a skill which makes your life different. And uh, I think, I read a lot because at that time we didn’t have so much TV and computers, and it was a way to escape. Our life was difficult. It was hard, and we used to read to enjoy, to escape. I remember doing some stuff outside and milking the cows and working in the garden, but my hope was do it fast and get back to the book and having that piece of the cake so I could escape. [It was] my way of escaping the reality.

I also asked participants the following: How have you experienced your relationship with your child’s teacher and the school related to your child’s developing literacies? Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with home and school literacies?

Four of the participants were very happy with the education their preschoolers obtained at the lab school. Helga was happy with the socialization her child received at the lab school, but because her children had difficulty when they transferred to their
neighborhood school, she did not believe the academic requirements of the lab school were rigorous enough.

In addition, Tara, Mark, and Helga had no positive experiences with their local public schools after their children left the lab school. Tara’s son had a very difficult time in first, second, and third grades and transferred to a performing arts school for fourth grade. Mark’s son initially had an excellent first-grade year, but the family moved for his second-grade year and his son struggled at his new school. The curriculum was very traditional and did not allow for much independent reading, which Mark believed dampened his son’s enthusiasm for reading. As noted above, teachers determined that Helga’s son needed Title I tutoring when he transferred to his neighborhood school.

Because four of my participants were born in a country other than the US, they had unique perspectives about learning in U.S. schools. Maha and her husband were stunned to realize that two neighboring school districts could be very different as a result of the tax base in each city. They had not given much thought to determining where to live because they had assumed that the schools would provide equal amenities.

Helga was surprised at the difference in kindergarten in Germany and kindergarten in the US. She was unprepared for her oldest son to be expected to learn letters and sight words in kindergarten; furthermore, she thought that no grades should be given for spelling either. Although she was unhappy with aspects of formal learning in the US, she was happy with the overall structure. She said, “But . . . see, people say here that the school system here in America is so bad, that children don’t learn anything, and I don’t think so. I think it’s actually much more child-centered than in Germany.”
Olga spoke of the differences she had experienced with the strong political backdrop that served as the context for her learning:

We grew up in the collectivist[t] society, and we trust the school, and we don’t actually challenge, umm, question what the teacher does. So we trust the teacher, and we trust the school, and I remember when my older child—children—I was never concerned about their education. I didn’t think that I had to actually read [to] them. I didn’t do that. I gave them—they went to kindergarten, and they started to learn the books—I mean the letters—and they started to read. They are in the kindergarten, and they went to school. So we don’t think about that part. So when I came here, and I saw how different it is here. Parents are so much concerned with learning, and they actually really take it seriously. . . . I didn’t do that.

Marta was also happy with her child’s learning at the lab school and said, “Umm, this is a very good school, so obviously I’m very impressed with the school.” She assumed that the phonics workbook she used with her daughter would prepare her for kindergarten because it had been recommended by a parent of a kindergarten student.

Marta stated:

In her group she is by now only familiar with letters, not with sounds, so she can spell her name but she can’t read it. She can now read it with me because of that book we are starting. . . . So umm, I don’t know what to say about this strategy. . . . It does seem bizarre because why would they teach them letters instead of sounds because knowing letters doesn’t help them read, . . . but maybe
in their curriculum, it’s designed for . . . letters, and then they learn sounds in kindergarten. So not sure what to say about that!

Tara spoke to this question, and her answer echoed what she said earlier regarding her own literacy learning at home when she was a child. When children read, they must read about something that means something to them. She said, “They have to be able to put a feeling to it. It has to be a memory. It has to be . . . like the things that children got most excited about were the things present in their own lives that they were relating to in their home life.”

Olga thought of herself as the gardener of her children, who provided a nourishing environment in which learning occurs. She said:

It’s like a seed again. You are taking care about only the environment and it will grow. It will grow they will read and wonder but on the completely different qualitative level. It’s not about reading. It’s not about letters. It’s more about experience, you know. It’s life behind that—that’s what I would say.

A great deal of research supports the idea that reading aloud to young children builds the background knowledge necessary for learning to read and reading success in school (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997; Clay, 1991; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Durkin, 1966; Fox, 2008; National Institute of Literacy, 2006; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Many families have bedtime routines that often include reading together as parents bond with their children as they prepare children for sleep (Calkins, 1997; Cunningham, 2005; Huck, 1999; Taylor, 1983; Trelease, 2006). When children reach school age, many teachers continue to encourage parents to read with their children on a
daily basis as a means to support the literacy learning that occurs in school (Trelease, 2006). This study included not only an abundance of literacy experiences with parents but also with grandparents and siblings.

**Theme 5: Dissonance Between Home and School Expectations**

The fifth question I intended to answer in this research was the following: What challenges and supports does a parent encounter from educators and other family members as literacy is experienced with a child? In order to elicit responses from the participants, I asked, “What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?”

**Subtheme 1: Importance of alignment of home and school purposes.** Tara’s response to this question spoke to the central research question for this study: What do parents experience as they navigate home and school literacy practices? The uncertainty she expressed here also echoed the dissonance between what professionals expect and the family literacy that is offered at home by parents as they navigate home and school literacy practices. Tara said:

As I’ve gone through my doctoral program and I’ve [been] a very verbal person and literacy is foremost in my mind, I’ve always done very well; but how did that prepare me for challenges that I’ve had even working through my dissertation? It was more about my attitude, having a good attitude, and how to find information and how to go about seeking answers to my questions; so that’s what I hope my children will learn is the perseverance, the real-world skills of information literacy skills, all those kinds of literacy skills, to be successful in the real world, not to
not have any creativity, to not be filling out worksheets. And I’m surprised that education has been reduced back to that. I think we’ve gone almost backwards instead of forwards sometimes!

Maha spoke to the importance of the connection between home and school as literacy skills develop:

So the school it will not cover everything for them. The school and the home, they must be connected to each other. School without home doesn’t make sense, and home without school doesn’t make sense.

**Subtheme 2: Negative literacy experiences.** All participants mentioned parents who had served as role models for their own parenting. Marta stated:

My father used to always do homework with me, so for me it’s not—it’s what is natural for me. If I get some time to spend with my child, this is what I will be doing, . . . so we repeat what we’ve learned from our parents.

In addition to reading with parents, participants mentioned reading with grandparents and siblings as well.

Helga and Tara spoke at length about negative experiences their sons had had after leaving the lab school and trying to adjust to a public school setting. Helga shared this: “The first year in school was a fricking nightmare; I tell you it was horrible!”

And Tara communicated this:

First grade—first grade it was a disaster. And he was so looking forward to first grade. He was so excited about it, and he went for about two weeks, and we
started having crying jags. He didn’t want to go. . . . I mean it was just horrible.

From there [school] was just a horrible experience—first, second, and third grade. As a former first-grade teacher, I must admit that hearing from parents of two early learners that their first experiences in a public school were “horrible” was disheartening, to say the least.

**Subtheme 3: Philosophical differences at schools in the same country.** All participants noted some difficulty as their children moved from one school to another. When Helga’s and Tara’s children transferred from the lab school to a neighborhood school, they experienced considerable difficulty.

Mark’s son experienced difficulty when his family moved from one community to another. The first teacher had a strong background in literacy and allowed her students to engage in an abundance of independent reading both in the classroom and at home. During the following year, his teacher followed a more traditional approach, using an abundance of worksheets, for example; and Mark’s son lost his motivation to read.

Maha’s children attended the lab school during the day and an Arabic language school several evenings during the week. Not only were they speaking another language during these lessons but using the Abjad, or Arabic script.

Nonnative-born people, Olga, Helga, Marta, and Maha mentioned difficulties in understanding the American system of education. Olga, Helga, and Marta were perplexed by the focus on phonics when teaching children to read. Maha was shocked to discover that in the US a great disparity may exist in the quality of neighboring school systems.
Helga was amazed at the emphasis on handwriting: “Really, I couldn’t care less about the handwriting of my son,” she said. She was also unhappy about the emphasis in her son’s school on learning how to spell and the weekly spelling tests:

From Grade 1 there is spelling tests. This is typical. . . . I never saw this in Germany, ever before. Well, that’s not true because you do some kind of spelling tests from fifth grade on but not before. Not before, there’s not, I mean, spelling words?

Helga also believed that attendance on report cards deserved less emphasis:

Listen, attendance should not show up on a grade card. Attendance should not be there. Attendance can be—how many days or hours a student has missed—that has no business on a grade card. A grade card is really—I want to see in the time the student when they were there—how did they do? I mean often, it’s not even the fault of the kid, no?

Olga was very disappointed with the amount of reading done in the US. She said:

It’s sad what I see in the United States because we came from our country, and we always looked up to America because it’s the wealthiest country in the world, and it’s sad how they were in the school. They don’t read a lot here. They don’t expose them to that beautiful literature, poetry. I think by the fourth grade I was already able to read poetry and see the [meaning] behind that—the beauty of the weather, the beauty of the tree, [and] the beauty of the grass. I was able to do that already in the fourth grade when I read the poetry. But here I don’t see that in my
kids. [They] don’t have the same experience. I don’t know. It’s not
generalization. It’s just not their experience here.

**Subtheme 4: Philosophical differences at schools across countries.** Because
four of my six participants were born in countries other than the US, another idea they
mentioned was the considerable difference in the way learning is conducted here in
comparison to the way they had experienced it overseas. Foreign-born participants
believed that the schools in the US are not as rigorous as they are in their homelands.

Because participants Helga, Maha, Marta, and Olga were born overseas, much
discussion occurred about the differences in the schools they had attended and the ones
their own children attended in the US. Helga’s experience was what she referred to as
“old school” and very traditional. Because she came from a small town of about 1,000
residents, the school was very modest. With only two teachers for the entire school,
Helga did not receive the individual attention her children did in the US. In addition,
Helga’s parents ran the local bakery and were busy making a living to provide for their
family while she was growing up.

Maha attended school in a small town in Libya, where the typical child received
four or five years of formal schooling, an advanced degree reserved only for a few.
Although her parents encouraged her to learn, her father did not actually read with her or
help with homework because he was often too busy working to support the family.
Libraries in Maha’s country contained books written only for adults; children’s books
were expensive and hard to acquire. Because Maha owned four or five books for
children, she and her family and friends shared books to increase the variety of the books they read.

Both Marta and Olga were born overseas in Soviet-influenced countries, where the manner in which children learned was very demanding. Marta recalled attempting to learn manuscript writing with great difficulty, and she had no memories at all of learning to read but assumed that her sisters must have taught her.

Olga taught herself to read around the age of three, and she believed that because she shared a bedroom with her older sisters, where her siblings were “reading all the time,” she simply modeled what her older sisters did. When asked if her parents ever read to her, Olga said, “We didn’t have that kind of life”; her parents were always busy working to provide for the family.

At the age of nine months, Olga’s mother placed her in a Soviet-run kindergarten, the equivalent of a daycare in this country. The building that housed the daycare included preschool and kindergarten as well, so Olga remembered the transition from what is considered daycare in the US to preschool and kindergarten as smooth. Olga remembered this time with great affection: She enjoyed going to school and was unhappy if she were ill and unable to attend. She recalled music continuously playing with much singing and dancing. Olga reminisced fondly about her kindergarten experiences.

Her experience changed, however, when she entered first grade, where the curriculum was very rigorous. A first-grade required reading challenge was to memorize a four-line poem to be recited in front of the entire class. If a student made a mistake, she or he began all over again until completing the recitation without error. One might
assume that this process would produce anxiety in children, but when asked about this, Olga said that this was simply the expected way of doing things. Regardless of the competitive nature of her schooling, she enjoyed it and always tried to be the best in everything she attempted.

Parents born in the US and those born overseas bore striking differences. Participants born in the US (Mark and Tara) had more relaxed literacy experiences: reading the newspaper over breakfast, snuggling with a parent or grandparent over shared reading, and reading aloud to a parent or grandparent in a leisurely fashion. Participants born overseas had experienced a more deliberate approach to learning to read with more structured reading strategies and plans. This may have been the result of economic factors, for example, parents’ work schedules that allowed little free time to read together in an undisturbed manner. Participants born overseas experienced adversities related to harsh economic or political environments and learned to read despite these difficulties.

**Theme 6: The Impact of Parents With Academic Privilege on Their Children**

Limitations of this study noted above in Chapter 3 included the nature of the participants themselves: They were chosen from the preschool located on the campus of Midwestern University. Those who agreed to participate were parents of preschool-age children enrolled in the lab school at the time of the study and may have been more likely to participate because of their expected acceptance of preschool literacy learning. Often families affiliated with a higher learning institution like Midwestern University are more likely to be aware of best practices and the most current educational procedures.
Well-educated middle-class parents with high incomes and community status tend to be more successful at preparing their children for mainstream schooling scenarios (Lareau, 2000). These parents see home and school as interconnected and strive to provide opportunities that support learning. Working-class parents view school and home as separate entities and tend to admire teachers as professionals (Lareau, 2000). The consequence of this mindset results in middle-class parents who are comfortable assisting teachers and working-class parents who leave the work of educating their children to teachers. In this study, however, although they were comfortable and willing to assist teachers, participants found their children’s teachers unwilling to work with them when difficulties arose.

A discussion between parents and teachers is essential if they are to improve the education of children; the necessary collaboration occurs through a mutual agreement about the goals for children (Epstein, 1985). Teachers who have committed time and energy to parent involvement with school activities are more likely to gain cooperation from parents of students who respond favorably to the teachers’ commitment (Epstein, 1985). Although the participants in this study noted a strong collaboration with the teachers at the lab school during the preschool and kindergarten experience there, that experience was not replicated when their children attended neighborhood schools.

Mark and his wife were displeased with the level of collaboration offered at the neighborhood school his son attended after leaving the lab school. When the teacher used worksheets, they requested that their son be offered more difficult chapter books. Mark stated:
I don’t think they provide very challenging materials for him. For example, there’s a sheet that goes home every week. They do a one page, and it’s, you know, the practice reading. And they have to do some comprehension stuff, and it’s incredibly simple. And, you know, it almost always comes home already done. And he says, “Yeah, I did this already in class.” And it’s very simple.

Mark decided to supplement his son’s literacy learning at home by engaging him in projects that included reading directions, doing library research, and reading content book sets.

Tara was also unhappy with the results of her son’s school experiences at the neighborhood school he attended after attending the lab school for preschool and kindergarten. She said:

It was interesting because the teacher said, “Your son wants to run around all the time, and he doesn’t want to sit at his desk and do his worksheets.” He went from the lab school where it was all very active and hands-on learning. [And now] he has to sit in his desk. First grade was a disaster. And he was so looking forward to first grade, was so excited, and then he went for about two weeks, and we started having crying jags. He didn’t want to go. I mean it was just horrible!

From there [school] was just a horrible experience first, second, and third grade. Tara believed her son was content at the lab school, where his individual learning style was valued and supported. This changed dramatically when he moved to his neighborhood school for first grade, and she ultimately removed him and placed him in a school that supported his style of learning and artistic inclinations.
In the examples above, Mark and Tara exemplified the well-educated middle-class parents who provide economic security as a means to prepare their children for mainstream school scenarios (Lareau, 2000). They provided opportunities to support learning and saw home and school as interconnected; however, my participants did not experience a collaborative relationship with their children’s neighborhood schools. My participants believed their children’s teachers were unwilling to build a collaborative relationship with them, resulting in academic difficulties for their children.

Helga was also unhappy with her son’s experiences at his neighborhood school after attending the lab school for preschool and kindergarten. She was happy with the lab school and called it “an amazing school,” where the focus on socialization skills was first rate. In Helga’s experience, however, she found that the teacher at the neighborhood school spent too much time emphasizing following the rules. She said:

I swear, the first four to six weeks in public kindergarten is just about behavior—behavior and rules. It’s horrible, just horrible. What a waste of time! And what did they learn? That when you are good and quiet, you get a candy after? And you cannot talk in the hallway? I mean, what a waste of time!

Helga’s frustration also indicates an understanding of what is developmentally appropriate for an early learning environment.

**Summary**

In this chapter my purpose was to describe the storied experiences of parents with children in preschool who are beginning their literacy learning. Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I examined participants’ lived stories through the three
dimensions of space: backward–forward, inward–outward, and situated in place. These three dimensions provided insights into parents’ lived experiences as they prepared for and assisted children as they navigated home and school literacy practices.

Findings from this narrative study are important because ambiguity exists for parents about the characteristics of their role as parents who may or may not successfully prepare their children for formal schooling (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Parents, researchers, and educators often have conflicting ideas about what role parents play as the first teacher as well as perceptions about the value placed upon that role as a result of personal histories and lived experiences.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Children do not enter school as blank slates; they have experienced reading and its effects in many ways. Prior experiences with reading; the experiences of siblings, peers, and parents; and the role reading has played in the lives of their parents and grandparents each play a role in the construction of students’ attitudes and identities as readers. (Compton-Lilly, 2003, p. 2)

I came to this study with a wide variety of experiences that influenced my own literacy story. My early home and school learning laid the foundation for a lifelong yearning to seek understanding and to think critically. As a young teacher, I became interested in emergent readers and their parents, leading me to pursue my first graduate degree in reading. My experiences as a mother advanced my interest in emergent literacy and the impact of parental influence. Later as a doctoral student, I decided to pursue my interest in family literacy by looking more closely at how parents experience it and how they navigate the literacy practices their children experience at home and in school.

Compton-Lilly’s (2003) message above accurately represents my interest in the impact of “prior experiences with reading” on early literacy development. Although many people and experiences may influence a child’s literacy learning, I chose to focus on the parent and his or her experiences during the child’s early literacy experiences and their impact on the child’s early learning.

Dewey (1938/1997) maintained a similar stance decades earlier when he stated, “Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and
modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). His principle of continuity of experience aligns with the notion that all parent experiences have the potential to impact a child’s learning.

The purpose of this study was to describe the storied experiences of parents with children in preschool who were beginning their literacy learning. Stories shared by participants in this study helped me to answer the main research question: What do parents experience as they navigate home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children?

Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in this study, I examined participants’ lived stories through three dimensions of space: backward–forward, inward–outward, and situated in place. These three dimensions provided insight into parents’ descriptions of their lived experiences preparing for and assisting children as they navigated home and school literacy practices.

The following themes illustrate how supporting questions aligned with three-dimensional inquiry space around the major research question: What do parents experience as they navigate home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children? Interview prompts indicate the questions asked during interviews.

Findings from this narrative study are important because ambiguity exists about the role parents play in literacy education. A dissonance can be found in home and school expectations regarding what is to be done, if anything. Parents, researchers, and educators often have conflicting ideas about what role parents play as the first teacher as
well as perceptions about the value placed upon that role as a result of personal histories and lived experiences.

**Theme 1: Value of Literacy**

Looking backward, participants considered the following: How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literary practices with their child?

The first theme that emerged was the value of literacy in one’s life as participants shared stories of reading with family members and its importance to them. Reading not only with parents but also grandparents and siblings often occurred on a daily basis. Close family ties were reinforced when stories were read together, when one family member read to another, or when siblings read together at the same time. Participants experienced reading as a way to bond with family members, and they shared very positive feelings about these experiences. Tara expressed this sentiment with a story of reading with her grandmother. She said, “Reading was a feeling of warmth and tenderness.” When family members read together, the results can have a lasting positive effect on a child’s reading ability both in and out of school (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Learning to acquire literacy skills as a means to prepare and support literacy learning in school was discussed by participants at length. They told stories of parents and older siblings assisting them with their homework and working with them when specific academic difficulties arose in school, a common practice in families (Durkin, 1966). One participant was even sent to live with a grandmother so she could attend
school in a state with an early school enrollment age. Participants then transmitted these histories and lived experiences to their own children. Parents naturally use literacy practices with which they are familiar as they influence the next generation (Taylor, 1983).

Although the value of home literacy has been discussed in the literature (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Durkin, 1966; Jalongo, 2014; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Taylor, 1983), this study is different in that parents’ voices are prominently featured. Parents discussed their own literacy learning and how those experiences informed the knowledge and practices they used with their own preschool children as they became emergent literacy learners.

**Theme 2: Literacy and Its Role in Lifelong Success**

Looking forward, participants considered the following: How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?

Parents of all socioeconomic groups want their children to be successful academically (Lareau, 2000), which in turn can translate to lifelong success. Families provide diverse experiences that contribute to a child’s “funds of knowledge” (Moll et al., 1992). Participants in this study saw literacy as a means to academic success and beyond. They mentioned reading not only as a teaching tool but also as a skill that opened up an intellectual world to them. When parents read with their children, the goal, then, should be not a strong vocabulary but a strong engagement with the world. Children who talk and listen easily are also children who know how to
make insights out of observations, to make meaning out of their lives. These are children who can think more confidently about language, about their ideas, and about the ideas of others. The best way to strengthen children’s learning is to let children live like richly literate people the world over (Calkins, 1997, p. 30).

**Theme 3: Parent as the First Teacher**

Looking inward, participants considered the following: How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?

The third theme that emerged was the concept of the parent as the first teacher (Anderson et al., 1985). The emergence of this theme was unsurprising for several reasons. First, participants were either employees or married to employees of Midwestern University, where the lab school that served as the setting for this study was located. Second, participants either held or had spouses with advanced degrees. Finally, participants had purposely been selected because their children attended the lab school and they had previously exhibited a willingness to work cooperatively with staff members. Middle-class parents have been found to take seriously the responsibility of their role in their child’s education and feel guilty if a child is unprepared for school (Durkin, 1966). Furthermore,
middle class parents had more education, status, and income than working class parents. This increased their competence for helping their children in school, as well as boosted their confidence that they were capable of helping. Working class
parents lacked both the skills and the confidence to help their children in school.

(Lareau, 2000, p. 9)

How teaching by parents as the first teacher occurred was idiosyncratic for each participant and his or her child according to the direct or indirect implementation of instruction by the participant (Taylor, 1983). Mark, Marta, and Maha all purchased educational resources for the purpose of teaching their children to read. These were instructional materials designed for teachers and parents and followed a structured format. Tara provided many materials but did not give much instruction with the resources and preferred a more holistic approach by allowing her children to lead their own learning. Olga mentioned specifically that she did not teach her children to read and preferred to envision herself as a gardener who prepared her children for learning and then nurtured their growth along the way.

Helga was less involved with directing her children’s learning. She believed that the majority of learning should be at school:

Okay, if my child goes to kindergarten, he should get—he or she should get—the main ideas from school. I feel that I can feed into that and say, “Okay, read the book or something,” but I think the learning should be done during the day [when] they are there from 9 to 3.

Helga’s approach reflected several things about her life. She was a single, working mother raising four children on her own. Her statement suggests that the time she was available to her children outside the work or school day may have been limited as a result of these circumstances. Certainly, the literacy experiences at home differ from those that
take place at school (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) and are unique to each family’s structure, daily routine, and literacy practices.

With spoken word and with the literacy activities parents engaged in with their children, they believed that they were “their child’s first, most enduring teacher” (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 7). Because the perspectives of parents have not been discussed completely in previous literature, my goal was to give parents an opportunity to speak about their role as the first teacher as they shared their storied understandings of their children’s literacy learning.

**Theme 4: It Takes a Village**

Looking outward, participants considered the following: How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?

Considerable research supports the idea that reading to and with young children builds the background knowledge necessary for learning to read and reading success in school (Anderson et al., 1985; Calkins, 1997; Clay, 1991; Duke & Purcell-Gates, 2003; Durkin, 1966; Fox, 2008; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002). Many families have bedtime routines that often include reading together as parents bond with their children as they prepare children for sleep (Calkins, 1997; Cunningham, 2005; Huck, 1999; Taylor, 1983; Trelease, 2006). When children reach school age, many teachers encourage parents to continue to read with their children on a daily basis as an essential means to support the literacy learning that occurs in school (Trelease, 2006). This study not only provides an
abundance of literacy experiences that included parents as well as grandparents, siblings, and community members.

Helga spoke extensively about the local store her parents owned when she was a child and the authentic learning that occurred there. She mentioned that even at the very young age of five years old she was often left to tend the cash register, resulting in her learning to read the words on containers of food. Those customers assisted her as she located containers and learned to count and make change. She believed these experiences helped to lay the foundation for her natural desire to learn and eventually become a mathematics professor.

Participants reminisced fondly of other literacy experiences that included reading with siblings as an enjoyable pastime. Marta and Olga discussed learning to read with assistance of older siblings. Tara recalled with great warmth memories of reading with both grandmothers during her childhood. All participants read with their parents on a regular basis. Storied understandings that participants revealed about their own literacy learning informed how they shared home literacy with their own children.

**Theme 5: Dissonance Between Home and School Expectations**

All participants described some dissonance between home and school expectations. The dissonance found through this study differed from the dissonance discussed in Chapter 1. Initially, when speaking to parents, I believed an uncertainty existed about teacher expectations for them; however, the dissonance as reflected in the following subthemes seemed less about teacher expectations and more about parent expectations for their children’s teachers. My question was as follows: How have you
experienced your relationship with your child’s teacher and the school related to your child’s developing literacies?

**Subtheme 1: Importance of Alignment Between Home and School Purposes**

Parents agreed that home and school expectations should be similar; however, determining what expectations should be for a particular school and or teacher could be difficult. Often the mission statements listed on websites did not match their child’s own experiences in a particular school. This information emerged when I asked the following: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with home and school literacies?

**Subtheme 2: Negative Literacy Experiences**

Participants hoped that their children would have positive experiences when they attended school; however, their own childhood literacy experiences had not prepared them for the difficulties their children experienced. This finding was surprising in the way the theme of dissonance emerged. I did not expect the discussion with participants about their preschool child to evolve naturally into detailed conversations regarding older siblings and their school literacy experiences. These discussions were sometimes startling in the level of disappointment both parents and their children experienced and the degree to which parents were dissatisfied with the classroom teachers and the literacy curriculum. I was distressed to hear that Tara’s child’s first year of school was “horrifying” because of difficulties with teachers that her son had experienced as a result of his lack of focus on his seatwork. Helga related that her son’s experience was a “fricking nightmare,” and she was concerned about what this might mean for his
remaining school years. Mark stated that the type of nonfiction that his son was reading as a fourth grader was “boring” and “excruciating to read.”

**Subtheme 3: Philosophical Differences at Schools in the Same Country**

Participants discussed their surprise about the variations in school districts as their children moved from one to another. Maha and her husband were unprepared for differences in the school districts near Midwestern University and were surprised to learn that some were rated better than others. Maha’s husband related a conversation he had with a coworker in which he was told that “the ranking of the school is affected by the neighborhood,” an idea inconsistent with their previous understanding of education in this country. Before coming to the US, Maha believed that everything was “equal here” and schools provided the same education to all students. As immigrants who had previously lived under Muammar Gaddafi’s politically repressive regime, one might understand how disappointing this discovery must have been to them.

Mark not only experienced the differences between the lab school and a neighborhood school, but he and his family moved to another suburb between his son’s first- and second-grade years so that his son attended two neighborhood schools after attending the lab school. The first neighborhood school resembled the lab school in its teaching philosophy; however, the second neighborhood school was very traditional in its approach, and Mark believed his son was less motivated to read there because of the uninspired approach to literacy learning.

Because the lab school had been specifically chosen for this study for the good relationships parents and teachers already had, I anticipated the results would be positive
as they related to parents and their relationship with the school. And to clarify, all parents approved of the education their children received at the lab school and the quality of the program offered there. Participants noted the constructivist approach to learning, in which knowledge is constructed through “an active process of inquiry that prioritizes exploration, communication, meaningful relationships, and play.” They also cited that socialization skills, active learning through play, and literacy activities that contributed to their children’s desire to learn as a result of this approach. The difficulty seemed to arise after their children left the lab school and attended other schools either for kindergarten or first grade.

Tara and Helga were shocked to discover their sons had been recommended for Title I reading intervention in the fall of their first-grade years after attending kindergarten at the lab school. Both mothers were caught unawares by the determination and unhappy with the resulting anguish experienced by their sons and themselves. Tara and Mark were unhappy with the schools their children attended after leaving the lab school and with the very traditional approach to learning with structured seatwork time that included numerous worksheets that drilled reading skills. This was, they believed, a result of the different philosophical approaches to learning at the lab school and their neighborhood schools. Because the lab school was holistic in its approach, children there were taught according to their own ability levels; furthermore, literacy learning was embedded in the hands-on learning that took place. This transition from the lab school to neighborhood schools was a very difficult one for the parents and their children mentioned above.
Subtheme 4: Philosophical Differences at Schools Across Countries

Participants born overseas believed that American schools were the best and that only best practice was followed in the US. They were disappointed to learn that the phonetic approach to teaching reading is emphasized, that spelling is a requirement, and that handwriting and attendance are included on a report card.

Olga, Helga, and Marta were shocked at the phonetic approach to reading used in the US. They were amazed that the method of teaching reading included the use of decoding strategies first instead of reading for meaning. Marta expressed her shock this way:

It does seem bizarre because why would they teach them letters instead of sounds, because knowing letters doesn’t help them read, but maybe . . . their curriculum is designed for letters and then they learn sounds in kindergarten. So not sure what to say about that!

As a former literacy instructor who has taught phonics courses at two universities, I understand the rationale behind teaching letter names and sounds to emergent literacy learners. The English language is noteworthy for its peculiar spellings resulting from the influence of the Celts, who were the first inhabitants of the British Isles; and subsequent invaders like the Romans (Latin), Anglo-Saxons (German), and the Normans (French). American spelling would certainly seem bizarre to someone whose native language had fewer influences!

Olga not only disagreed with the phonetic approach to teaching reading but also did not believe that children in the US read enough. She said:
It’s important for them to know their letters and how to connect the syllables together. It’s absolutely important—I understand that. But I want my kids to meet those teachers who can actually connect again that formal reading with that thing behind it and behind the text. I think then the kids will learn to enjoy reading and now we see in the school that kids don’t read a lot.

I believe that Olga wanted her children to learn not only how to decode words but also how to make meaning from those words. She continued as if to clarify her thoughts:

It’s not about the alphabet. Letters are only the key to the door. That’s how we have to show children. When you put it together, the letters together, it opens up, and behind that—and I think they must learn. We must, we have to introduce the alphabet but find a way to do it more engaging and meaningful. I always say that we have to always engage the emotions in our teaching so they will be lifelong learners. They wouldn’t look at it as something formal, but they would enjoy it.

Olga seemed to believe that the formal teaching of reading, in which the alphabetic principle was emphasized, overlooked the most important piece of reading. To Olga, the joy of reading was to be instilled in her children and that was lacking in their literacy instruction in the US as opposed to learning about the beauty of the text that she had learned and instilled in her a love of lifelong learning.

**Theme 6: The Impact of Parents With Academic Privilege on Their Children**

Because the parents in this study were academically privileged and participants had been recommended as a result of their positive relationship with the lab school, an expectation was that their experiences would be positive. To be clear, the relationship of
the lab school and participants was essentially a very positive one; however, as children graduated from preschool or kindergarten at the lab school, the experiences of parents with neighborhood schools were less than positive. The constructivist approach to learning practiced at the lab school was seldom replicated in home schools, which caused great strife for families.

**Implications of the Findings**

The first two findings are Theme 1: Value of Literacy and Theme 2: Literacy and Its Role in Lifelong Success. The importance of early literacy and its benefits for lifelong success have been discussed by many authors (Durkin, 1966). By the time Trelease published his *Read Aloud Handbook* in 1982, reading aloud had already been done by many parents who might not have understood the lifelong benefits of this literacy activity. Trelease also initiated the conversation about how parents could create a desire and motivation to read before children learned to do so at school. His *Handbook* is now in its seventh edition, which speaks to the value of its content. Huck (1999) also wrote about creating a literacy rich home environment in which books and reading were valued; both she and Trelease wrote about the importance of lighting the literacy fire on the home front for children so that the motivation to learn, the concept of print, and the excitement of reading would already be in place by the time the child arrived at school.

The themes mentioned above relate to early literacy and its relationship to lifelong success. Both themes are typical of middle-class parents with cultural capital (Lareau, 2000); they tend to be enthusiastic about their children’s learning because of their earning power and education. These parents find encouraging the academic efforts of their
children relatively easy. Working-class parents who lack their own academic skills might experience difficulty determining how to encourage their children academically; furthermore, because they see teachers as the professionals who take the lead with their children’s learning, they might not take the lead themselves. Although my study included parents who were not native speakers of English, they were also highly educated. Nonnative English-speaking parents without advanced degrees might experience additional difficulties supporting their children’s English language acquisition and successive academic efforts.

The third finding, Theme 3: Parent as the First Teacher, had earlier gained nationwide attention with the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Anderson et al., 1985). Perhaps parents may have known they were their child’s first teacher before this publication, but the national news coverage certainly brought this concept to the forefront for the first time. Both themes are interrelated and connect with what the parent has initiated or continued throughout the period of a child’s literacy learning.

The number of participants who were affiliated either directly or indirectly with Midwestern University was a limitation of this study. As employees or spouses of employees of the university, they constituted a limited pool. One may reasonably assume that their affiliation with higher education gave them a better understanding of the importance of the types of teaching a parent might engage in at home. A limitation of this study is that participants would likely be familiar with *Becoming a Nation of*
Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading (Anderson et al., 1985) or at least be familiar with the results of this study.

The fourth finding, Theme 4: It Takes a Village, regarded the importance not only of parents in the process of early literacy learning but also of grandparents, siblings, and community members. A greater understanding about the role that others play in a child’s learning must be fostered and encouraged. Many adults may play a role in a child’s learning in the course of the day as a result of parents’ work schedules. In addition, as a child encounters changes in living arrangements and changing family structures, they may encounter even more adults with the potential to influence literacy learning.

Theme 5: Dissonance Between Home and School Expectations seems to have the most significance in this study. Participants were unhappy with the way their children learned at neighborhood schools and were surprised when they realized significant differences in teachers, schools, and school districts.

The middle-class participants in this study had community status because of their affiliations with Midwestern University. As middle-class parents they saw home and school as interconnected, may have had stronger academic skills and higher economic status, and may have been unafraid to dictate to teachers how their children should be instructed.

Recommendations for Teacher Education Programs

The next section includes recommendations for teacher education programs. These suggestions impact preservice teachers, instructors of preservice teachers, teacher
education programs, and the students who will ultimately be affected by these changes in teacher education programs.

If the goal of teacher education programs is to prepare preservice teachers for their future profession, then these programs must prepare education majors for the classroom and beyond. Learning and teaching must begin and end with the diverse families who send their children to school.

**Parents as Collaborative Partners**

I began this study inspired by parents who believed that I was an expert on education and who admitted they were unsure whether what they were doing with literacy learning was right or sufficient. Although the participants in this study spoke of occasional uncertainty, for the most part they were comfortable with the literacy efforts they implemented with their children. To be sure, the participants in this study were academically privileged because of their association with Midwestern University as professors or as spouses of professors.

I believe these participants can serve as a best practice model as parents who are interested in providing the foundational structure on which formal literacy learning can take place. Parents in this narrative study understood not only the importance of reading to their children early and often but also of providing opportunities for their children to improve their own literacy skills; they supported their efforts as they learned more in the lab preschool.

Participants spoke of positive relationships at the lab school and satisfaction with the constructivist practices implemented there. This reflected the philosophy of lab
school personnel that knowledge is constructed through an active process of inquiry in which exploration, communication, meaningful relationships, and play are prioritized. In addition, the mission statement located on the lab school website stated that parents were considered “full partners in the education of their children.”

Although the home and school communication has improved in the last few decades, the results of this study make clear that few teachers see parents as equal partners in education. Teachers must learn the importance of the value of parent involvement and proactive communication in their preservice preparation. Relationships can be challenging, yet when the effort is made by savvy teachers, the results are very successful.

In direct contrast to the middle-class parents who participated in this study, working-class parents often hesitate to become involved in home–school relationships because of their lack of cultural capital. Preservice teacher education programs must prepare new teachers who understand parents who have or lack cultural capital and the implications of either for their relationships. Every attempt must be made to create a more balanced home–family relationship with neither party in a position of power.

**Teachers Initiate Communication**

Teachers must reach out to parents before the school year begins and lay the foundation for positive relationships. By communicating through newsletters sent either electronically or via postal mail, they can help create the mindset for a successful school year. Newsletters can contain helpful information regarding school supplies and school calendars; however, another more important use of the newsletter can be to prepare the
child for the rigors of the school day and the challenges of schoolwork. Parents can be reminded about the essentiality of good nutrition and an appropriate amount of sleep to provide energy needed for thinking in school.

Talking to their children about the upcoming school year can be suggested to parents in a newsletter as well. Creating a sense of excitement about making new friends and learning new things can provide the motivation a reluctant child may need and reduce any anxiety about changes in a schedule or a new teacher. The new school year must be looked upon as an exciting new adventure that the child cannot wait to begin. This is an vital part of the learning process and parents can play an important role with a little nudging from organized teachers.

When the school year begins, teachers must continue the conversation with the parents of their students. Open house, curriculum nights, and parent–teacher conferences are some of the traditional ways that teachers have provided information to parents regarding the processes and procedures of the school year; however, if teachers want parents to be more involved in their children’s learning process, parents must be given opportunities to take an administrative role.

Parent–teacher organizations have historically been supportive of school events like dances, grade-level trips, and spelling bees, to name a few; however, these activities are usually suggested by teachers and administrators, and the impact is limited by the willingness of those teachers and administrators to relinquish control. Parents who can make decisions involving school activities will be more invested in the outcomes. Parents who are more invested will be more motivated to continue to be involved; in
addition, those involved parents serve as mentors for other parents hesitant to become involved.

Because the lab school is affiliated with the early childhood program at the university, undergraduate students are required to complete a minimum of one semester of their field work at the facility. This policy ensures that the students attending the lab school reap the benefits of the best and most innovative practices of early literacy learning.

**Recommendations for Educators of Early Childhood Literacy Learners**

In the next section I describe recommendations for educators of early childhood learners. These suggestions will impact early childhood literacy learners and their families.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching Model**

The middle-class parents who participated in this study were academically privileged. Their cultural capital made them comfortable dictating how their children should be best educated at school; however, working-class parents do not assume such a stance with regard to the teaching philosophies and strategies used with their children.

Early childhood teachers must attempt to empower all parents to understand and advocate for their children’s literacy needs.

Each family has a unique body of knowledge and skills that they use to function in life. Early childhood teachers must understand the knowledge and experiences can enhance the literacy learning of all children, regardless of cultural or economic
background. Funds of knowledge exist in all children and are unique to their families and the experiences they have had. Teachers must build upon the foundation of those funds.

**School Communication That Fosters Transparency**

Some of the parents in this study were disappointed when their child’s teacher did not communicate well. Teachers must have a method to correspond weekly with parents on curricular information, homework schedules, and upcoming events. Technology provides easy access to information via school websites and communication applications like ClassDojo and Remind101 for most parents. Paper newsletters can be sent to those families without access to technology.

Another issue that arose for parents in this study involved moving from one school district to another. Often the reports on a child’s academic strengths and weaknesses were inconsistent from one school to another; for example, the child may have been viewed as a strong reader in the first district but qualified for Title I reading in another. This type of situation could be alleviated if schools were more transparent in methods of teaching and evaluation by placing such information on brochures and public websites so that parents could make informed decisions when selecting school districts for their children.

**Move Kits**

As a first-grade teacher at the beginning of my career, I gave little thought to the inconsistency my students would experience when moving in and out of my classroom or district. I believed that I was providing a strong literacy foundation for them. I also hoped for the best if children left my classroom as a result of a family move; however,
when a child loses several weeks or months of learning because of a disparity in teaching philosophies across school systems, lifelong consequences can occur.

Some participants described challenging circumstances affecting their entire families when a child moved from one school to another. Perhaps understanding these challenges and working to ameliorate the effects of a move from one school to another would be helpful.

Reducing difficulties experienced when a child moves from one school to another can be accomplished if the teacher of the child leaving prepares students and families for the change. Preparations could include a move kit for the student to take to the new school; it could include a letter to the new teacher from the previous teacher providing helpful information regarding instructional methods used with the child. The moving kit could also contain books, letters from the child’s classmates, and other artifacts to help ease the transition. Improved communication among home, school, and new school could reduce or eliminate many difficulties.

**Mission Statements**

Changing schools could be easier for families if school personnel were more transparent about instructional methods. Commonly found on district websites, mission statements communicate to the public the overall objectives of the school district. Although these are somewhat helpful, in my experience they are most often simple statements used to satisfy state and federal mandates. These vague mission statements fail to reflect the teaching philosophies of every teacher working there.
Classroom teachers can devise their own mission statements, snapshots of what occurs in their classrooms on a daily basis. These mission statements would resemble school district mission statement in structure. A brief, concise statement that includes an explanation of teaching philosophy and instructional strategies would help parents make decisions about changing schools or moving to a particular school district.

**Families as Collaborative Learning Partners**

Much has improved with home–school collaboration, yet according to the results of this study, much remains to be done. Parent–teacher organizations meet to plan bake sales to raise money for athletic equipment athletic teams and have book sales to purchase technology carts. Parents and teachers meet to plan school parties and dances. These are important contributions to the education of the whole child; however, I believe an essential component of the learning process has been overlooked: the relationship between families and schools.

Families must be considered true partners with schools and the educators who provide the learning there. Families of the children who are enrolled in schools must be viewed as partners in this process. The process of including parents as partners must begin early if the relationship is to yield lasting effects.

The results of this study show that parents support literacy and want their children to be successful literacy learners throughout their lifetimes. This study also indicates that parents believe they are their child’s first teacher and one who has an enduring effect upon their learning. This study also indicates, however, that parents were disappointed
with some of the strategies used as well as differences in strategies used at the schools their children attended.

If families are better informed about the schools their children are about to attend, I believe some of their disappointment may be reduced. Parents with access to teacher mission statements and the move kits mentioned above would have more information before making final decisions about which schools their children would attend.

Parent–teacher collaboration must be expanded to include more than fundraisers and school parties. Parents and families must be included in the planning of the school year, schoolwide literacy initiatives, and district assessment information. This already occurs in some districts where Schoolwide Title I is implemented. Throughout the year parents remain involved with an annual meeting, a parent advisory committee, assessment updates sent home every eight weeks, and other opportunities like family literacy resources and learning opportunities. These parent–teacher collaborations can be used at all schools, not only Title I schools.

**Recommendations for Policy Makers**

In this final recommendation section I describe my suggestions for policy makers who make decisions and influence those who make decisions about early childhood funding initiatives. These suggestions will impact early literacy learners, their families, and the population as a whole.

**Universal Preschool**

A complaint from several kindergarten and first-grade teachers with whom I work in urban districts has been that their students are unprepared to learn. These students
come from homes very different from the middle-class homes of the participants in this study. Most have not had the advantage of parents who know they must prepare their children with exposure to books and learning.

Preschool prepares three-, four-, and five-year-old children for elementary school. Learning that occurs in preschool is essential in laying the foundation for emergent literacy learning to occur by exposing students to print concepts, letters and the sounds they make, and counting and number sense. More importantly, however, preschool provides an opportunity for children to learn about getting along with others and taking turns as well as when to use an “inside voice” and when it is time to play. For these reasons and many others, preschool for all children must be mandated.

Families who cannot afford to send their children to preschool potentially add another risk factor that must be overcome. School districts must do a better job of providing preschool support for families. The solution is universal preschool, which is offered to parents across the United States as well as around the globe (Barnett, 2010). Good quality preschools provide the foundation for strong cognitive outcomes, social skills, and academic progress (Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010). When this cannot be done through federal or state funding, perhaps other universities with early childhood programs like Midwestern can offer partnerships to districts in impoverished areas.

**English Learners**

Another issue facing today’s schools is the issue of English learners, whose first language was not English. Students whose parents are nonnative speakers of English are
at a disadvantage because parents are unable to help with homework, participate in
parent–teacher conferences, and read newsletters with vital information for their
children’s learning.

Four participants in this study were not native speakers of English; however,
because of their academic privilege, this was not a risk factor for their children. English
learners continue to grow in number in the United States, which makes the availability of
additional resources essential to assist families as they transition to speaking English.

**Summary of Recommendations**

Often teachers are unhappy with the lack of participation of parents in their
child’s education; however, this problem can be remedied by preparing preservice
teachers to be proactive with parents and treat them as collaborative partners. Teachers
can easily blame parents who appear not to want to participate in their children’s
learning, but they should instead be willing to be proactive and initiate home–school
collaboration with their families.

Preschool is a necessary precursor to the early grades of elementary school
because it provides children an opportunity for exposure to early literacy and math
concepts and socialization skills. For busy parents and those unable to provide early
literacy learning, preschool fills the gap and lays the foundation for later learning.
Teachers must do a better job of providing this vital opportunity to all children regardless
of financial status.
Future Research

This study manifested as one conversation that included parents whose preschoolers were emergent literacy learners. In the discussion, I attempted to give them a voice in how they experienced the home and school shared literacy experiences with their children. Through their narrative stories, I intended to clarify their experiences with home and school preschool literacy practices.

Phonics and Its Impact on Literacy Learning

One idea raised in this study was confusion over the learning of phonics. Although members of the National Reading Panel (2000) found the teaching of phonics to be essential, they set down no particular means to teach it other than using a “systematic approach.” A variety of approaches are available to teach phonics, depending on the reading series adopted by school districts as well as professional development opportunities or lack thereof. Preservice teachers have received different types of preparation for phonics instruction, depending on the literacy philosophy of their education department. Novice teachers may have learned to read themselves with a literature-based whole language approach and have very little knowledge of phonetics themselves.

In addition, some of the parents in this study were born overseas and were not native speakers of English. Most other languages do not include the variety of spelling oddities English has as a result of the influences of Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman conquerors. Another study might include a comprehensive look at how these influences make the learning of phonics, the foundation of learning to read and write the English
language, challenging not only for native English speakers but also for nonnative
speakers of English in particular.

**Families of Literacy Learners**

As parents discussed their preschool children, conversations often included older
children. Parents inadvertently compared experiences their other children had had with
the same school or teacher. Instead of focusing on just preschoolers, another study might
look at the children in one family as one entity. Such a study might provide another
interesting data set.

**Follow-Up Study With Lab School Families**

The participants in this study were chosen because of their previous relationships
with the lab school. The choice proved to be positive in terms of their relationships with
the lab school and the teachers there, but after the families left the school, problems
arose. Following families after they leave the lab school might provide information
helpful to the educators there as well as to families whose children attend the school.
Such a future study would be helpful to determine how to ameliorate the difficulties
children and their parents experience when they leave the lab school and enter
neighborhood schools.

**Using Constructivist Best Practice in School Districts**

The structure of many school districts is very traditional, sometimes called the
standardized management paradigm (Henderson & Gornik, 2007), and is the result of an
emphasis on accountability in most school districts. This traditional approach puts the
focus of teaching and learning on standardized test results instead of on individual
students, resulting in challenges to teachers to individualize their instruction as is necessary in early literacy learning in particular. Focusing on the individual child and using techniques that differentiate instruction are essential.

**Philosophical Approaches in a Given Learning Community**

This study revealed the adverse effects of some teaching philosophies and on children and their families. Looking carefully at schools and teachers to determine teaching philosophies before children are placed in situations in which they may not thrive would provide essential information for families as they transition from one learning community to another. Learning more about schools beyond what is currently provided by the schools themselves would be helpful.

**Idiosyncratic Nature of Family Culture in Literacy Learning in the US**

Another future area to study is the effect of a family culture upon the literacy experiences of the children in that family. Because the lab school educates professors and students from around the world, examining how different cultural backgrounds impact their children’s learning experiences would be enlightening.

**Content Analysis**

The limitations of this study derived from the storied experiences of the parent participants. To deepen the data set, additional interviews can be conducted with first-year teachers to determine how preservice education translates from theory to practice in the classroom. Another way to triangulate the data is to conduct a content analysis study of teacher education textbooks and teacher education syllabi to determine how family literacy is addressed in undergraduate education courses.
Conclusions

When I began this study, I asked, “What do parents experience as they navigate home and school shared literacy practices with their preschool children?” I cast a wide net, believing that the dissonance in what professionals expected and the family literacy offered at home created uncertainty in parents as they navigated home and school literacy practices. I believe the results of this study reflect this idea but not in the manner I expected.

Parents described their lived experiences as they prepared for and assisted their children while they navigated home and school literacy skills; however, ambiguity existed not in the parents and their roles but in the roles of their children’s teachers and the schools their children attended. Perhaps the results would have been different at another school, one unaffiliated with a university, because the parents in this study were certainly not representative of the typical cross-section in view of their educational statuses. Parents, researchers, and educators often have conflicting ideas about the role parents play as the first teacher as well as perceptions about the value placed upon that role because of personal histories, lived experiences, and other cultural or economic factors.

Throughout my career in education as teacher, tutor, student, and parent, I have found parents questioning the value of literacy practices in which they are involved with their children. The vignettes that opened Chapter 1 illustrated encounters I had had with parents who wondered whether the literacy practices they engaged in with their children
were right and whether those literacy practices were enough; the views of those parents were the impetus for me to begin this study.

I am hopeful that information collected from the storied experiences of the parents in this study will help other parents navigate their interactions with schools regarding literacy practices as well as help educators assist them as they navigate the gap in home and school practices.
APPENDIXES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Interview prompts are listed under each supporting research question:

1. How do the past experiences of parents contribute to their engagement in literacy practices with their child?
   
   What were your experiences learning to read at home and at school?

2. How does the vision a parent has for a child’s future learning and life experiences influence the literacy practices in which the parent engages?
   
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at home?
   
   What do you hope your child will gain from learning to read at school?
   
   In your view, what is the most important piece of literacy learning (school, home, or both)?

3. How do a parent’s thoughts and feelings, prior experiences with, and dispositions about learning and school relationships impact literacy experiences with a child?
   
   How do you feel about your own literacy learning as a child?
   
   How do you feel about your child’s literacy learning?
   
   What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?

4. How do family, cultural, and physical surroundings contribute to the experience of initiating and implementing literacy with a child?
   
   How have you experienced your relationship with your child’s teacher and the school related to your child’s developing literacies?
   
   Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with home and school literacies?

5. What challenges and/or supports does a parent have as literacy is experienced with their child?
6. What is one critical experience that impacted your ideas about literacy learning?
APPENDIX B

EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS
Appendix B

Excerpts From Interview Transcripts

Excerpts From Interviews With Helga

Interview #1 Helga

April 2, 2013

Liz: So, I would like to hear from you what your experiences were as you were learning to read at home and at school.

Helga: My experiences…my goodness…it's decades ago. Uh, not very pleasant I think. I remember that I was in third grade and I had a bad grade in reading so I had to read every day with my father, who was a baker. So every day I was in the bakery for an hour or something so after a couple of weeks or something that was done and I could read really well.

Liz: Great!

Helga: But in Germany really reading was I mean you had a page or a book or something and you were reading it word by word. I mean this was not like here’s a word and here’s a picture or anything…this was really hard-core reading. And the German language is so different compared to English…you read the letters its not you know “c” is pronounced…you can really can follow all the letters and read a word haus is (shows me on chalkboard) H-A-U-S and it’s how you pronounce it but there was no picture of a house or anything. There was no help it was work and then you practice.

Liz: That was in school right? Can you think of any other experiences except that one time?

Helga: No, no I mean there is, German schools at that time I mean I think that changed too.

Liz: So, the experiences you had while growing up were not positive, is that what I’m hearing you say?

Helga: No but I mean when I grew up , first of all when I grew up both of my parents were running a business I was pretty, my Grandmother was living with us but I was pretty much on myself. It was a working class family, the school was school in a village of a thousand people there were two teachers who taught everything an older one who was…actually we even had two grades in one room so one was working the other was doing something else I would say my first…and I mean I skipped half a school year
...I skipped it; they decided I’m smart enough to skip first grade or something but they just combined first and second grade and called it (unintelligible). I was always the youngest. So I would say the first two years of everything I was pretty much left on my own. I mean, you had the things that you had to do like homework or something...you had to practice letters...but otherwise there was no...nothing compared to what’s out nowadays to help a child to read or ...you know? But when I grew up I was exposed to daily life math daily life literacy because my parents had this bakery I mean I was not even in first grade and I was five years old when I had to run the bakery by myself when my parents were working somewhere else. So, I did not know what the exact money was but the customers helped but this is also early literacy, right?

Liz: Sure

Helga: I mean you see a box and you know “this is a box of cereal,” right? Or this is butter, you see the words right? At some point you read the words right?

Liz: Let’s talk a little about your children in terms of your little ones, the 4 year olds. What do you hope they’ll gain from you in terms of learning at home?

Helga: You know what really made the big, big difference I have to say is the I Pad. Big difference. Having the all these materials accessible there ...tracing letters making words...learning about apples. And Sophia is anyway the girl who is so into technology, to TV, to remotes...she was two years old she could go to Netflix and choose a movie! I mean, connect symbols, colors, “Oh, I have to go to the red thing, and I click there then Netflix comes up! It’s very it is different. But the question was what I expect, what do I hope for...

Liz: What do you hope they’ll gain from learning to read at home?

Helga: I mean my children do not need to learn to read at home. I hope that they gain, you know something that is fun and they can learn something the world opens to them when they can read. When Sophia asked me, what did she ask me? “Mom, how did you know how this works?” “Sophia, I can read I just read the description.” She said, “Ahhh, that’s how you know that!” That’s how you know and that makes sense to her and the thing however if I look for something and I learn from that....

Liz: It’s like learning a code...

Helga: Yea...

Liz: What do you hope they’ll gain from learning to read when they are at school?

Helga: You know I do not care where they learn how to read; at school at home by themselves....uh... see at preschool I don’t know if I mean when Cindy was in preschool
she did not do anything and she was not forced I mean there was no intention to show them how to read which was for me fine too I mean at some point they’d better learn how to read right? And Adam went to the Lab School too and I think in his kindergarten years I think he just fooled everybody. He could not, see when he came to first grade see this is not what I realized. See in Germany you learn how to read in first grade you learn how to read there. This is the start of school, everybody starts at point zero and we go from there letters and whatever. Now, this is what I was absolutely not aware of! This is very different. Here, I mean how I saw this with Adam and the same with Cindy you learn how to read in Kindergarten. Kindergarten is first grade, right? Okay, not being aware of this Adam ended up after four weeks, in Title One; I thought oh yeah he’s going through school in Title One! This smart boy ended up in Title One because he had no clue how to read. Why not? Because when he had to read there were all these pictures there and as smart as this guy is he knew exactly what this word is or what he has to do. Then he was always among the late children showing up in kindergarten so the late children were always answering the questions…so you had to read the sentence and answer the questions. For example, look at the pattern and continue and put the next two symbols there or something. But he just looked at the answers…”Sure, I can do that too, right?” Otherwise he was just playing Legos there and playing with his buddies and having a good time. I mean this is certainly reading I mean you know I don’t know how you want to call this but this boy just fooled his kindergarten teachers by just looking smart, giving smart answers but reading or something he could not I was aware I would ask he what this means like speed signs or something no idea “I don’t need to know this Mom, forget this…your problem, you are driving, don’t ask me!”

Liz: Did he really?

Helga: Sure, absolutely! Oh my God, I thought if this is continuing like this the next twelve years I am not making it! The first year in school was a fricking nightmare; I tell you it was horrible! And then he couldn’t do it, he didn’t like to do it, for five minutes of homework of work, reading, he gave me three hours of grief, right? Fight after fight after fight after fight “I don’t want to do this; I’m not doing this I’m in school and that’s good enough!” Yeah. So----

It was bad until he got a handle on how to read or just mature more or knew some basic…basic patterns or letters you know he had no idea of the difference between a capital letter or…no idea it was ---horrible just horrible!

Liz: Okay let’s get back to …I have a couple other things that I wanted to ask you about. Did you have one thing in particular that has impacted your ideas about literacy learning? It could be something that happened to you, or something that happened with your children is there perhaps one thing that might jump out to you in terms of….you already did taught about the handwriting and the reversals is there anything---
Helga: What do you mean? Do you mean what would foster…I think you mean what that comes…

Liz: Something that comes from your experience. Either your children’s experience or your experience that has impacted the way you think about literacy learning?

Helga: Yes, I think that….you know….ya…uhh… see I mean with the first child I was just stupid, I mean naïve. Let them, he’s smart, he’s smart that’s clear so he will do whatever, it will work itself out, right? Not taking into account that he’s lazy too, but…(laughs) so he’s smart, he will get there with some pushing from me and some pressure he will get there. Uh then …you know especially with the twins’ language and language learning starts the moment they are born if not earlier. The way they make sounds and they were articulating with sounds…with Adam I did some sign language with Cindy she never needed sign language…..not more than ten words…more, milk, but with Cindy she already trained me so young that I knew exactly from the sound she makes what she needs…and then she could talk…Adam was maybe three years old when he talked a little bit more than a couple of words or something …some sentences I think when he was three you know he was just quiet he had everything he wanted there was no need for him to talk he was just happy right?

Liz: He was your first child also. You may have had more time with him perhaps…

Helga: There was no need to talk, he had everything he needed he had all the toys he wanted, he was good, right? Cindy she talked in complete sentences. I swear in complete sentences at the age of two. Complete sentences!

Liz: My!!

Helga: Amazing right? So there was no need of sign language she could talk she could articulate it right? But I mean the thing is with the twins I was aware of the situation I was a very….so Adam programed me and Cindy programmed me and with the twins I was just more observing, right? I mean what do they know first? …vowels come first…literacy starts so much earlier so much earlier than we are thinking about it preschool if not younger…language, sign language, that’s literacy…literacy is the words, “uh” you know in German you had two and I was not so aware of it to think how you say words you cannot say words right? The way you say words…uh-huh… or uh-huh? This is literacy! And to see this in little children so much better without using literacy starts so much earlier.

Liz: so you would say that’s the biggest thing that you learned is that perhaps----

Helga: It was stunning to me it was kindergarten or first grade it is earlier…it’s not reading books and going through books and this is a horse and this is a cow and you know elephant or whatever it’s the interaction right?
Liz: So it’s the speech?

Helga: Yea, how speech develops!

Excerpts From Interviews With Marta

Interview #2 April 2, 2013

Liz: So, you have a four year old daughter, who’s in preschool at the CDC, I have several questions that I’d like to ask you and if you have other information that you’d like to add that’s fine. The first question is about your learning in terms of literacy and I am referring to reading and writing. So I’d like to know from your perspective what your experiences were as you were learning how to read and write at home.

Marta: I think my sister taught me but I have no recollection of it I have no remembrance of it unfortunately. So I did know how to learn to read for sure before I started school. I don’t know what age and I don’t think I knew how to write at that time.

Liz: And, do you remember what your first experiences were when you started school?

Marta: Umm, it was a little bit difficult to write letters for me. Because we were taught writing the handwriting way…

Liz: Cursive?

Marta: Exactly. Yeah. So it was different from the printing.

Liz: So you found that difficult?

Marta: I found it probably easier than writing numbers. Numbers were, were, were harder.

Liz: So, if you can tell me, what, what do you hope that your child will learn or gain from learning to read at home?

Marta: She likes reading generally, and she’s always with a book. She always wants to know what happens on each page, she’s very adamant that we read every word on the page and obviously when she reads to learn, learns to read herself it will be perfect for her. That’s exactly what she wants.

Liz: So she’s excited about learning…

Marta: Yes, she’s a very curious child and she’s good in languages so, she likes doing it! It is also something to do with the child also, I’m not…good at games…so, I prefer
something that’s easier for me…its’ easier for me as well to teacher her something rather than a game… I’m trying to come up with a game out of learning. I can’t do a game that doesn’t have a learning component.
Liz: I understand.

Marta: So it’s better for me if I do it. I’m a teacher so, it’s natural for me.

Excerpts From Interviews With Mark
April 11, 2013

Interview #3 Mark

Liz: Let’s start out by I’d like to ask you what your experiences, what your personal experiences were as you were growing up and learning how to read at home. …if you remember.

Mark: well you know I don’t remember a lot about it but my parents tell me this story my case is a very unusual case in terms of literacy. My parents claim that they never taught me how to read. I was (the) third child and I was very, very interested in reading and I started reading when I was about three. And my parents say that we don’t know how you learned to read because they both tell me this and I you know it’s one of those things where you know they’re old now so they probably just remember but they say, “what is this word?” and leave and come back and say “what is this word?” and I read very early on and I was very, very interested in it…I thought it was fascinating. Once I got this idea that you mean all this stuff on the page, it because fascinating…

Liz: it means something?

Mark: Yeah, and I was and when I was the arrow when I was growing up was I grew up in southwestern Ohio and the Cincinnati Reds were huge at that time and I’d read the sports page and that’s how I learned to read. I’d read the sports page to my dad in the morning. So what did the Reds do today? So that was my huge motivation to read was figuring out how the Reds had done last night.

Liz: So you don’t remember actually any structured reading with your parents with your siblings----

Mark: I remember my parents reading to me at bedtime that kind of stuff but I could read by that point in time. So those are…so I don’t remember anything about the process about learning how to read.

Liz: How about when you got to school?
Mark: when I got to school I was a pretty good reader by the time I got to school and I remember being incredibly bored with the reading materials that were available. That’s one of my earliest memories just going “okay, I’m done with this, what’s next?” Which has been a lifelong problem…going what’s next? And I always enjoyed it. Reading was a way to keep me out of trouble as I got older a very good friend of mine who had the same issues…we used to sit in the back of class and we would have a pleasure reading book inside of our textbook and while the teacher gave an inordinately boring lecture we’d be reading our…whatever books we’d be reading. And we’d swap books when we were done and that was good because it was a really good strategy for keeping ourselves out of trouble. Cause you know, if we were bored and we were not reading we would start to make mischief.

Liz: So, if you could tell me what do you hope, what do you hope when you think about your children and your hopes and dreams for them as they are learning how to read at home and or at school? What are your hopes for them?

Mark: Sort of a long-term goal for them? For both of them I would hope that they would become proficient readers who really enjoy it I’ve always loved to read. My wife hates to read which is funny because you know she’s a professor and grinding through grad school…

Mark: But reading for me was, that was the most fun/part of the job. So, I would hope for them that it becomes something that, that they enjoy because you know it unlocks so many doors throughout life to be able to read, to enjoy reading to be able to educate yourself. I really see it as the cornerstone of being a lifelong learner is being proficient in reading, enjoying reading.

Liz: What do you hope will happen to them once they get to school and start learning to read at school?

Mark: Well, I have one that’s a second grader and one that’s in preschool so with the older child, my son, he was very much like me, he was incredibly interested in reading early along and he could read when he was three. I spent a lot of time with him but he was incredibly motivated to do it. And that made a huge difference. So he would bring me books and say “what’s this?” and we would go through it. Now before that we had laid the huge foundation for reading. Cause we read to him all the time every night before bed I mean book time to this day and it started when he was…. we started reading to him when he was about 3 or 4 months old and people would say, “Why are you reading to him? He can’t understand it!” and we’d just go “go away, and ….”. But we would read to him every night and one of the first things he learned when we would pause he would, he thought it was great to turn the pages. And that became a big thing for him.

Liz: What do you see as the most important piece---in school at home, or both?
Mark: I see it as home. I see school as being almost secondary to what we should be doing. I know that’s probably weird thing to say, but I see it as you know there our kids and I see it as you know as a very, very, very important job to make sure that they know how to read, they know how to do math you know school is a very, very good secondary resource I know that’s probably weird to say but I see us as being very, very responsible for this and you know again, you know if they are interested in doing something that’s beyond doing what they’re doing in school it doesn’t matter to me I’m very, very happy to help them pursue that. And we do a lot of other projects---

Liz: So you find out what they’re interested in and you build upon that?
Mark: We try to do that. There are some things that of course, they don’t know what’s out there so you have to introduce things to them they might be interested in that…so we try not to make it completely directed we try to make it not completely following their interests because you know with my son he’d just be playing video games the whole time or watching TV…but if you can pique their curiosity about these things so we do lots of science projects, and again along the way especially for my son who is older there’s a lot of other things that come along with it. Reading is a big component of it so it’s, let’s read the instructions for this experiment and giving him experience with more technical text instead of reading for pleasure text and again that’s another skill set but it’s an important one.

Liz: I think it’s so important too that you are exposing him to different genres. For example if you are just interested in reading graphic novels more things need to be read than graphic novels.

Mark: And he enjoys non-fiction not all the time and school sometimes they give him non-fiction which is, you know I’ve seen it and it has a lot of it has been in history sections in his class. And he says, “This is so boring” and I don’t want to tell him this but it is…excruciating to read. And I just go, “You have to figure out how to do…” and you know when we give him non-fiction for example, and I just know this cause we just got this book from the library it’s called “unusual creatures” it’s all about these weird animals that you’ve never heard of…and he loves this book. And it’s cool because there’s stuff that I’ve never heard of so he shows me, ‘wow, look at this thing!’” and I’ve never heard of that.

Excerpts From Interviews With Olga

Interview #4 April 23, 2013

Liz: Olga, can you tell me first of all, what were your experiences in learning to read when you were at home as a child?
Olga: I grew up in the family with many children, I have five siblings and I am the fourth child. So in my family my older sisters used to read all the time. So recently I asked my mom when I started to read and how I started to read and she said, “You learned to read yourself and you started to do it when you were five.” I don’t remember my parents sitting with me and reading to me…we didn’t have that kind of life we never had our own rooms so many children my mom was always busy but I learned reading myself. Maybe because my sisters were reading and people were reading around me I just maybe imitated that and learned through that? (laughs) So um, also I went through the Soviet education system which is very, very challenging and its rigorous…I went through the kindergarten when I was nine months not kindergarten…we say kindergarten but here it’s like a daycare. But in our country it’s everything they connect everything together. Its daycare and preschool and then kindergarten everything in one building. So my mom had to work and she had to give me to the daycare from nine months…so I was there.

Liz: Wow. So do you remember learning when you were in the daycare? What kinds of things did they do there?

Olga: I would say that I remember something from my kindergarten…you know in kindergarten we used to sing a lot, and dance, we had a music teacher I remember that. I remember listening (to) fairy tales on the tape I remember one morning and I came there and there was the Three Little Pigs on the on CD it wasn’t CD …so I loved to listen that. It was quiet in the morning and I loved all the time in the morning they used to turn on that …while the kids are coming they can listen the story while they are playing. I think all of that contributed to my development I don’t remember teachers are so pushing us in the kindergarten but in the first grade yes, it is it is challenging. We used to, we had to memorize poems started form the first grade so umm you memorize the poem it starts in the kindergarten and in kindergarten it’s about four lines but them it increases as you get through the school so you have to memorize maybe eight lines in the first grade and it increases and increases as you get older. Umm so you have to memorize and then you come to them in front of the class and you have to tell it by memory…the poems.

Liz: So you had to memorize it and recite it?

Olga: Recite it exactly. If you stop one time then your grade will be lowered. So you can’t stop.

Liz: That is strict! Was it scary?

Olga: You know when you leave there and you didn’t see anything to compare with, it’s just a way of living. You don’t think about it…I think about it now how it’s probably so challenging but as children we didn’t think about it. We think that’s how it’s supposed to be and this is the…we we we we thought that it’s normal. It was challenging, yeah.
Liz: In general, how do you feel about the way they have learned to read or the process of them learning to read and write?

Olga: Maybe it’s something with me …I have never been concentrated on learning or teaching the children, never. I wanted them to move as much as they could to play outside the way I wanted them to experience as much as they could with their bodies that way I thought I am preparing the body for that later ability to focus I’m again I am putting the seeds for that for future development because of that environment that I create around them that’s what I think for me child is a seed you put it in the ground but I am the gardener…I create the environment and the child learns on their own I’m not doing anything they learn on their own yes I sing, yes I tell the stories we jump together we play together I do the puppet show or if there is a chance we turn off the lights and we do the shadowing…anything and I tried to be a child with the children and they guide me and I just helped them to try to put their ideas to bring their ideas if they have an idea and they don’t know how to create something I am there to help them but umm I’m not teaching them anything. It’s my way of thinking about the children’s learning I wasn’t focused about that and my daughter she used to play piano and I think that was important for her and she used to go to the choir umm my husband was always reading and again I wasn’t focused about the I didn’t think about reading the library like here we didn’t have so much books like here in my childhood in my kid’s childhood we never had so much books like people have in America. My daughter grew up with maybe 10 books. I read I used to read them over and over and over and she memorized them and she loved them when we read them again and again ummm we were fine with that and then my son I started a kindergarten and he was in my kindergarten and he started learned reading it happened by itself again in my kindergarten it was Waldorf he started to come there when he was three and until five and he was there with me and then suddenly we were in the bus and he was reading the store said “Magazine” by himself magazine means store or everything was outside in the street written things he started to read himself never I was again I didn’t introduce him to letters I didn’t introduce him to reading, never I was sitting there and saying “do this” or ‘do that” because I was so much busy with my life and I was running the kindergarten in which I was running again the focus wasn’t on the intellectual development it wasn’t on the head I concentrated on the emotions I concentrated on the body I fill the room with music, I fill the room with poems, ten to fifteen poems a day we used to say in the morning and they don’t sit down and write it to memorize it don’t give it to the parents to memorize I just say it in the morning I just sing for example (sings a Russian song!) it’s only for washing faces or hands when we are making bread I sing another thing circle time there is no almost no books I introduce that gradually it grew it’s for half an hour of 40 minutes we have all the poems depending on the weather or depending on the season the morning opening some kind of poem and then a song and then some kind of poem with movement and finger-play and story and then song again that’s how they memorize all of that they listened they hear all of that and then I used to say fairy tale on Monday …then same story for five days….then Friday a puppet show…so I don’t believe that we have to actually sit down and taught them this is
the “A” and this is the “B” and look at it you have to learn that or show to child I think that way they listen they experience it and then it comes all by itself. Like it happened it with my child.

Liz: so you created the environment? -----

Olga: yea, it’s like a seed again. You are taking care about only the environment and it will grow. It will grow they will read and wonder but on the completely different qualitative level it’s not about reading it’s not about letters its more about experience. You know? Its life behind that, that’s what I would say.

Excerpts From Interviews With Tara

Interview #5  May 17, 2013

Liz: …First we’ll talk about your experiences growing up, so can you tell me a little about your experiences as you were learning how to read and write at home?
Tara: Okay, my Mom was a remedial reading teacher and probably we belonged… and in the 70s…we visited the library a lot we had a lot of library cards and we had a mail order program as well. So in the summer we could get books, so you could choose the books and they would mail them to you so you got a package in the mail. But early-- early on I remember, first of all my sister always wanted to read with me and so ummm and so we would read together and then my father was blind and so he would have me read the comics to him and even before I could read. So it was always like, my dad had a big recliner and so I could cuddle up with him and read the comics to him and tell him about…you know I would make up the stories with the pictures. And then, as I got older he would have me read the league leaders ---which is baseball--- and then my mother she also even back then they had the book the Scholastic the Scholastic Book Fairs I think and she would bring home great big things of books and we each had a bookcase in our room. Lots of reading, my mother was a reader and my father “read” books on tape. He got books through the Blind and Physically Handicapped. And so, they also had magazines and books and my dad was always reading too. I think we were kind of a household of readers… and my grandmother, my mother’s mother was also a big reader and one of the things… and she would have me when I was in elementary school, umm she would we would walk everywhere she lived right in Athens and she didn’t drive so we would walk everywhere. So we would walk up to the library…there was like a combination library and historical society… and we would, we would and we would she like Robert Frost poetry and she had a whole bookcase in her first house with a window.

Liz: Like a bay window type thing?

Tara: Yes, and you could sit in there and read and she had all these books and even then it was reading aloud , I would read aloud to her even as her eyesight began failing I
would read to her Robert Frost. One of her favorites was “Fire and Ice” so I remember that. I think I just came from a household of readers and it was really encouraged to…to read. I think the feeling of early reading was really that snuggling with my father in the in the recliner.

Liz: so, you talked a little about on the way to school, what do you hope they will gain as they learn to read at school as they gain literacy skills at school?

Tara: The thing I hope they will learn is that reading can help them to be successful academically like the more skills they have reading the more transferable those skills are to any type of like, math, reading, being able to read for meaning isn’t just a good story, it’s to help them do well academically. And umm it’s really interesting because my son is such a—I think he’s a fantastic reader. I mean, he loves going to the library and he loves comic books and graphic novels and non-fiction books and he reads…you know my sister sent him the Kid Page from the Washington Post, she’ll send him a package of those. And she usually gets him for Christmas those subscription to National Geographic Kids so he loves these magazines but them at school, in his Language Arts he doesn’t always get the best grades. I mean I often think that it’s such a chore for him to read and have to do all the paperwork that they require and so I’ll often get him the audiobook, and then he’s like really into the book and it really helps him with the comprehension. He’s not into doing worksheets…and that kind of kills the reading…I wish…I mean he reads for joy at home he’s constantly, yesterday I had to tell him you need to put down this book—he’s reading this book on how to play chess—he’s really into learning how to play chess now at school and he wants to learn about strategy he loves reading, you know he’s always picking up a book you know at the most inopportune times when he should be getting his book bag ready…you know like last night he got home and he had to go to bed because he has a big day today and he’s got the covers pulled up and he’s got a tent and a flashlight and he’s reading his book under there and I’m like, “I’m going to take your book away!” and I hate to threaten that but with both my kids I’ve always tried to read to them before bed and have that be our special time and for my son, he’s just now the addition of the second child has really impacted that…but he still wants me to come in that’s our close time I guess. Still sometimes he doesn’t want to read a book now exactly with me but he still wants me to sit with him for a little bit and rub his back and that’s tied in with the reading and then we also one of the things we did was with him just to help him go to bed at night, we started reading the 14,000 things to be happy about and then we would write down what we can be happy about and then cuz this year for some reason with all the horrible things that have been happening…and now he’s old enough to tune in to the news, and listen to the radio…it’s been very hard. Sandy Hook and then the…it’s just been awful you just get this feeling that, like for him he understands things now and it starts filling him with fear. And he’s now old enough to look online for movie trailers and some of them are scary, and I’m trying to monitor that but it’s difficult. So with my daughter, it’s interesting she’s really, she loves books with music, she loves
“Pete the Cat” and so she’s reading a lot and identifying like “oh there’s an ‘h’ “ so she’s developing her literacy.

Tara: And so she hasn’t shown much interest in writing but the other day she told me that she was scribbling something and she told me that it was a story about two girls and they were friends and a theme to go with it. And it was scribbling so that was neat it was literacy and I said I’d like you to sign Grandma’s card for Mother’s Day and I said, can you make a “K” and she said, I can make an ‘H’!” so she made an ‘H’!! and she scribbled a little bit and said, “this is my name” Cuz I like try to give her opportunities for real writing Like, “can you help Mommy make a grocery list?” and so I try to say, let’s think about what we want for our lunch this week cuz I try to give her opportunities for real writing and so she knows yogurt and so she writes “yogurt” but it doesn’t really say “yogurt” you know it’s just scribbling but I’m trying to make that connection I’m really happy that she was writing and she was like, “and this says…” and she was telling me this big long story and I was like “Oh! You need like three sheets of paper for that! So that’s exciting. I like the way the CDC…their approach to literacy, and like, “real” events…it’s authentic. It’s authentic, and it’s empowering and the way that they do it it’s really I mean it’s nothing worksheetee or dumb it’s done in authentic ways…she’s like, “oh, I have power now. I can write something and this is what it says and I can tell somebody something. Communication. And now it’s very interesting cause on the way to school she said to me yesterday, “I’m going to write Grandpa a card” which I thought was interesting because we hadn’t really been talking about Grandpa. And she said, “And I’m going to give it to him! And I’m going to tell him Happy Birthday!” Because we were talking about birthdays…and this is because my son had asked me, “Whose birthday is next?” because we just had Kaitin’s birthday...and I was going over…”first we had Daddy’s birthday, we had grandma’s birthday and grandpa’s birthday is in the same week.” So she heard us discussing this. And she knew we’d already given Grandma a card and she didn’t get the whole Mother’s Day thing…she knew we had given Grandma a card and when we gave Grandma something it was wrapped and “oh, it’s a birthday present for Grandma. And I kept saying it’s for Mother’s Day but the Mother’s Day thing didn’t really register…

Liz: Well, she doesn’t have Mother’s Day. She has birthdays…it’s all about me when your 3 and 4!

Tara: Right! So I thought that was neat!
Excerpts from Interviews with Maha

Interview #6

May 24, 2013

Liz: So, my first question is about you. And your experiences and when I say literacy I mean reading and/or writing. So I’d like to know from you what your experiences were as you were learning how to read.

Maha: You know for reading, you ask about reading at home? It is very important for kids. You know? The home is the first school for them. You have to be with your kids…you know these days we are very busy with working or studying so it is good for parent to take from their time to their kids. Sharing with kids, it will build relationship between us. You know my experience for two languages. I practice with them English and I teach them my home language and they are with Arabic school here. Because when we go back, they will face problem if I don’t teach them here. So it’s important to share the time with them to practice----

So the school it will not cover everything for them. The school and the home to bar. (I think she meant that they are together…connected). They must be connected to each other. School without home doesn’t make sense and home without school doesn’t make sense.

Liz: Do you remember learning to read?

Maha: Yeah, I remember that yeah. But you know in our culture we encourage reading and writing. And it’s very important for kids. But, we haven’t a lot of activity in that time and we haven’t a lot of book we have library at home we didn’t have public library we just buy book from the library shop and we keep this book but we switch with our friend. For example, we buy two book(s) and our friend bought two book and then we switch the book to each other.

Liz: Isn’t that nice?

Maha: yeah, because the book is very expensive and in my country there isn’t public libraries. We have....it is for big, not for kids. We haven’t a lot of story for kids, just some book related to Koran. There isn’t related to fun so we buy from library shop and we try to switch with other kids.
APPENDIX C

FOLLOW-UP LETTER
Appendix C

Follow-Up Letter

Hello Friends:

First: I’d like to thank you for agreeing to be part of my study. I appreciate your willingness to share your time with me; it was fascinating to hear about your personal experiences with literacy learning and your child(ren). I have thoroughly enjoyed transcribing and rereading your stories!

Second: I had initially asked you to keep a journal to record your ideas, thoughts, and experiences about literacy. Since this has proven to be ineffective, I hope you will agree to respond to the following prompts through email:

   1. Reading is…
   2. Writing is…
   3. Please describe a favorite literacy artifact from your child and explain why it holds meaning for you and/or your family.

*Please finish these sentences in your own words, using whatever ideas come to mind. This can be written as a word document and sent to me as an attachment.

Next: I have prepared a demographic information survey that is the second page of this attachment. Simply copy this attachment, type onto it directly, and then send back to me as an attachment.

And Last: I would like to have a brief follow-up meeting (one hour) to discuss my preliminary findings. Please let me know which of the following times would work within your fall schedule:

   A Tuesday afternoon/evening  OR  A Wednesday afternoon/evening  OR  A Saturday morning

(Please indicate when you would be available for approximately one hour)

*Meeting would take place on the KSU main campus.

I cannot thank you enough for your participation; I look forward to reading your comments!

Liz Ritz  eritz@kent.edu  440-xxx-xxxx (cell)
APPENDIX D
FOLLOW-UP DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY
Appendix D

Follow-Up Demographic Survey

*This survey is voluntary, however, should you choose to complete the following information it will be kept strictly confidential.*

**Your Information**

Name: ______________________________

Phone number where you can be reached: ______________________________

*(Please also indicate if you’d prefer not to be contacted by phone)*

Country of your birth: _____________________________

Your Age: 25-30___ 31-35___ 36-40___ 41-45___ 46-50___ 50+___

Your current Title/Position _____________________________

Education: High School ___ Trade School ___ Master’s Degree ___ Ph.D. ___

Other _____________________________

How would you describe your ethnic, racial, or religious background?

__________________________________________________________________

What do you identify as being important aspects of your ethnic/racial/religious background?

__________________________________________________________________

**Your Children**

Boy/Girl _____ Boy/Girl _____ Boy/Girl _____ Boy/Girl _____

Age____  Age____  Age____  Age____

Is there anything else that you’d like to add that may or may not be literacy related?

__________________________________________________________________

Thank You! Your help with this study is much appreciated! ☑
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


(Original work published 1938)


(Original work published 1982)


