THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS USING EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION

SUPPORTING ELL STUDENTS IN A LOW-INCOME SCHOOL IN SOUTHERN NEW

JERSEY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Gia Sparacio Scarani

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of early childhood education teachers at a rural, low-income, elementary school in southern New Jersey instructing literacy to ELL and low-income students at the Bridgeton Public School District. The theory guiding this study is Vygotsky's theories on social-cultural interaction, the Zone of Proximal Development, and scaffolding. The methodology of the phenomenology study was to gain information from the teachers through interviews, journal keeping, and observations. The study will examine the experiences of literacy instruction methods by 12-15 teachers for low-income and ELL students in early childhood education. Focusing on the teachers' experiences instructing students in low-income areas and ELL students might give better insight to these teachers on how to best instruct them.

The evidence presented in this research study validates the finding that teachers use different ways to teach ELL students. One method that is agreed upon by all as being best, but it is dependent on the teacher's skill level, knowledge, training, and resources. The study also shows the specific methods that these teachers use to facilitate the instruction of ELL students which include pedagogy and environmental. The pedagogical methods used were based on sociocultural theory in student grouping, visual clues, story play, speaking with proper grammar, and through music. In summary, based on the experiences of the 11 teachers, the teaching methods used to teach ELL student literacy were influenced by the experience level of the teacher.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development, scaffolding, early childhood education, theory of social interaction, literacy, ELL.

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to God, my creator, from whom all good things flow, and who, during the dissertation process, gave me Philippians 4:13, which has always helped me to know that God has my back!

To my daughter Sami, who always loved and believed in me every step of the way as I researched for this dissertation.

I dedicate this to my husband Paul, who supported me in so many ways throughout my pursuit of my Ph.D. and who always loved and encouraged me unconditionally.

To my parents, who always encouraged me to keep moving forward in education and taught me from a young age to never give up.

Finally, I personally thank my Mom because without her sharing her love and knowledge of education with me, this would not have been possible.

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

American Reading Company (ARC)

Common Core Standards (CCS)

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

Differentiated Instruction (DI)

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, 3rd Edition (ECERS-3)

EL with LD (English Learner with Language Disabilities)

ELL English Language Learners (ELL)

Emergent Multilingual Learners (EM)

English as a Second Language (ESL)

Framework for Teaching (FFT)

International Literacy Association (ILA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Independent Reading Level Assessment (IRLA)

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)

Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)

Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. Literacy experiences, especially in ELL and low-income school classrooms, can be varied and challenging for teachers. Children vary extensively in their language skills at school entry, and a substantial part of this variation is due to disparities in language exposure before school (Walker, 2020). In preschool, learning letter recognition and sounds are most important for students. The students receive the essential literacy background knowledge that becomes the basis for their reading for the rest of their academic careers and life. The study examined teachers' experiences utilizing scaffolding techniques in teaching literacy to early childhood ELL students. Second, it will also examine the teachers' experiences in how Vygotsky's sociocultural theory adds to these students' literacy development. This chapter will address how low-income children typically enter school with low literacy skills, some reasons why this happens, why preschool is important for low-income children to help enhance their literacy skills, and how Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory relates to this study, and why scaffolding is a useful tool to help enhance the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) of these students.

Background

Typically, low-income children enter school, preschool, or kindergarten, with less vocabulary, language, and exposure to books than children from more affluent families (Storch, & Whitehurst, 2001). Unfortunately, society has given these children schools that are less than standard with low funding, and teachers who have a high turnover rate. Twice – in 2000 and

2002 – the Abbott plaintiffs filed motions to enforce the Abbott V mandate for early childhood education in the urban districts, alleging that state education officials failed to ensure funding for qualified teachers, appropriate class sizes and curriculum, and other essential components of a "high quality" preschool program as these rulings provided critical detail and direction to the State on key aspects of the preschool program, from teacher qualifications to class size, enrollments, facilities, and procedures for determining needed program funding. (Education Law Center, 2011-2023)

In addition, some students are ELL students who have the additional obstacle of learning English. With the additional added task of learning English, many forms of individual scaffolding must be used. Of the ELL students, students with special needs require more intensive individual scaffolding techniques to become academically successful in English literacy. Anchoring curriculum requirements to a local context is helpful uniting students from diverse languages and cultural backgrounds around common objectives (Zalen, 2018). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is also a denominator in early childhood improving their literacy skills and in cultural-historical theory, the social situation of development is defined as:

a completely original, exclusive… and unique relation… between the child and… the social reality, that surrounds him… [one that] represents the initial moment of all dynamic changes that occur in development… [and] determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics… the path along which the social becomes the individual (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198; Nicholas, Veresov & Cripps Clark, 2021)

Historical Context

The historical context of this study was that usually, in low-income areas, children enter school with less vocabulary than children of more affluent families. Children from low-income families are at risk of learning outcome difficulties, particularly in literacy (Piper, et. al, 2015). The negative impact of poverty on children's English language learning can be identified as early as 18 months and is pronounced by 24 months between lower versus higher-SES children (Greenwood, et. al, 2017). In their analysis of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-K, reported a 60% gap in readiness scores for higher-SES children compared with their lower-SES peers, a differential effect size of 1.25 standard deviation (SD) units (Neuman et al., 2021). There could be many reasons for this, including a lack of parental education, access to books, and high-quality preschool programs. This lack of vocabulary exposure could cause these students to immediately fall behind in pre-literacy skills, including speaking. Children with a low socioeconomic status are usually more vulnerable to health and developmental problems than are children from families of higher socioeconomic status (Horsley & Ciske, 2005). Access to high-quality preschool programs for low-income families could help bridge the gap between these students and students who had access to more vocabulary exposure and modeling at a young age. Over the past ten years, the State of New Jersey has been putting forth more funding to preschools, creating free preschools, not just for low-income areas, but now for areas that apply for the funding and meet the specific criteria for the program as outlined by the New Jersey Department of Education. For these reasons, it is important to study which methods best allow these low-income children to learn literacy skills.

Social Context

The social context of low-literacy levels among low-income children stems from many reasons, including access to high-quality preschool education, and materials at home such as books. These students and their families also may have different priorities other than finding or purchasing high-quality preschool books, when the family's socio-economic conditions and political factors have them concentrating on finding shelter, food, and the necessities of life as outlined in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In addition to the challenges associated with the first school experience discussed above, these children are faced with a myriad of additional barriers to their school and life success (e.g., food insecurity, lack of materials and resources, less exposure to rich language in the home) (Bustamante et al., 2018)**.** As a result, children in these families are apt to suffer from psychological and behavioral issues that could detract from learning at school. Social capital, including trust and participation, is restricted in low-income families, which has been found to affect children's outcomes, including their mental health and behavior (Dáu et al., 2017; De Silva et al. 2005; Parcel & Menaghan,1993).

Theoretical Context

The theoretical context behind this study was that children in low-income areas commonly do not have as much exposure to literacy in the form of vocabulary and books as other children. At school entry, low-income children are almost a year behind in their language and literacy skills compared with their high-income peers (Bernstein et al., 2014). The fact that most of these students are ELL learners typically makes it even harder for them to catch up to the right academic level. Low literacy exposure can alter the way a teacher may want to approach instruction; hence educators must work to develop pedagogies that are fluid and flexible to meet

students' needs, ensuring that their cultural, linguistic, and neurological diversities are acknowledged, integrated, and sustained (Polleck et al., 2022).

Estimates suggest that about 60% of four-year-old children in families below the poverty line are enrolled in preschool, up from about 30% two decades ago (Barnett & Yarosz, 2007; (Wasington-Nortey et al., 2020). There is a stigma among some people that preschool is unnecessary or that it is "babysitting," or that they do not have to go to school until they are six years old. This stigma makes families unsure or reluctant to enroll their children in preschool programs, thus denying them a purposeful, educational head start.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) stresses the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live, and it implies that human learning is mainly a social process (Mahan, & Parisa, 2022). According to sociocultural theory, cognitive development is essentially a socially mediated process, in which the mediational connection between the social and mental ability is created and, in large part, by language, as it develops from social speech to private speech, which in turn into inner speech (Mahan, & Parisa, 2022). Because sociocultural theory holds that the learning of language development takes place in a social environment, the classroom aids in this process from peer to peer, teacher to student, and even student to teacher. Lantolf and Thorne in their 2006 study contended that the principles of the SCT (Sociocultural theory) can also be used to explain Second Language Acquisition (SLA) (Mahan, & Parisa, 2022).

Problem Statement

The problem concerning this study was that preschool students in low-income areas and ELL students on average have low letter recognition and letter sounds. Students' low vocabulary knowledge heading into school leads to language deficiencies, especially when paired with

limited access to books. According to Ritter (2021), children who begin first grade with deficits in early literacy skills will likely continue to experience difficulties in reading through fourth grade and later and may never close the reading skill gap in comparison to same grade peers. Barrera-Osorio et al., (2020) concluded that children with an inferior performance in phonological and letter naming skills in the first grade made more mistakes in word dictation in the second grade. It is important to study because, if methods of reading instruction work best with struggling readers in preschool, the instruction methods of the teachers in higher grades could be utilized more efficiently. The difference would be that more kindergarten students would be reading grade level or above and, therefore, do better academically in school. In the absence of intervention, the initial language gap between children from high SES backgrounds and those from low SES backgrounds will likely continue to grow exponentially leading to gaps in reading outcomes (Hart and Risley, 2003). Also, it would possibly lead to evidence that different literacy instruction methods have a positive effect on low-income students and ELL students, as opposed to other forms of literacy instruction. Many school districts in New Jersey prefer teachers who hold teaching certificates reflecting literacy instruction training, over those teachers whose standard teaching certificate contains little formal literacy instruction in their educational background.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. At this stage in the research, literacy instruction will be generally defined as any method that the teacher feels will yield the best results, and social interaction is defined as a communication process between two or more people

where information is shared. Each interaction is not only affected by the characteristics of individuals or the environmental context but also by the history of interactions (Meijerink-Bosman, et. al, 2023). These students participate in the early childhood program that lasts from September until mid-June.

Significance of the Study

Early childhood education teachers in low-income areas, specifically those who teach ELL students, must find many forms of differentiation to teach literacy to these students that will fit their individual needs. Differentiation with ELL students include, but is not limited to, the academic and cultural needs of the students. Teachers could use visual aids, or hands-on activities, ELL translation support or peer pairing for modeling to enhance differentiation. Teachers need a repertoire of strategies to manage learning styles of ELL's, some of whom may not yet be able to communicate in English (Lucas, & Villegas, 2013). These strategies may include asking students to use visuals to illustrate their experiences, having them write about experiences in their home language and asking someone to translate, and identifying a bilingual community member who can serve as a guide and liaison to the child's family and community (Lucas, & Villegas, 2013). To help ELLs participate in learning activities, teachers must be able to analyze language so that they can determine the linguistic features of the discourse of their disciplines and of classroom activities that are likely to be challenging for ELLs (Lucas, & Villegas, 2013). The significance of this study was to understand and explore the experiences of teachers in early childhood education instructing literacy to ELL students utilizing Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory while scaffolding the students to their ZPD.

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of the study was how Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory using scaffolding, teacher-to-student, and peer-to-peer relates to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This research contributes to the study by showing how the study is affected by these theories concerning literacy instruction. The ZPD is one of the main concepts in sociocultural theory that indicates the significant role that teachers have as mediators (Clark & Graves, 2005; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Mahan & Parisa, 2022). Guided reading provides an opportunity for [teachers to support] small groups of children within the same developmental reading stages to apply strategies they already know to texts they do not know (Nicholas et. al, 2021). When a teacher uses scaffolding to constantly bring the child to the next level of ZPD, this can create academic literacy success.

Scaffolding, when used peer to peer under the context of Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory can be useful to literacy learning. Regarding early reading, Griffin (2002) found that paired reading is a useful scaffolding technique. In a study by Kirova and Kamison (2018), argues that more capable peers can be important sources for scaffolding young children's multiliteracy experiences in preschool classroom contexts. Peer scaffolding under the context of Sociocultural theory can also be seen in preschool during play. Free-flowing, child-initiated play is a typical context for peer interaction, and shared activity and imagination in play promote cognitive development as well as social development (Syrjämäki, Pihlaja, & Sajaniemi, 2019). As for ELL students, sufficient evidence has demonstrated a strong relationship between social interaction and language learning and development, regardless of whether or not it is of a first or second language (Xu, Chen, Spence, Washington-Nortey, Shang & Brown, 2022).

Empirical Significance

The empirical significance of the study was related to the study by Nicholas et al., (2021) wherein they address the ongoing issue of *how* to effectively teach reading. An expert teacher's deep conceptual understanding of guided reading, therefore, is achieved by having intellectually worked upon their picture-thinking (their recall of experiences they've personally accumulated), using higher-order thinking *about* the concept of guided reading (Nicholas, et al., 2021). It would be more productive to shift the focus of debate from the *what* of teaching reading, to the nexus that exists between the what and the how (Nicholas, et al, 2021). Teachers must learn to leverage knowledge about young readers' strengths, needs, and interests to plan and teach guided reading lessons skillfully (Davis, Griffith & Baumi, 2019). This requires, among other forms of knowledge like content and pedagogical knowledge, "intimate knowledge of the children… achieved by direct involvement with them" (Schwab, 1973; Davis, Griffith, & Baumi, 2019).

Effective teachers, also according to the ILA (International Literacy Association) in 2000 crafted the position statement on excellent reading teachers declaring that effective reading teachers understand the reading process, use the information and ongoing formative assessment to plan for and implement future instruction, know a variety of ways to teach reading with an array of diverse materials and to provide strategic support (Davis, Griffith & Baumi, 2019). Given the growing number of ELLs, interventions that are effective in improving the reading abilities of these students are essential (Linan-Thompson & Hickman, Davis 2002; Gyoi, Cartledge, Kourea, Yurick and Gibson, 2009). Culturally responsive teachers also need to take into account students' sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds to let them be a rich resource for learning (Hilaski, 2018). Reading intervention may necessitate the assertion that culturally sustaining pedagogical practices are just as foundational to the aims of literacy education as the teaching of

foundational reading skills (Wissman, 2021). This study focuses on the experiences of teaching literacy to low-income students and ELL students.

Practical Significance

The practical significance of the study was that finding out the experiences of these teachers in literacy instruction for low-income, ELL students and special needs students might allow teachers to be able to efficiently fine-tune instruction to suit their students' educational needs when scaffolding instruction and using differentiation for students of varying tiers. Other important elements of DI (Differentiated Instruction) include pre-planning by the teacher (establishing clear lesson goals and analysis of pre-assessment data to determine student readiness), ongoing, scaffolded formative and summative assessment (to assess mastery of content), flexible student groupings and classroom environment (individual, paired and group work to vary student learning experiences) and high-quality adaptive teaching processes (varying instruction, pacing the lesson and supporting students when needed) (Gibbs & Beamish, 2021). Differentiated learning is proven to be able to produce optimal learning achievement for students with special needs those deemed 'gifted' as well as those who have limited use of language (Hasanah, Suyatno, Maryani, Bader, Fitria & Palmasari, 2022).

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Research Questions

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To examine teachers' experiences of scaffolding and modeling in literacy instruction with low-income and ELL students, teachers' views about scaffolding and modeling in reading instruction experiences were questioned during the interview process. To examine the influence of scaffolding and modeling in literacy instruction, as well as social interactions, teachers were observed during literacy instruction, and lesson plans were obtained to ascertain if scaffolding questions are pre-planned and if there are different modeling strategies planned for ELL students.

In addition, the teachers were asked to journal their experiences with pre-determined guideline questions that will be given to them at the beginning of the study.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of early childhood education teachers teaching literacy to low-income ELL students and through different scaffolding techniques during social interactions and activities?

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe their experiences using the five key concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in literacy instruction with ELL students during planned activities and social interactions?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences teachers supporting ELL students with special needs as they attempt to learn the five key concepts of literacy instruction during planned activities and social interaction?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe their experiences, from most successful to least successful, in teaching literacy to ELL students and ELL special needs students during planned activities and social interactions?

Definitions

1. *Early Childhood Education* – Involves any program serving children from birth to age 8 that is designed to promote children's intellectual, social, emotional, language, and physical development and learning (Cooper & Bredekamp, 2009; Kosetelnik, Soderman, Whiren & Rupiper, 2019).

2. *EL with LD* – English Learners with Learning Disabilities - English learners (ELs) have disabilities and receive special education services (Williams, & Vaughn, 2020).

3. *ELL*- English Language Learners- students whose first language is other than English and is learning two or more languages (Kosetelnik, Soderman, Whiren & Rupiper, 2019).

4. *Multimodal Instruction* – To teach concepts using multiple modes including visual, auditory, illustrations, music games, movement, or writing (Newby, 2021).

5. *Scaffolding* – is the process by which a teacher provides a dialogue and a sensitive adaptation of support so that the necessary skills and knowledge are internalized (Puntambekar, 2022).

6. *Sociocultural Theory* - views human development as a socially mediated process in which children acquire cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society (McLeod, 2023).

7. *STEM* - The development of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricula (MacDonald, Tofel-Grehl, & Searle, 2022).

8. *TPACK Model* - Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK), provides a 21st-century connection for teachers to meld pedagogy, content, and technology as they implement standards (Lisenbee & Ford, 2018).

9. *Zone of Proximal Development* - the distance between the level of actual development, as identified with the help of the tasks the child solves independently, and the level of possible development, identified with the help of tasks the child solves under the guidance of adults and in cooperation with more competent peers[3] (Nicholas et al., 2021; Vygotsky, 1935).

Summary

Early language competence is a reliable and powerful predictor of children's success in school, and word gaps linked to socioeconomic status disparities have cumulative effects on academic outcomes (Levine, et al., 2020). This study concerns children of low-income and ELL families who usually enter school knowing less vocabulary than more wealthy peers and students whose first language is not English (Levine, et al., 2020). As a result, they enter school behind and unfortunately typically remain that way throughout school. Researchers have attributed these differences to environmental factors such as family socioeconomic status (SES), maternal gestures, the amount or frequency of linguistic input and exposure to diverse vocabulary words in the child's early environment, and early literacy practices such as shared storybook reading (Hart & Risley, 1995). Read alouds are a great way to encourage interaction through higher-order thinking questions and new vocabulary words. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. Emergent literacy skills are key for young children as they constitute a foundation for learning, not only in reading and writing but in other academic areas as well (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, as cited in Borre et al., 2019). These methods would be taught to teachers

through professional development in low-income schools so that the most efficient methods will be used with these students.

This phenomenological study aimed to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. Focusing on the teachers' experiences instructing students in low-income areas and ELL students might give better insight to these teachers on how to best instruct them.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the experiences of early childhood teachers scaffolding literacy instruction with low-income and ELL children in school. This chapter will present a review of the current literature related to the topic of study. In the first section, the theories relevant to preschool literacy practice, the quality of preschool, and the theories of the zone of proximal development and scaffolding will be discussed, followed by a synthesis of recent literature regarding preschool literacy instruction at school preschool, quality determinations, and the role of teacher instruction in the achievement of long-term goals.

The research was carried out through a qualitative study using interviews of 11 early childhood teachers from a low-income public school in southern New Jersey and observations of their classrooms. The research took place over approximately a three-month period.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework behind this study focuses on Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory and how teachers use the students of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to teach literacy. This theorist was chosen because, in early childhood education, the use of ZPD is the

way teachers scaffold the children's learning when done through play or any type of experimentation. In preschool learning, teachers often use the ZPD developed by Lev Vygotsky, to decide what children can accomplish on their own and what children can accomplish with the aid of a teacher. Thus, the ZPD permits teachers to delineate the child's immediate future and his dynamic developmental state, allowing not only for what already has been achieved developmentally but also for what is in the course of maturing (Vygotsky, 1978). These skills and competencies contained within the ZPD do not determine the children's level of development, but rather their learning potential (Cohen & Waite-Stupiansky, 2017). This potential, in theory, can be built upon repeatedly, hence growing the children's knowledge and cognitive development. ZPD gave a better indication for predicting or understanding future intellectual development than a measure of independent performance because it focuses on maturing functions (Shabani et al., 2010; Valsiner, 2001). Through the development of the ZPD of the child, Vygotsky believed that the child also developed self-regulation skills and executive function. Previous research indicated that self-regulation predicts strong academic performance and reduced disciplinary problems for school-aged children (Baran, et al., 2019; Blair & Razza, 2007; Fuhs et al., 2014).

Scaffolding

The uniqueness of Vygotsky's contribution to early childhood education is found in the critical role that verbal interactions with a more knowledgeable person have in advancing learning (Smolucha & Smolucha, 2021). Used to accompany the ZPD theory is scaffolding. Scaffolding is the process by which the teacher aids the children by modeling, questioning, and providing feedback that teaches, not just verbal praise. Scaffolding was first presented by Wood, Bruner & Ross in 1976 in their study entitled, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem Solving." This

scaffolding consists essentially of the adult controlling those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence (Wood, et al., 1976).

Children with low language skills may have a limited vocabulary, comprising only several hundred words, whereas those with high language skills may have a vocabulary repertoire numbering in the thousands (Nation, 2014 as cited in Pentimonti, et. al, 2017). Teachers can use scaffolding as a form of differentiation to expose the children to higher-order vocabulary. The level of vocabulary knowledge in preschool can be predictive of children's future academic achievement (Cabell et al., 2011; Cabell et al., 2009 as cited in Pentimonti, et. al, 2017). In literacy instruction, specifically guided reading, scaffolding is used to increase and build upon the student's ZPD. The importance of understanding guided reading as operating within a dialogic exchange between teacher-child and/or children, where educators present, and children seek to apply, a specific ideal form of the children's 'flowering' (still maturing) capacities/strategies/reading processes, while acknowledging the refraction of a child's internal attitude to the experience (Nicholas et al.,2021).

In today's popular quality preschool curriculums, scaffolding is an essential part of instruction during play-to-learn activities. Play-based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements, along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives (Pyle, A. & Danniels, E., 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013). There are two types of play, child's pretending play and adult-driven play. While children can learn through both, the first by modeling off other peers, especially more advanced ones, during adult-driven play the teacher uses curriculum-based standards to drive the play into a rich learning experience. Children direct their learning within the established play contexts while teachers

enhance the learning experience by playing the role of commenters, co-players, questioners, or demonstrators of new ways to interact with the materials involved (Fisher et al., 2013; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Tsao, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2013).

In their review of instructional scaffolding research, van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen six types of scaffoldings *means* were identified, or ways that teachers can scaffold: feeding back, giving hints, instructing, explaining, modeling, and questioning (Taylor, 2021). These means might be thought of as instructional strategies, used by teachers to carefully tailor scaffolding to the needs of the student and the task at hand (Taylor, 2021). Scaffolding can be differentiated to the child's academic level, and the task they are involved in (i.e., building blocks or cooking in dramatic play).

Modeling, or demonstrating how to perform a certain task, is also a type of scaffolding. For instance, during read-alouds when modeling was used as a scaffolding strategy with picture books, corresponding activity codes such as asking questions about vocabulary, holding the book so the students could see the pictures, and using one's voice to engage interest was evident (Massing, 2018).

Related Literature

Many educators observe that early childhood literacy development starts at home and is developed in school. Factors affecting this development include exposure to vocabulary from birth, how many books a child has read to them, the quality of the preschool program they attend, the prowess of the teacher, and the strength of the curriculum. Children who are exposed to larger quantities of adult speech in early childhood talk more themselves, have larger vocabularies and higher intelligence scores, and exhibit more efficient language processing capabilities (Gilkerson & Richards, 2009; Hart & Risley, 1995; Rowe, 2012; Weisleder &

Fernald, 2013 as cited by Mitsven, et. al, 2021). How parents speak to children and how often they interact with them using quality language interactions can be a predictor of vocabulary knowledge and language progression in preschool. The quality of young children's language input and production is another key indicator of children's future language capabilities (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015). Features of high-quality language experiences, including diversity of input, conversational turn-taking, and parental responsiveness to children's vocalizations, are associated with more favorable language outcomes (Pan et al., 2005; Romeo et al., 2018; Rowe, 2012; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2014 as cited by Mitsven, et. al, 2021).

Letter Sounds and Recognition

A child's first step to learning literacy is to learn the alphabet and letter sounds. Letter knowledge, which includes the understanding of both letter-sounds and letter-names, and phonological awareness have been identified as foundational skills underlying this alphabetic insight (Byrne, 1998; Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989; Patel et al., 2022). Children need to learn all the letters, upper and lowercase, consonant, and vowel sounds. This includes knowing the shape or form of letters, identifying letters by name, relating sounds to letters, forming letters (52 in English), and understanding the classification concept of "letter" (Kaye & Lose 2019). Once the child learns the names of each of the 52 capital and lowercase letters, the next step is to learn the sounds that correlate with each letter,- whether consonants or vowels. According to the own-name advantage hypothesis, children perform better than otherwise expected on the letters in their name, reflecting their special interest in these personally important letters and their greater exposure to them in informal learning situations (Treiman et al., 2019). It begins in preschool with putting each child's name on a name tag with their picture labeling their cubby, using another name tag to have them sign in in the morning, one for use

with small groups, and another for entering learning centers. This name/picture recognition

allows them to eventually learn their name without the picture by just finding the letters, first by

the first letter in their name.

Pedagogy

Literacy and numeracy occur within the educational context and adds that teachers'

pedagogical knowledge is crucial for realizing opportunities to promote and emphasize these in

teaching interactions and documentation (Hedges, 2003; Hedges & Cullen, 2005). Pedagogy is

the instructional method(s) that a teacher imposes in the classroom; however, it also can be

broken down into 'pedagogical interactions"' (specific behaviors on the part of adults) and

'pedagogical framing' (the behind-the-scenes aspects of pedagogy which include planning,

resources, and the establishment of routines) (Siraj-Blatchford, & Sylva, 2004). Teachers use

different pedagogical approaches utilizing curriculum as a guide to enhance literacy learning. A

signature pedagogy is understood as a set of assumptions about how best to use certain forms of

knowledge and skills (Ødegaard, 2021). In preschool, teachers are encouraged to use various

activities to instruct the children, including small and large groups, a read aloud, choice time

(guided play), and gross motor. These activities must be guided by the state standards and/or

core curriculum standards which are usually done through the choice of curriculum. The small

group involves four to six children with the teacher doing a focused activity differentiated to

students' levels. Preferably during this activity, the children in the grouping are of varied

academic levels so that the lower-level children can model off the higher-level children. In

choice time, the children play to learn, and the adults scaffold the learning to eventually bring the

children to a higher level on their own (ZPD). Scaffolding is an effective teaching and learning

strategy in language learning as it engages learners in collaborative activities (Yunus Yildiz, &

Celik, 2020). These collaborative activities allow children to also learn from each other by building on each other's scenarios, ideas, and schema. While performing the activities, learners see these connections and endeavor to apply their prior knowledge to new meaningful contexts as the background knowledge of learners about a topic plays a significant role in the understanding of new information (Yunus Yildiz, & Celik, 2020).

Play-based learning as part of the pedagogical practice involves teachers not being didactic but rather observers knowing when to interject to scaffold learning. During purposeful play, development, and age reciprocally with children in play through language interactions, scaffolding concept development, and enhancing the play experience during teachable moments (Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021). Teachers have a responsibility to move from being passive observers at the periphery of play, or didactic instructors in sessions that do not involve play, to being knowledgeable participants alongside children during and inside play (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). Teachers can then confidently remain tentative, exploratory, and reflective during play-based pedagogical engagements with children, using their professional knowledge to encourage children's learning and development related to children's motivations and interests while preparing the way for gradual recontextualizing everyday knowledge into scientific concepts (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). Play facilitates content learning when teachers are intentional about setting up, supporting, observing, and documenting content-rich, playful environments and activities (Valasek, 2020). Collaborative play is a play that involves rules, with roles performed by students, such as when playing house in dramatic play or teacher is in the literacy area. The quality of the collaboration of the teacher and students in the play scenario is crucial. The point is not for the teacher to take over but rather, on one hand, to highlight the opportunity to expand the child's knowledge through their exploration of novel objects or ideas, and, on the other hand, to

enrich and extend the opportunities to play in a ludic manner,- such as by having the child take control and agency of the novel object or idea (Ødegaard, 2021).

High-Quality Preschool Programs

Although preschool is becoming a very important focus in the United States, the quest for high-quality preschool, which includes the current push for universal preschool for all children ages three and four, no matter their income level, has become an objective to reach this goal. Research indicates that successful programs incorporate common elements of preschool quality, such as well-qualified educators, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, and adequate learning time (Meloy et al., 2019). The research focused on examining how children acquire the needed skills to become good readers has indicated that high-quality teacher instruction may figure prominently (Mihal et al., 2017). Early literacy skills are those skills that are the developmental precursors to conventional reading and writing skills and are measurable as early as the preschool years (Lonigan et al., 2008a; Goodrich et al., 2017; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Introducing oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge to preschool children through inter-curricular instruction during play to learn is the basis of their early literacy foundation. Three early literacy skills that are predictive of children's later reading abilities are oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge (Goodrich et al., 2017). Oral language, phonological awareness, and print knowledge are a big focus of the early childhood curriculum. In a large-scale study of a preschool early literacy curriculum and two professional development models, Lonigan et al. (2011) reported significant and moderate effect sizes for a preschool curriculum that utilized techniques such as phonological awareness training and dialogic reading to improve children's early literacy skills (Goodrich et al., 2017). The curriculums should concentrate on the following domains: Social-Emotional, Physical,

Language, Cognitive, Literacy, Mathematics, Science and Technology, Social Studies, and the Arts. These domains educate the preschool child by developing the whole child, mind, and body. They should also align with the curriculum standards of the state and/or the Common Core Curriculum.

According to NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS) (NAEYC, 2003), teachers are the key to the implementation of high-quality curriculum and assessment systems in early childhood programs (Leung, 2012). Teachers in a high-quality early childhood education program should be educated, certified, and properly trained. However, this is just part of what makes a program high-quality. Educators must be willing to branch out and try different methods of instruction. Taking risks in ECE professional practice is encouraged as a way of questioning taken-for-granted practices, beliefs, and theoretical discourses, and moving ECE beyond standardized outcomes, toward education that empowers children and educators as critically reflective members of society (Fenech et al. 2010; MacHaughten and Smith 2001; McLeod and Giardiello 2019; Moss 2017 as cited by Cooke & Francisco, 2021). Making early childhood education high-quality not only includes the teacher taking risks but allows the children to take risks while expressing creativity to explore and learn. Analysis of the data showed a range of cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements that worked together to enable and constrain educators' risk-taking in the five areas of risk-taking identified by Cooke et al. (2020):

- providing opportunities for children to take risks.
- trusting children.

- doing all new things.

- expressing ideas and beliefs.

- including curriculum content that may be considered controversial, complex, and inappropriate for children (Cooke & Francisco, 2021).

Another factor affecting high-quality preschool and early childhood programs is leadership. Leadership essentials include the personal skills and attributes on which administrative and pedagogical leadership are built to help ensure success (Abel, Talan, & Masterson, 2017). One method of ensuring a high-quality early childhood program is through the Whole Leadership Framework. This framework consists of three primary domains: leadership essentials, administrative leadership, and pedagogical leadership (Abel et al., 2017).

If the leadership in an early childhood program is weak, this affects the strength of the program. However, interdependence between the leadership enactments by different leadership stakeholders is crucial for leaders and teachers to achieve common goals (Heikka et al., 2019). Enhancing and encouraging shared pedagogical visions are fundamental elements for the continuous and uniform quality of ECE pedagogy and practices in ECE services across the board (Heikka et al., 2019). Collaboration of both parties combined with trust can enhance the quality of early childhood education.

Early Childhood Curriculum

In 2008, the federal government set up core curriculum standards, including standards for early childhood education. Most states, including New Jersey where the study took place, have incorporated these standards into their standards for early childhood education. In the preschools in New Jersey that are state-funded, especially the Abbott and PEA districts, the standards must be followed using the approved curriculums to ensure not only optimal learning but maintaining

the funding. Theoretically, curricular packages—a set of instructional tools and lesson plans typically purchased from a publisher—provide guidance for teachers on how to cultivate the developmentally appropriate skills defined by the states' early learning standards or by accrediting bodies, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Whitaker et al., 2022). These curriculums include *Creative Curriculum*, *Tools of the Mind*, *High Scope,* and *Connect4Learning* (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). *Creative Curriculum* and *High Scope* are well-rounded in all domains for learning, *Tools of the Mind* has a heavy math focus and *Connect4Learning* is strongly concentrated on math and science(State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). According to a study by Bodrova & Leong (2018), the findings showed that Tools of the Mind had positive effects on children's English math and literacy abilities as well as Spanish vocabulary This enables the school district to choose which curriculum focus best fits the educational needs of the students and the goals and mission of the school.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that all curriculum for early childhood education should include developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). In developmentally appropriate practice, the curriculum helps young children achieve goals that are meaningful because they are culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally and educationally significant. The curriculum does this through learning experiences that reflect what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular (Developmentally Appropriate Practice, n.d.).

Curricula

Curricula set goals for the knowledge and skills that children should acquire in an educational setting (Jenkins et al., 2019). The knowledge and skills developed at the preschool

level can set the pace for their future academic success. This jumpstart is an important basis, especially for literacy acquisition. This knowledge acquisition is especially important for low-income and ELL students who mostly come in with a disadvantage stemming from the effects of poverty and/or an unfamiliarity with the English language.

A quality preschool curriculum that is literacy content-rich is also a must for reinforcing instruction of early literacy skills. Dickinson et al. (2009) explained that one way to increase the emphasis on children's early literacy skills in preschool classrooms is to provide teachers with a good curriculum (Mihal et al., 2017). There are many different preschool curricula. Survey data from the 2009 Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey show that the majority of Head Start teachers report using Creative Curriculum for Preschool (53%) and HighScope Curriculum (15%) as their primary curricula (Moiduddin et al., 2012).

Another example of a preschool curriculum is *Tools of the Mind*, which is based on the educational theory of Lev Vygotsky. Developed from a Vygotskian framework, *Tools* focuses on equipping children with cognitive tools for learning that they can then apply to the task of acquiring and sustaining academic knowledge as well as behavioral competencies (Nesbitt & Farran, 2021). A major theme derived from Vygotsky's theory, which underlies all *Tools* practices, is the role of scaffolding (Goble et al., 2021). It helps children to use mediators or concrete symbols, language, and activities that are scaffolded by the teacher.

Inclusive Curricula

Tools of the Mind emphasizes that teachers use scaffolding techniques to help children internalize the learning tools at the center of the curriculum (Nesbitt & Faran, 2021). This curriculum also focuses on developing children's self-regulation and executive function skills through make-believe play. As with Vygotsky, Tools identifies "mature" make-believe play as

the key driver of children's self-regulation development (Bodrova & Leong, 2013) (Baran, et al.,

2019). Make-believe play involves children using props and other educational materials to elicit

role-play of real persons like doctors, mothers, firefighters, etc. Through this play, the children

learn as they are continuously scaffolded by the teachers and model for each other. Roehler and

Cantlon (1997) identified strategies of scaffolding as offering explanations, inviting student

participation, verifying, and clarifying student understandings, modeling desired behaviors, and

inviting students to contribute clues. Barkley, an evolutionary psychologist, argued (2001) that

make-believe play is the most natural context for children to develop executive function because,

theoretically, make-believe play targets all three aspects of executive function.: In-play

scenarios, children must 1) remember their make-believe role and act it out (working memory),

2) inhibit the impulse to arbitrarily switch roles (inhibitory control), and 3) switch between their

personalities as individuals and the personalities of the role they have assumed (cognitive

flexibility) (Baran, et al., 2019). The students also create a play plan before entering the centers

for make-believe play which tells what they intend to do in the centers and what roles they would

like to act out. The play plans then serve as reminders for children to act out their roles during

the play scenario (Baran, et al., 2019).

American Reading Company (ARC)

For grades Kindergarten through Grade Two, the inclusive curriculum does not come in a

commercial package. There are curricula for certain subjects such as literacy and math that are

from commercial companies, but they focus on one subject while providing co-curricular support

for other subjects. These curricula, in most states, must adhere to the Common Core Standards

and the state's standards for education. For example, The *American Reading Company (ARC)*

curriculum, called the Independent Reading Level Assessment Framework (IRLA), is a product

of the *American Reading Company (ARC)* which is mainly a literacy curriculum,; however, the content is cross-curricular, covering science and social studies (The American Reading Company, 2022). It is available not only for grades kindergarten through Grade Two but for kindergarten through Grade 12. Through technology, quantitative data regarding students' reading engagement and time spent reading independently is documented through SchoolPACE by the classroom teachers to formatively assess their students' reading comprehension of the books the students are choosing to read based on the Common Core Standards (CCSS) (Creighton, 2022). The ARC curriculum also is available in Spanish for English language learners whose first language is Spanish. The Guide to IRLA Coaching with Multilingual Learners gives specific support for how to use ELD designated instruction to maximize the impact of expert coaching (with the IRLA and IRLA Toolkits) and a high volume of reading practice (The American Reading Company, 2022).

Quality Teaching

High-quality early childhood education includes developmentally appropriate learning opportunities that support a range of skills across developmental domains, follows the basic principles of child development, includes child-directed and teacher-supported play experiences with concrete materials, and recognizes children's unique strengths and culture (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gerde et al., 2020). High-quality teaching is thought to require the concomitant management of several different resources for teachers, including their content knowledge, attitudes, and understanding of the pedagogical instructional practices that might support children's learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hill & Charalambous, 2012; Saçkes et al., 2011 as cited in Neuman, & Danielson, 2021). Incorporating all these factors, plus having teachers who are highly educated, properly certified, and who participate in ongoing professional

development, is an effective way to ensure that a preschool program is high-quality. NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) offers six guiding standards for excellence in EC teacher preparation affecting teacher quality and these standards are:

- Promoting child development and learning,

- Building family and community relationships,

- Observing, documenting, and assessing to support young children and their families,

- Using developmentally effective approaches to connect with children and families,

- Using content knowledge to build meaningful curriculum, and

- Becoming a professional in the field of EC education (Casey & DiCarlo, 2017).

When training new teachers, it is important to encompass these standards, however, in teacher pre-service during field supervision training, not only should the emphasis be put on the standards, but the supervising teacher must be willing to model and provide opportunities for the student to use the knowledge they have ascertained in school. The central core of all practicum experience is a system that involves a teacher candidate and cooperating teacher in the classroom within a relationship that includes multiple elements with the intended outcome of developing effective teaching practices (La Paro et al., 2017,2018). However, to be able to learn effective teaching practices the teacher and student should have a good relationship. The cooperating teacher–teacher candidate relationship provides the foundation through which cooperating teachers can scaffold teacher candidates' learning experiences, provide feedback, and impart knowledge and wisdom from teaching experience (Cohen et al. 2013; McIntyre 1983; O'Brian et al. 2007; Weinstein 1989, as cited in La Paro, Van Schagen et al. 2017, 2018).

A substantial body of research on programs that succeed in preparing children for school identifies important elements of quality. These elements include:

- sufficient learning time and small class sizes with low student-teacher ratios.

- well-prepared teachers who provide engaging interactions and classroom environments that support learning.

- ongoing support for teachers, including coaching and mentoring, with program assessments that measure the quality of classroom interactions and provide actionable feedback for teachers to improve instruction.

- research-based, developmentally appropriate early learning standards and curricula.

- assessments that consider children's academic, social-emotional, and physical progress and that contribute to instructional and program planning; and

- meaningful family engagement (Meloy et al., 2019).

Providing purposeful instructional and educational opportunities, especially for low-income children who may come from environments with limited access to print media is essential to facilitate later learning and comprehension of more complex text (Neuman & Celano, 2012 as cited in Neuman, & Danielson, 2021). Children from low-income families especially need to be exposed to a high-quality preschool program because traditionally they are exposed to less vocabulary by age three than more affluent peers. In four years, an average child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family with 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family with 13 million words (Hart & Risley, 1995). These and other studies (Pollard-Durodola et al., 2016) suggest that children who have access to a high-quality content-rich curriculum are well-positioned for academic success in elementary school and beyond (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

Not only must the instruction be of strong quality, but quality teaching also requires that the teachers are highly qualified, meaning educated and state-certified to teach. As preschool

becomes more common in public schools, standards for hiring teachers are becoming more rigorous. In New Jersey, since the advent of Abbott v. Burke, preschool in the state has become available for almost every three- and four-year-old for free, starting with the most impoverished areas. In 1981, several schoolchildren from Camden, East Orange, Jersey City, and Irvington, four of New Jersey's poorest districts, brought an action in Superior Court, alleging that the Public-School Education Act of 1975 violated the "thorough and efficient" clause as it had been applied (Lichenstein, 1991). The court case mandated funding for these low-income districts along with other mandates that stipulated the quality of teachers, curriculum, and facilities including a limit to the number of students allowed to be in one class, fifteen, with a teacher and aide. The longer professional experience and the smaller groups of children have been confirmed as crucial factors for the improvement of preschool educational quality, especially in the instructional approach and teacher-child interactions (Trifonova, 2022). The funding through the preschool grant continues today and constantly is revised and remediated through the court as the grant funding spreads to other schools that are not as low-income as the original districts. Currently, in New Jersey, over 30 districts and growing have received preschool funding under this grant.

Unfortunately, for the 2023 school year, most Abbott districts' budgets suffered severe cuts because of enrollment numbers from the 2021-2022 school year as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (https://www.nj.gov/education/stateaid/2122/). This can affect the quality of a preschool program because it hampers hiring more experienced, educational teachers, the number of teachers, supplies, and materials.

Multimodal Forms of Instruction

        For young children, literacy is multimodal visual images, oral language, gestures, numbers, and other signs intermingled with printed words during language arts activities in early childhood education (Taylor & Leung, 2019). Multimodal instruction is the process of combining two or more forms of instruction that provide the student experience through each of the senses, visual, auditory, and tactile. Anyone who teaches young children observes multimodal literacy regularly, as children shape their stories through talk, pictures, and gestures, just as surely as they shape them with words (Watts-Taffe, 2022). Multimodality is not one way of determining what to mean, but it incorporates many "languages" or, as Serafini (2014) calls it, "Words married to images, sounds, the body, and experiences" (p. xi) (Dalton, 2020). Teachers may use these experiences in instruction to attend to students with a wide range of learning styles, strengths, and preferences for the way that they learn best. Children might learn best through seeing a chart or diagram (visual), explaining a concept with a video, using pair and share discussions (auditory), or by doing a hands-on project with a group or a performance of a scene from a book (tactile) (Multimodal Learning-Best Practices for P-3 Instruction, n.d.).

        The use of multimodal instruction in literacy can be especially important to instruction in early childhood education settings. Since children are involved in multimodal textual practices in their daily lives (Unsworth, 2001), it is agreed that the definition of literacy should be broadened to accommodate multimodal media concepts and practices informal educational settings, and to change accordingly the pedagogy of literacy acquisition (Jewitt, 2008; Unsworth, 2001, 2006; Walsh, 2009), and that literacy can no longer be based on written and verbal language only:

language" has to be seen in a new light: no longer as central and dominant, fully capable

of expressing all meanings, but as one means among others for making meaning, each of

them specific. That amounts to a profound reorientation. (Friedman, 2018, p. 314)

Children can use puppets to retell a story that was read to them, participate in art by

drawing a picture of an event, or use the blocks in the block center to build their house and

explain it. All these activities allow children to learn new languages and vocabulary, with the

teacher scaffolding, by expressing themselves and having their ideas built upon eliciting learning

through multimodal literacy instruction in early childhood classrooms.

Multimodal pedagogies involve communicative practices, constructing tasks, and

multiple meaning-making projects that can contribute to the English as a second language

classroom context (Stein, 2000 as cited in Si, Hodges & Coleman, 2022). By listening to the

sounds of the words through storytelling and seeing the accompanying pictures, an ELL student

might be able to make better connections and improve comprehension. Digital literacies have

been examined that can facilitate ELLs in various literacy skills for meeting the needs of daily

life as social citizens, so teachers need to help students better connect multiple technologies with

literacies (Hutchison & Beschorner, 2015 as cited in Si, Hodges & Coleman, 2022).

In today's classroom, using integrating play with different multimodal forms of

instruction could keep the students more engaged and increase learning. Multimodal play

integrates popular culture, media, and digital technologies in ways that can promote children's

learning (Greishaber et al., 2021). With the advent of online instruction, by choice or through a

pandemic, multimodal instruction gave students different ways to learn and participate during

virtual learning. Yelland (2018) defined multimodal learning as the application of more than one

mode (multimodality) for learning that offers rich learning experiences for young children. For

example, multimodalities can include linguistic (text-based), visual, kinesthetic (digital touch), aural, and spatial (movement) modalities (Kewalramani, & Nikolay Veresov, 2022). These multimodalities can not only make the instruction more relevant to the students but also keep them more engaged.

Using Technology to Enhance Literacy Instruction

In the early childhood classroom, literacy instruction has integrated the use of digital books, language and literacy learning software, and games. ABC Mouse and Wonder are digital book platforms that allow children to read or hear various books on their reading level. Students can listen to the recordings with highlighted words when pronounced by the narrator, record themselves while reading the books, and take a quiz related to the content of the book (Neslihan et al., 2020). Also, Learning A-Z (Raz Kids) is another popular literacy software platform for early childhood education that allows students to listen to books, read along, and make choices that are scored and assessed. Audio files are meant to provide students with a "read-to" option if reading is a barrier, and the assessment is meant to provide students a way to monitor their learning as they go through multiple pages (Love et al., 2017). As a result of the achievements of students, they are automatically graded with point stars that they collect throughout the whole time using the platform and the teacher can reward additional points according to students' success in quizzes, recordings, or the number of books they read (Neslihan et al., 2020).

Effective and developmentally appropriate implementation of technology allows teachers to strike a healthy balance between young learners' interests and motivations during playful learning and structured learning of standards-aligned curricula (Rogowsky et al., 2018). Aligning curriculum and standard requirements using all available technology such as tablets, Smart Boards, and e-books, can be a challenge for a teacher when there are limitations by certain state

departments of education as to how much screen time early childhood students can have. A contributing limitation could also be that the use of technology was once understood as a sedentary activity of passively receiving information (e.g., watching television) (Rogowsky et al., 2018). The State of New Jersey Department of Education, Early Childhood, dictates that children in preschool ages three to five should be limited to TV/video to no more than 10 minutes, and other electronic media use should be limited to no more than fifteen minutes per child (New Jersey Department of Education, 2019). Engaging students with an e-book read aloud on a Smart Board could conceivably go over the 15-minute time limit leaving no more time for students to use other electronics independently during play.

For English language learners, frequently hearing the spoken word with correct pronunciation and enunciation is essential to mastering the English language. The lively and attractive features of e-books could potentially support young learners' literacy and language development by holding their interest and reinforcing comprehension of a story (Yufen, & Siouwun, 2020). Students can not only hear the vocabulary in the proper syntax and morphology but also in some instances, see the pictures that relate to that vocabulary offering a better comprehension of the words. The illustrations in eBooks clearly visualized auditory explanations of new words, which was more beneficial than the exclusively verbal explanations given by a teacher reading the print version (Yufen & Siouwan, 2020).

The use of the TPAK framework for literacy instruction has also been another tool used to incorporate technology into the classroom, using technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge. The TPACK Model, Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) provides a 21st-century connection for teachers to meld pedagogy, content, and technology as they implement standards (Lisenbee & Ford, 2018). Digital storytelling as opposed to traditional

storytelling is a use of this framework. According to a study by Lisenbee & Ford (2018), students experienced the need to critically think, problem-solve, and be creative and collaborative while socially engaging in constructing a retelling of a story using digital storytelling. Children are more likely to become engaged in the story if it is on a screen like a SmartBoard or Promethean board, large and full of color. Many educators use digital storytelling to draw students' attention and stimulate their interest in new topics (Robin 2008 as cited in Yuksel-Arslan, Yildirim & Robin, 2016).

The use of technology also allows children to learn valuable skills not only in education but in life and career. Teaching children STEM as part of the curriculum enhances their technical skills and prepares them for the future. A growing body of research has indicated that early STEM experiences (defined as preschool to third grade) play an important role in enhancing children's knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for the jobs of the future and preparing students for an economy that demands innovative solutions to complex problems (Aronin & Floyd, 2013; Chesloff, 2013; DeJarnette, 2012; New, 1999). For example, Chesloff (2013) argued that STEM education should start in early childhood since "concepts at the heart of STEM—curiosity, creativity, collaboration, critical thinking—are in demand".

Children's play has changed because digital technologies, media, and popular culture now assume a greater part in their lives and provide a contemporary context for play (Greishaber et al., 2021). Children ages eight and under now have increased access, especially at home, to electronic devices including cell phones, tablets, computers, and video games as a means of play compared to traditional toys. Because of their home experiences, many young children come to preschool with high levels of interest and wide experience in using a range of digital technologies in their everyday lives (Greishaber et al., 2021).

ELL Students with Disabilities

Students who are EL and have a disability are at an even greater risk for school failure than either group alone due to low reading achievement, as it impacts their ability to participate in their general education classes, as well as their transition into postsecondary education and employment (Williams, & Martinez, 2019). One method for improving the reading comprehension of students who are EL with LD is through intensive intervention designed to target the subskills involved in proficient reading, which include both word reading and vocabulary, in addition to supporting oral language development. (Gough & Tunmer, 1986; Williams, & Martinez, 2019). ELL students with disabilities need more individualized literacy instruction differentiated to their individual levels so that a focused approach can be used. This individualized instruction could include reading intervention. In previous studies, the reading intervention included daily instruction in word study, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. It was first evaluated with middle school students (Roberts et al., 2013), and students who received continued intervention throughout middle school significantly outperformed those students who did not receive intervention, with a small to moderate effect on word reading and comprehension outcomes (Williams, & Martinez, 2019). One way to do this, with Spanish-speaking ELL students is to use cognates in instruction which are words that in Spanish sound similar to words in English like correct and correcto in Spanish. Making these connections explicit can be motivating for students who are EL, as this shows them that their primary language can be used as a valuable asset in their learning process (Williams, & Martinez, 2019).

For EM students' learning, research finds that core instruction and reading intervention often includes language-related enhancements that align with students' linguistic needs, and teachers can apply scaffolding techniques to make core content more comprehensible to students

who are acquiring English and simultaneously learning grade-level content (August &

Shanahan, 2006; Baker et al., 2014; MTSS4ELs, 2020; Artzi, L., Hsin, L. B., Sanford, A. K.,

Brown, J. E., & Guin, S., 2022). Students must not just learn and memorize vocabulary words

but learn their meaning and practice using them in context to obtain better comprehension skills.

In a study by Williams and Martinez (2019), these data supported the value of using CR

(culturally relevant) passages that represent the children's experiences/ background for fluency

practice for ELL students.

Evaluation and Observation Methods
   ECERS-3

Early childhood classroom quality has received increased national attention in the past

two decades because advocates and practitioners see it as a key strategy for encouraging school

readiness and narrowing the achievement gap (Klein & Knitzer, 2006). The focus is on

individualized teaching and learning with an emphasis on matching teacher interactions with the

children's abilities and interests to engage them, rather than on the mere presence of those

materials, which is standard in previous versions of the ECERS (Montes, et al., 2018). The term

quality in early childhood education is used to describe the structural and process features of the

environment that promote learning and development (Early, et al, 2018). The Early Childhood

Environment Rating Scale – Third Edition (ECERS-3; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015) is the

latest version of one of the most widely used observational tools for assessing the quality of

classrooms serving preschool-aged children in the United States and around the world (Early, et.

al, 2018). The ECERS-3 (ECERS-3; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2015) observation tool measures

35 items including instructional and physical quality, and takes a total of three hours to complete.

Among other things, this tool requires that either breakfast or lunch must be observed. The

indicators at the upper end of the scoring continuum focus on staff providing higher-level

learning opportunities that help young children develop advanced skills related to math and literacy (Early, et al., 2018). This observation also measures the environment of the classroom and its space and safety level. The environment of the classroom includes the condition of furniture, flooring, educational materials, electrical outlets, cabinet accessibility, health and safety practices, and anything that could cause a hazard inside the classroom, outside on the playground, and structural quality. Structural quality refers to distal factors in early childhood settings such as staff-to-child ratio, group size, teacher education and training, and staff wages and benefits. These factors are often considered necessary supports to promote process quality but are not sufficient on their own to optimize children's learning (Burchinal, 2017 as cited in Early, et al., 2018). The goal is to use the data for program improvement, sharing it with the teaching team and others who can celebrate program strengths and identify areas for improvement (Montes, et al., 2018). This information helps administrators, master teachers, and teachers make adjustments and revisions to the materials, and program, including curriculum, and/or provide additional needed professional development in the areas that scored low. When problems are identified, the individual was given additional instruction and support, followed by additional practice and testing (Early et al., 2018). It should be noted though that the class size could negatively affect the results, and contrary, the teachers' experience was positively associated with better quality, so the acquired professional skills help teachers to meet the educational objectives (Trifonova, (2022). The more students in the classroom usually the

harder it is to maintain good classroom management. However, some areas are out of the hands of the staff of a school, including the size of the classroom or the playground, or even the lack of a student bathroom in a classroom, all of which lower the score. According to a study by Early et al (2018), if the goal is to identify which programs generally provide children with safe,

stimulating, enjoyable early learning experiences, and which programs need more support to provide foundational quality, there is evidence that ECERS-3 is useful for such purposes.

CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System)

For teachers to scaffold students' learning, they first must be able to interact positively with them so that those interactions are effectuated in instruction. Balancing cognitive and social aspects of learning, as well as the trade-off between the excellence of some students, on the one hand, and the learning progress of the entire learning group, on the other hand, makes it necessary for a teacher to be explicit about the learning goals and to choose teaching strategies accordingly (Cortina et al., 2015). The other observation tool widely used in preschool is the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). CLASS requires a minimum of four sequential 30-minute cycles of observation (20 min) and scoring (10 min) to generate average quality scores that index the quality of the ECE day (Thorpe et al., 2020). The CLASS assesses three domains in a preschool classroom, classroom organization, emotional support, and instructional support. The CLASS tool is used to rate interactions between teachers and children, rather than the environment as a whole (Jacobi-Vessels et. al, 2016). Each component is rated on a scale of one (few incidents) to seven (numerous incidents) (Stites, & Brown, 2021). The observation takes one hour to complete and affords no interaction between the observer and teaching staff as they teach through the course of their normal routine. The pre-K version of the CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008) was used to evaluate the levels of instructional learning formats, quality of feedback, language modeling, and concept development related to mathematics (Stites, & Brown, 2021). The teacher then uses the feedback from the observer to improve the practices in the classroom for the academic benefit of the students.

The first domain, classroom organization, evaluates teachers' ability to proactively

manage students' behavior, use learning time effectively, and maintain students' attention and participation during instruction (Li et al., 2020). If the students are not following rules and the room is chaotic, no learning can occur because students could be distracted, and teachers could spend most of the instruction time quelling behaviors instead of teaching. This might also cause teachers and students alike to become frustrated, therefore attaching a negative stigma to school.

The second domain, emotional support, assesses the degree of positive/negative interactions between teachers and students and between peers (Li, Liu, & Hunter, 2020). It gauges the level at which teachers and students interact, how they interact, and the quality of those interactions. According to a study by Chen et al. (2021), when students perceived positive relationships with their teachers, they had higher levels of academic engagement. If students associate their teachers and school with positive relationships, they will be more engaged, and hence, possibly achieve higher academic achievement.

The third domain, instructional support, assesses teachers' use of techniques to promote analytical thinking skills, provide feedback to strengthen skills, and facilitate language development which includes scaffolding (Li et al., 2020). Scaffolding, in the assessment of the third domain, comes from the rating of the quality of teacher feedback to the students. According to a study by Nores, Friedman et al. (2022), teachers contribute to children's quality experiences by making decisions about the context, content, and timing of children's opportunities to learn, as well as through the mechanisms and interactions through which they engage with children.

In addition, classrooms where teachers are more responsive to students and rate higher in this category on the CLASS scale tend to have fewer behavioral problems, and that impacts academic and social-emotional growth positively. In a study by Longobardi et al. (2020), higher levels of responsive teaching were found to be positively associated with the quality of the

student-teacher relationship as perceived by both teachers and students, being linked with increased closeness and warmth, and lower levels of negative interactions.

Framework for Teaching

The Framework for Teaching was created by Charlotte Danielson, a lifelong educator and expert in teacher effectiveness, who wrote her first book on teacher evaluation in 1996 (The Danielson Group, 2022). The Framework for Teaching (FFT) is one of the most widely used observational systems for evaluating teacher effectiveness and driving professional development conversations in schools (Kettler & Reddy, 2019). Danielson wrote the book creating the evaluation based on the Praxis III criteria, to hopefully enhance and enrich the professional lives of teachers (The Danielson Group, 2022). The evaluation tool consists of four domains:

- Domain 1 – Planning and Preparation

- Domain 2 – The Classroom Environment

- Domain 3 – Instruction

- Domain 4 – Professional Responsibilities

These domains are built on the constructivism philosophies of Dewey, Vygotsky, and Piaget. (Danielson, 2007). A teacher is rated within these domains normally by a school administrator such as a principal, assistant principal, or the head of a department. The four domains consist of 76 elements nested within 22 components. Teachers are rated with scores from 1 to 4:

- Score of 1 is unsatisfactory.

- Score of 2 is basic.

- Score of 3 is proficient.

- Score of 4 is distinguished (Danielson, 2007).

Normally, administrators are trained in the Danielson evaluation tool before they can perform an observation. The observation can be performed announced or unannounced. In an announced observation, a pre-observation conference is done, and the details of the lesson are discussed along with the submission of the lesson plan. Next, the date and time are agreed upon for the observation to take place. During the observation, copious notes are taken by the observer that encompasses the first three domains. Afterward, there is a post-observation conference wherein the administrator and teacher meet to discuss the results of the observation. At this point, the evidence for domain 4 has been presented and scored. The observer presents recommendations and accolades to the teacher based on the findings of the observation. An important concept behind these new evaluation systems is to improve student learning by identifying teachers with strong instructional practices and providing constructive feedback in areas where teachers needed improvement (Reid, 2020). Observers are then encouraged to provide professional development, educational articles, or even instructional modeling of a lesson for the teacher if needed. The teacher has the chance to write a rebuttal, which has the possibility of changing a score on a certain section if sufficient evidence is produced. In an unannounced observation, there is a pre-observation conference, but the observer comes to the classroom to view a lesson unexpectedly without the teacher's knowledge of the observation. A post-observation conference is conducted using the same parameters and procedures as the announced observation. A study found that principals exercised discretion when implementing the evaluation system, and their use of discretion varied across the system's components, took different forms, and appeared to be aimed at varied outcomes (Donaldson, & Woulfin, 2018). The problem is that by most teaching staff, the evaluation is seen as subjective to the observer's eye. The analyses further revealed that some school leaders perceive teacher evaluation

positively, while others see them as negative. Where school leaders see teacher evaluation as a possibility to promote professional learning, evaluation may also be used formatively (Lillejord & Børte 2020). Thus, the attitude and perception of the evaluation tool's users can affect the score of the teacher, whether they perform well or poorly. Despite sharing a common instrument, we find the three observation systems and their associated use contexts combine to produce different average teacher scores, variation in score distributions, and different levels of precision in scores (Lio et al., 2019). Existing protocols neglect to evaluate the specific instructional practices necessary to support ELs' (English Language Learner) learning, which is particularly problematic in schools using mainstream inclusion models where ELs are scattered in small numbers across monolingual classrooms and where the task of differentiating instruction is relegated solely to the teacher (Coady et al., 2020). When teaching literacy to ELL students, a teacher should provide specific language instruction to those students different from the English fluent speaking students, a form of differentiation. Because there is no reflection of this specialized knowledge in many current evaluation protocols of teachers, it is difficult to capture exactly what teachers of ELs do, including teachers in sheltered models of instruction where the purpose is precisely to differentiate and teach language (Coady et al., 2020). ELL students often need the words slowly enunciated, visuals, and other forms of multimodal instruction to enhance learning. The problem is not all teachers are certified to teach ELL students yet must do so anyway as part of an inclusive classroom as a part of the state and/or local policy. In states such as Florida that have mandated ELL preparation for all teachers, a generic teacher observation protocol also limits the accountability of teachers to provide differentiated instruction for ELs and excludes ELLs from teacher observation evaluations (Coady et al., 2020).

Summary

In the last few years, the importance and need for quality early childhood education, especially in low-income areas in the United States, has been a much-talked-about topic. For the positive outcomes of education to occur, learning environments must be optimized, materials must be accessible, and a quality curriculum must be utilized (Ishimine & Tayler, 2014 as cited in Aslan & Uygun, 2019). Parents of preschool students must also see the value and want to send their children to school. Educators have debated the effects of preschool on students' growth later in school, especially in literacy. Emergent literacy skills such as language acquisition, conventions of print, or phonological awareness (Whitehurst and Lonigan 1998) refer to one of the most important competencies preschool children must obtain because these skills provide a crucial basis for their subsequent educational attainment (Duncan et al. 2007; Weinert et al., 2010). Teachers want to pursue the best methods to instruct preschoolers in literacy to produce competent, on-level readers. Because educators seek to discover the best methods of instruction and pedagogy using a literacy-based curriculum that produces readers, researchers have explored the factors contributing to attaining this goal.

The research has shown that the most effective preschool settings (in terms of intellectual, social, and dispositional outcomes) achieve a balance between the opportunities provided for children to benefit from teacher-initiated group work, and the provision of freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Additionally, researchers have recently examined the validity and practical applicability of the students' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) aided by scaffolding. Zack and Graves (2002) emphasize that both the teacher and the children are learning in problem-solving situations and argue for a conception of the ZPD as an intellectual space where the children's and the teacher's knowledge

and identities are formed and transformed in moment-to-moment interaction (Breive,

2020). However, there has been debate on how these methods help preschool students learn. A

gap exists in the literature about the best methods for teaching literacy to low-income preschool

students. These students historically have had low exposure to vocabulary and schema, partly as

a result of the home literacy practice of the family. According to a study by Hart & Risely

(1995), by the age of four, the average child in a welfare family might have 13 million fewer

words of cumulative experience than the average child in a working-class family.

It has been demonstrated that these students face greater challenges in school than

students from educated families. These children face different fears than just finding a good job

or being successful in school. They face food insecurity, crime, homelessness, and because of

these circumstances, traumas. By examining the level of quality, as well as curriculum and

pedagogy, in a low-income area preschool, researchers can better understand the needs of future

preschool students. This helps not only low-income preschool students as the concept of

universal preschool gathers steam. The importance of the preschool environment for child

development and preschool, and the resources devoted to preschool make the effect of preschool

programs an important issue for families and policymakers alike (Blanden, et al., 2016). Also,

the integration of multimodal instruction and technology in the classroom has brought 21st-

century skills to our learners, better preparing them for the future. By looking at the curriculum

and pedagogy of teachers who are highly qualified and educated, and by examining the quality

of the preschool program through the ECERS-3 and CLASS observations tools, we can fully

understand which students will be more likely to be on-level or above in literacy upon exiting

preschool and what support structures adjustments will better prepare them.

In Kindergarten through Grade Three, teachers must use open-ended questions to allow children to talk about their ideas and experiences in relation to the story (van der Wilt et al., 2019). Through this sharing and open-ended questions, the teacher is able to scaffold the student's learning to get them into the next ZPD. The teacher models the literacy lesson by explaining a concept, and then later does a guided practice activity to model the lesson's focus point of learning together. By taking part in challenging conversations, children become inspired to engage in a story (van der Wilt et al., 2019). With ELL students, scaffolding and modeling can be much more important than with English speakers because they are listening and looking at everything being done trying to process it from their language to English.

All 11 teachers who participated in this study currently held a New Jersey Teacher of Preschool through Grade Three certificate. The number of teachers who participated was 11. Each teacher at a minimum holds at least a bachelor's degree, some have a master's degree, and they have been teaching from one to 32 years.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. The research investigated the experiences of the teachers, discussed the methods they use, and analyzed the qualifications and rationale of the teachers. The study also analyzed how Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory plays a part in the instruction of literacy via teacher-to-student and student-to-student. The study addressed the participants and settings of the research, as well as the participants, and how the data was collected and synthesized. The data was collected using interviews and observations done by the researcher, and journal keeping done by the participants who volunteered. After the data was collected and analyzed, it was documented and coded.

Research Design

The research design for this study is a qualitative transcendental phenomenology. This research investigation included the process of discovery, being analyzed, and interpreted through participants' narratives as a rigorous act of coding, imagination, and logic to aggregate findings (Mays & Brevetti, 2020; 2021). This approach was valid for my study because it allowed the information to be collected through interviews, observations, and journals and it allowed for data analysis with the option of breaking it down into smaller study groups. The study information data was broken down by grade level and gender or ethnic group which was also helpful. The research did not focus on the students, or the tutoring programs themselves, but rather on the results, which would be instructional and/or intervention methods that yielded the best results. Open coding was used to label concepts, define, and develop categories based on their properties

and dimensions through the information gleaned in the interviews, observations, and surveys. According to Corbin and Strauss (1996), since different instructional reading concepts, put together two concepts such as *phonemic awareness* and *vocabulary*, these memos are examples of axial coding because they show the relationships between two or more concepts.

In this qualitative transcendental phenomenology, semi-structured interviews, and observations were conducted, and journal entries were collected from the participating teachers. The information gleaned from these forms of data collection provided insight into the experiences of the teachers in this study. The teachers supplied evidence in their instruction of early literacy with ELL students and low-income early childhood students while also observing how Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory affects this learning.

Quantitative research would not be a good choice because this study does not focus on literacy academic levels relating to scaffolding but rather on the experiences of the teachers. Qualitative research is the best choice because it allowed the researcher to focus on the phenomenon of the experiences of the teachers using scaffolding to teach literacy to early childhood ELL and low-income students. Qualitative research is described as subjective with a focus on investigating the multiple possible realities that exist which, in turn, can have different interpretations by an investigator immersed in the research and seeking deeper understanding (Ramlo, 2020). This study sought a deeper understanding of the participants by analyzing the experiences of the teacher participants in scaffolding literacy instruction and sociocultural interactions in ELL and low-income early childhood students. Philosophical assumptions rest on some common grounds: the study of the lived experiences of the person, the view of these experiences are conscious ones (van Mauren, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018), and the

development of the descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not the explanations or

analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of early childhood education teachers teaching literacy to low-

income ELL students through different scaffolding techniques during social interactions and

activities?

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe their experiences using the five key concepts (phonemic

awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in literacy instruction with ELL

students during planned activities and social interactions?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences teachers have supporting ELL students with special needs as

they attempt to learn the five key concepts of literacy instruction during planned activities and

social interaction?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe their experiences, from most successful to least successful, in

teaching literacy to ELL students and ELL special needs students during planned activities and

social interactions?

Settings and Participants

The study took place at one rural elementary school in southern New Jersey. The

participants were teachers of preschool who responded and voluntarily agreed to participate in

this unpaid study. These teachers agreed to answer interview questions, be observed teaching

literacy, and complete a journal of their experience teaching literacy to ELL and low-income students.

Setting

The site for this study was a rural, low-income public elementary school in New Jersey that serves a large population of ELL learners. This school was chosen because it is located in a low-income area, with a large population of ELL's, mostly Spanish-speaking, which is the target group for my study. The school is located in a neighborhood where there is a large HUD community containing subsidized housing.

The leadership of the school consists of a principal and an assistant principal. The principal leads the school and the school's preschool has only been funded by the State of New Jersey Abbott grant stemming from the Abbott v. Burke decision. The decision required high-quality insurance like ECERS-3 standards and hiring high-quality teachers with certificates, specifically New Jersey Teachers of Preschool through Grade Three.

Currently, the early childhood department consists of the following:

- Preschool 3's –twenty-two classes

- Kindergarten – Three classes

- First Grade – Three classes

- Second Grade – Three classes

- Third Grade – Three classes

These classrooms total approximately five hundred students in preschool through grade 3 who attend this school.

Participants

The school is located in southern New Jersey in a small, urban city in an area that encompasses many migrant families who are employed by nurseries, farms, and other types of agricultural employment. The district is led by a superintendent who is the interim superintendent, and the principal is the leader of this school. This school, in a low-income area, relates to this study because it has a high population of migrant families whose first language is Spanish and are typically ELL students.

The school is located in a small, urban city in an area that encompasses many migrant families who are also employed by nurseries, farms, and other types of agricultural employment. The district is led by a superintendent who is the interim superintendent. The school itself is led by a principal and an assistant principal. This school, in a low-income area, relates to this study because it has a high population of migrant families whose first language is Spanish and are typically ELL students.

The school is an early childhood education center in a small, urban area in southern New Jersey. The school serves students in Preschool through Grade Three. According to the State of New Jersey Department of Education School Performance Report for the 2020-2021 school year, the teachers were 90% female, 10% male with 68.5% Caucasian, 15.6% Hispanic, 9.4% Black or African American, 3.1% American Indian or Alaska Native and 3.1% identify as two or more races. The teachers all hold a Teacher of Preschool through Grade Three certificate in the State of New Jersey. All teachers in preschool through third grade were approached by email and invited to participate. Of these teachers, 11 teacher participants agreed to be a part of this study.

Participants were recruited using criterion sampling, which is a purposive sampling method (Yıldırım, 2021). This school and its participants were chosen to be part of this study

because of the high population of ELL students that attend this school. As classrooms around the world become more diverse, research is needed to understand how students of linguistically diverse backgrounds interact and learn together (Martin-Beltran, Garcia & Montoya-Avila, 2020).

Recruitment Plan

The teachers totaled 11 in preschool at the school which is comprised mostly of low-income and ELL students. The teachers were chosen as participants based on the fact that they teach in a low-income area and have experience teaching ELL students. The teachers were asked to participate via email after permission was granted from the superintendents and principals of the school and/or the Board of Education of the school district.

The teachers who participated hold a New Jersey Preschool through Grade 3 teacher certificate. The number of teachers who participated was 11, although thirty-four teachers were petitioned. These teachers have a bachelor's degree and/or a master's degree and have been teaching for one to 32 years. Participants were recruited using criterion sampling, which is a purposive sampling method (Yıldırım, 2021). These schools and participants were chosen to be part of this study because of the high population of ELL students that attend this school. As classrooms around the world become more diverse, research is needed to understand how students of linguistically diverse backgrounds interact and learn together (Martin-Beltran, Garcia & Montoya-Avila, 2020). They will sign a consent form before the research begins (see Appendix A).

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Researcher Positionality

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I developed this study intending to explore the experiences of using certain methods of instruction for supporting classroom-based early literacy learning by early childhood educators

with ELL and low-income students. This impacts early childhood educators because those experiences can potentially help them craft and refine their instruction to better help these learners be successful. God has put me there for a season because He wants me to try to make a difference. I love the Lord and I know that a lot of the community in this school feel like God has forgotten them. I also believe that if we as a school teach these children more effectively, they will be able to learn and grow according to the best of their abilities.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework from which this study was conducted is social constructivism using transcendental phenomenology. The design was appropriate for the topic because using semi-structured interviews provides more consistency than unstructured interviews. That way I got the information I needed on the teachers' experiences scaffolding students during literacy instruction, instructional methods that they used during instruction, and explored their thoughts and feelings on the instruction. Qualitative research interviews have been conceptualized as a means to mine for data addressing particular themes or assumptions (Kvale, 1996; Neuman, 1997), to gather data to gain 'authentic' insight into participants' meaning-making and experiences (Colby, 1998; Silverman, 2004), and has highly interactional events leading to data generation rather than data collection (Rapley, 2012; Roulston, 2013 as cited in Roulston, 2019).

I observed the teachers instructing because I wanted to get a complete picture of their experiences. This enabled me to get an in-depth look at the scaffolding instruction in action and the sociocultural interactions between students to each other and students to teachers. Through the journal entries and reviewing their lesson plans, the data completed the picture of their full experience teaching literacy to ELL and low-income students.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumption in this study is that teachers' experiences with scaffolding vary depending on the student they are instructing. With English-speaking students, they might use one approach and with ELL students they might have to use word/picture cards and lots of visual scaffolding and modeling, as well as activities that allow the students to hear a constant stream of languages such as read alouds or recorded books on educational software.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption in this study is that as the themes develop in the findings, the researcher will report the different perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because of the situation these students come from, there were different perspectives as to how best to teach them literacy through scaffolding and modeling. Some believed that it is easier for a younger student to learn a second language and that they will pick up the English literacy skills necessary to read very quickly, while others believed that it is better to speak to them in their home language as you teach them English literacy skills to make them feel more comfortable and to ease them into the skills they need to learn. This could also change the methods of instruction from one teacher to another based on what they think works best. Most teachers have the content knowledge and pedagogical approaches they think will work best. Teachers learn through observing children's development, collecting data, acting on the data by personalizing and building upon children's prior knowledge to plan for instruction, instruct, and assess instruction; and by reflecting on the experiences, making adjustments to promote learning in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Jean-François, 2018).

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption in this study is constructivism. Constructivism is a theory about teaching and learning that involves essential aspects such as culture, context, literacy, language, learners' interests and needs, personal experiences, interpretation of reality, as well as application of knowledge, which the researcher can analyze to determine their impact on teaching and learning policies (Mogashoa, 2014). Constructivist epistemology in this study represented participants who are from an underrepresented or marginalized group whose differences can take the form of gender, race, class, religion, sexuality, or geography (Ladson-Billings & Donor, 2005) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants' students are from low-income families who are mostly English language learners and typically underserved in early childhood education.

The epistemological focus is away from academic frameworks for knowledge and toward the living context in which teachers and pupils do most of their learning which is the classroom (Wright, 2013). This means that the nature of knowledge itself becomes more closely tied to human interaction and other pedagogical processes involved in knowledge exchange (Wright, 2013). The human interactions in this study are related to sociocultural theory and how the students learn literacy.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption in this study is when the researcher gives their values to the study. In a qualitative study, the inquirers admit the value-laden nature of the study and actively report their values and biases as well as the value-laden nature of information gathered from the field (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The context and setting of this research were a small, urban school in a low-income area that serves mostly Hispanic/Latino students who speak Spanish as

their first language. These students are participating in a public-school Abbott grant-funded program by the State of New Jersey through the school. The context is one in which, because these students are traditionally underserved in preschool and because of the language barrier, they enter school with less vocabulary, letter and sound knowledge, and pre-literacy skills in general.

Researcher's Role

The participants in this study were 11 teachers who instruct preschool at a school different than the one where I am currently employed. I had no authority over them, nor did I evaluate their performance. I had no influence or control over these teacher participants, their views, experiences, or their answers. The data collection was subjective to each participant and their personal experiences related directly to the study.

I have approximately 13 years in early childhood education, eight as a teacher, five as an assistant principal in a public elementary school that serves students from preschool through second grade, and three years total as an adjunct professor at a university in southwestern New Jersey teaching early childhood education classes to undergraduates, including a clinical and an online university in Virginia. My only bias, or the assumption that I brought to the study that may influence how I viewed the data or conducted my analysis, was that I have certain views on what methods of literacy instruction work best with these students and opinions on what higher-order thinking questions in scaffolding are and are not. I attempted to put those beliefs aside and look at what the data reveals. My role as the researcher was not to make any judgments while interviewing or observing, but just to collect data and facts and to do the same during the analysis of the data. The data was kept away from all so that the participants and any other employee of the school could not tamper with what was collected.

Procedures

Permission to solicit the teachers in preschool through grade three at the rural, low-income elementary school in New Jersey was obtained through an email to the superintendent/principal of the school. The board of education approval was sought and authorized. Data collection permissions were sought in this process because I did not want to interview the participants but also come to observe them teaching in their classrooms.

Permissions

All proper permissions were requested by the IRB, and the IRB approval letter is attached (see Appendix C). Also, the applicable permissions from the school and board of education are attached (Appendix D). I reached out via email to both the superintendent and principals of the school and obtained authorization to interview and observe the teacher participants.

Data Collection Plan

The three types of data sources that were used in this study included interviews, observations, and journals. The participating teachers were interviewed with a standard set of predetermined questions at the start of the research. The teachers were also observed in their classrooms instructing. Each teacher participating was observed teaching throughout the length of the study. The observations were recorded through the taking of field notes for approximately 30 minutes per observation. The teacher was notified ahead of time that the observer would be in the classroom that day. There was no interaction between the observer, teacher, and students during the observation. If a substitute teacher was scheduled in that classroom for the observation that day, the observer would have rescheduled and advised the teacher of the schedule change.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

This data collected showed the similarities and differences in the teachers' experiences in scaffolding and modeling literacy instruction to the students. A chart was used to show which methods are used by teachers and will also be separated by grade level.

The information also determined if the experiences of the teachers were similar. It also gave information on specific methods that teachers use specifically for ELL students. After the participating teachers agreed to be a part of the study, a demographic chart was compiled showing the age range, and education levels including current grade level, gender, ethnicity, number of years in education, and type of teaching certificate(s) they possess in New Jersey. It was interesting because it allowed the researcher to see if there were similarities or differences in the experiences of these teachers based on their demographics.

Individual Interview Questions

The interview questions were first approved by the IRB before being used. The individual interview questions were in a written semi-structured interview format utilizing open-ended questions via a virtual meeting platform. The researcher was careful to listen to the participants without interruption, however, the researcher implored scaffolding of their answers to get further information. The participants were told ahead of time that the interview would only be the researcher and themselves and how many questions would be asked.

1. What scaffolding techniques do you use during activities and social interactions with ELL students and ELL special needs students?

2. Which literacy instructional strategies do you use (vocabulary/power words, phonemic awareness, phonological awareness, making connections, etc.)? RQ1

3. Which instructional strategies do you use to teach literacy concepts, and which work best for you during activities and social interactions? RQ1

4. Describe the modeling techniques you have used when instructing ELL students. RQ2

5. How do you use technology to enhance your instruction? RQ2

6. In which activities is the use of scaffolding most utilized in your classroom in literacy instruction and social interactions? RQ3

7. How do you scaffold instruction the same way for ELL students and ELL students with special needs? RQ3

Question one was chosen because scaffolding is a concept of Vygotsky that relates to his Sociocultural theory. Scaffolding can include, but is not limited to, directing attention, modeling, or reducing/simplifying the number of steps (Kirova, & Jamison, 2018). Scaffolding can be done most commonly by teacher to student, but also student to student in a social arena. Effective scaffolding can also occur through peer interactions. One common approach is for the peer to act as the knowledgeable other and provide peer tutoring by giving hints and clues, or rephrasing questions (Bodrova and Leong, 2007; Kirova, & Jamison, 2018).

Question two was chosen because both code-focused (e.g., alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness) and meaning-focused (e.g., oral language) skills are necessary for and predictive of children's later reading success (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Mirra & Garcia, 2021). Since all children are unique, the same literacy instruction strategies might be effective for one child, but the other child might be successful with the teacher utilizing another type of strategy.

Question three was chosen based on teachers' prior experiences, beliefs, and feelings are important when implementing any kind of innovative literacy program because these build a foundation of teachers' knowledge and attitudes regarding assessment and their pedagogical practices (Yu-Ting, 2023). During activities and social interactions in the classroom, students have the opportunity to interact with teachers and peers to enhance their learning of literacy and language. Also, during social interactions, it is important to learn how the cultural background of ELL students because reading practices are both shaped by and help shape increasingly diverse sociocultural contexts of our schools (Arya & Maul, 2021).

Question four was chosen because modeling in literacy is important, especially for all students but especially for ELL students. All students need to see your mouth and the form it takes to sound out the letters or words and they must be able to hear the sound that you are making. Vocabulary development requires educators to provide both incidental (e.g., contextual opportunities for indirect word learning) and explicit vocabulary instruction (e.g., unpacking the vocabulary in a given text before, during, and after reading) through which students are repeatedly exposed to a variety of developmentally appropriate words (Forgie & Boccalon, 2022).

Question five is important because to be aligned with 21st-century skills, technology is used in the classroom to enhance instruction. Previously, paper books were the only available books in the classroom, but now some e-books read and show the pictures to the students through a computer, tablet, or Smart Board. Several studies suggest that early education teachers could use e-books for many different purposes to help their students learn English, in particular improving reading skills (Zucker et al. 2009; Union et al. 2015) and comprehension (De Jong and Bus 2004; Reid 2016) (Neslihan, Olgun, & Elina, 2020).

Question six was chosen because scaffolding during literacy instruction can be seen in a few different ways, including the use of feedback during instruction. teacher feedback literacy involves awareness and skills of three interconnected aspects: the role of feedback in developing student self-regulative capacities; strategies for supporting student cognitive development in understanding feedback and in generating useful feedback on one's own and other's work; and attentiveness to sociocultural, relational, and affective aspects of feedback processes (Xu & Carless, 2017). During the process of feedback in literacy instruction while scaffolding, the social interactions increase and can be substantive.

Question seven was chosen because scaffolding bilingual learners can be challenging when presented with a language barrier and teachers need to be creative and try many methods. Re-envisioning scaffolding for diverse learners includes adaptive and contingent teaching, involving decisions that teachers make moment by moment to redirect literacy activity, add tailored supports, and assess kinds and levels of assistance needed at different points of difficulty (Athanases, Bennett, & Wahleithner, 2015; Parsons, 2012; de Oliveira, & Athanases, 2017). Supports need to be adjusted beyond mechanical use. Worksheets can aid learning but prove problematic if they dominate instruction or are disconnected from the larger goal and direct instruction can be used purposefully as scaffolding when followed by engaging inquiry activities, for instance (Schwartz & Bransford, 1998; de Oliveira, & Athanases, 2017).

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The questions of the interview were emailed to the participants beforehand, so they were able to ponder and think about the questions before the actual interview. The semi-instructed interviews were conducted by the researcher in a one-on-one interview in the same room virtually or in person, whatever the researcher and participant agreed upon. Semi-structured

interviews, where the researcher has some predefined questions or topics but then probes further as the participant responds, can produce powerful data that provide insights into the participants' experiences, perceptions, or opinions (Peters & Halcomb, 2015). This allowed the researcher to scaffold the questioning into higher-order thinking questions to get the most in-depth information for the study. These interviews did not extend past the amount of time the teacher was given for prep unless they requested to interview outside of school time, either before or after school.

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once the data was collected, data charts were made putting the answers together by themes, comparing similarities and differences through coding.

After all the charts were completed, they were compared to ascertain which experiences of teachers were similar and which were different. For example, it might be that different preschool teachers use similar methods of scaffolding because they both have learning centers in their classrooms that utilize play-to-learn strategies but do not have the exact same centers or the same materials. The experiences of the teachers were broken down into ELL and non-ELL students, students with IEPs, and students without IEP's.

Document Analysis Data Collection Approach

The researcher interviewed the participants, observed the participants, and co-currently had the participant teachers complete a journal. The researcher interviewed all teacher participants prior to the observations or the journaling starting. The teachers were told this ahead of time as the observations were planned based on the teacher's availability. During the

observation, the researcher monitored what was taking place during the literacy lesson, including through a sociocultural lens. The researcher was then able to collect all the interview, observation, and journal data for analysis.

Observation Data Collection Approach

The observations were an observer as participant type observations. The observations were scheduled with the teacher, and the researcher acting as a non-participant observer, not interacting with the teacher or the students. The researcher observed each lesson for up to 30 minutes.

 Each teacher participating in the program was observed teaching once during the length of the research. The observation was recorded through the taking of field notes for approximately 30 minutes. The teacher was notified ahead of time that the observer would be in the classroom that day. There was no interaction between the observer, teacher, and students during the observation. Observation protocol was based upon procedural steps that included the following:

- Selection of a site to be observed and gain access (each classroom that the participating teachers taught in during the program in the preschool).

- Identify who or what to observe with help from the gatekeeper (school and administration).

- Distinguish the type of observation based on observer role (Observer as Participant).

- Design and use the observational guideline questions to guide notes.

- Record aspects including descriptions and interpretations of the observations.

- Be introduced to build initial rapport.

- After observing, slowly withdraw, using good observational procedures.

- Prepare timely notes that are thick and rich in narrative description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher reflected on the observation process and discussed ways to overcome challenges emerging during observations (e.g., interaction, coordination of observations, and note-taking). If a substitute teacher was scheduled in the classroom for the observation day, the observer rescheduled and advised another teacher of the schedule change. The researcher analyzed the data by getting to know the participants and collecting subjective evidence based on individual views (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

During this research, each teacher was afforded an individual journal book to record their experiences when teaching literacy and answer with approximately four specific prompts that will help them start their entries (Appendix G). These entries only took 10-15 minutes to complete during the research process. Their answers gave a good insight into their experience.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

1. What changes would you make to the modeling of your literacy lesson?

2. Which forms of scaffolding instruction did you use and what worked best?

3. What were some of the higher-order and inquiry-based questions you used to scaffold?

4. How did you differentiate your scaffolding for ELL students?

5. What accounts did you view of students interacting with vocabulary and during literacy instruction in the context of sociocultural theory?

The researcher's data analysis plan was phenomenological, so the steps were:

- Create and organize data files.

- Read through text, make margin notes, and form initial codes.

- Describe personal experiences through epoch or "suspension of judgment'.

- Describe the essence of the phenomenon.

- Develop significant statements.

- Group statements into meaning units.

- Develop a textural description –what happened.

- Develop a structural description – how the phenomenon was experienced.

- Develop the essence using a composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To keep the interview and observation data safe, it was kept on a thumb drive for that use only-with access only by the researcher through a password. This allowed for the organization of the data as well as the security and privacy of the findings.

Data Synthesis

After collecting all the data through interviews, observations, and journal writings, the information was coded based on the pre-determined themes. The information was then collapsed into different categories. When the categories were complete, the emergence of themes appeared. Any themes that are not within my hypothesis or relevant to my study were discharged. The coding themes could have been changed, or more could have been added based on the information that was collected. The researcher focused on looking for similarities and commonalities in the responses of the participants. This gave the researcher more organized information to then break down the codes by grade and demographics of the teacher participants. The researcher used purposeful sampling because the site and participants were chosen specifically because they can inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once all the data had been analyzed through

the interview, observation, and journal data, it was presented in a chart. The chart was used to show which methods were used by teachers.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the systematic rigor of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the believability of the findings, and the applicability of the research methods (Johnson & Parry, 2015a; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Studies must have credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to together formulate trustworthy research. This was done through persistent observation, data checks by other peers not involved in the study, and triangulation of the data in which the Qualitative research Checklist (COREQ) could be utilized.

Credibility

Persistent observation during the study was used along with a member check in which feedback from the survey was used. Involving participants as active agents in the processes of generating and presenting the research provided the opportunity for more socially responsible and emancipatory research (Chase, 2017). Techniques for establishing credibility include: (a) privacy of teacher participants, (b) member-checking, (c) methods triangulation; (d) persistent observation, and (e) prolonged engagement.

Transferability

The findings of this study have transferability to other contexts in the other school in the district of this elementary school that also teach low-income and ELL students in preschool from the same demographic. Possible dissimilarities or unknowns were the backgrounds of the teachers/participants such as education, years of teaching experience, and/or experience teaching ELL students. Transferability was enhanced by doing a thorough job of describing the research

context and the assumptions that are central to this study (Nichols, 2023). The transferability of this study was generalized to the other low-income preschools in the district with ELL students.

Dependability

In this study, a participant's lens was used to show the dependability of the study. The teacher participants were able to review the findings of the study and examine the data to ensure that the findings were consistent with the actual data that was collected. At the end of the study, the teacher participants were able to view not only the data, but also the analyses, interpretations, and conclusions so that they could judge the accuracy and credibility of the account (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The inquiry audit consisted of two experts in this field of early childhood education reviewing the interview questions and journal prompts before the research began.

Confirmability

Certifying confirmability in this study was done by using an audit trail and peer debriefing. The audit trail was done by keeping an accurate record of all the data that was collected, including, but not limited to, interview, and observation data. Using a single thumb drive dedicated only to research, and keeping it locked in a filing cabinet when not in use, also verified confirmability as the data was kept organized, safe, and private. The research was done using method triangulation. Method triangulation was useful in this research because it involves the use of multiple methods of data collection about the same phenomenon which may include interviews, observation, and field notes (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe & Neville, 2014).

Ethical Considerations

First, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be able to conduct the research. Permission from the school district to perform the study at the elementary school was attained. Informed consent was acquired from all participants in the study for which a consent form was signed stating that their consent was voluntary and that they had the option to withdraw from the study at any time. The exact procedures of the study were discussed with the teacher participants, including any possible risks. Finally, if any other issues arose during the study, they were told that they would be notified. In the final results, all participants' identities were kept anonymous and confidential. Teachers were grouped based on grade level and not by name. The research data collected was kept on a thumb drive in a locked cabinet only accessible to the researcher.

Summary

This study aimed to analyze the experiences of early childhood education teachers' use of scaffolding in literacy instruction with low-income and ELL students in a low-income public school in southern New Jersey which consists of a large number of ELL learners. The research was important because teachers have different views on scaffolding and modeling because of what they feel works best with these students. Literacy is fundamental for educational achievement. Literacy contributes substantially to a range of life skills. However, literacy difficulties during the early years of school are associated with long-term adverse impacts on academic success, with differences in academic achievement being sustained through children's schooling (Quach & Dawson, 2018). Findings show that the education and experience of the teachers were factors in the way these instructional methods of scaffolding and modeling were used. Possible risks include bias and/or subjectivity. The researcher is currently the Executive

Director of a private preschool thusly the researcher had the autonomy to schedule in advance, the observations of the teachers and take the time needed to perform the observations and research needed for this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. Collected data in the form of narrative descriptions of the volunteer participants interviews of participants of the school, observational notes of the participant teachers during literacy lessons with an accompanying graph of their demographics (see Table 1), validation of evidence through data, themes, and subthemes (Table 2), and research questions findings describing the participant teachers' experiences are provided in this chapter.

Participants

Permission from the school was granted to recruit volunteer teacher participants at the school through the board of education approval (Appendix C). Of the teachers in grades preschool through grade three, 11 teachers responded by providing consent to participate (Appendix A), and of these 11 teachers all met the recruitment criteria to participate. All 11 teacher participants were preschool teachers. None of the teachers in grades kindergarten through three volunteered to participate. The participants' levels of education ranged from a bachelor's degree to a master's degree. All the participants possessed a New Jersey Teachers Certificate for Preschool through Grade Three, and one possessed a similar teaching certificate with the State of Arizona along with a certification in Arizona to teach full English language immersion. Three of

the participants obtained their New Jersey Teachers Certificate for Preschool through Grade Three through the State of New Jersey's alternate route program and had previous careers before becoming a teacher. This program allows a person with a bachelor's degree in any major to take a one-year, full-time course at a university in New Jersey to obtain a Preschool through Grade Three certificate. This certificate allows a prospective teacher to apply for and obtain a New Jersey Certificate of Eligibility for Preschool through Grade Three and then gain employment in a school. During the first year of teaching employment, the teacher must be assigned a mentor teacher and be under the guidance of a master teacher. After one year, the school district then makes a recommendation, either positive or negative, based on the teacher's performance, to the New Jersey State Department of Education. If positive, the teacher is awarded a standard New Jersey Teacher's Certificate for Preschool through Grade Three, which does not have an expiration date. All the participants possessed general education teaching certificates; none had special education teaching certificates. In New Jersey, teachers in preschool through grade are required to teach all content areas to students. Participant's teaching experience varied from one to 32 years of teaching experience with various school districts and all the participants only spoke English, but one who was bilingual and also spoke Spanish fluently. Below is a detailed look at the participants.

Table 1

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Race/Gender	Grade Level
Teacher A	25	Bachelor's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher B	18	Master's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher C	17	Master's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool

Teacher D	32	Master's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher E	24	Master's	African American/Female	Preschool
Teacher F	18	Bachelor's plus 30	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher G	19	Bachelor's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher H	26	Bachelor's	Caucasian/Female	Preschool
Teacher I	1	Bachelor's	Hispanic/Female	Preschool
Teacher J	1	Bachelor's	African American/Female	Preschool
Teacher K	8	Master's	African American/Female	Preschool

Teacher A

Teacher A became a teacher earning her Bachelor of Early Childhood Education and going on to earn a State of New Jersey Teacher's Certificate for Preschool through Grade Three. This teacher has taught preschool for 25 years in total at two different schools within the same school district. During these 25 years of teaching, all these years have been spent teaching classes with a large majority of ELL students. When teaching literacy, the teacher noted that she takes the students where they are trying to reach the next level by adding appropriate forms of different support. These supports include visual supports, acknowledging all attempts to speak English, using cognates, story play, and incorporating families into at least one activity every month. Visual supports include picture cards with the word of the object underneath. These cards are put onto a ring or a ring with a lanyard worn around her neck for convenience. She uses the

"I do, you do" strategy with the picture cards by saying the word a few times and having the student repeat it. The picture cards all have real photographs on them, not cartoon pictures which the teacher believes gives the students a more realistic visual of objects that can make it easier to relate to these objects when they encounter them outside the classroom. She stated, "When students attempt to speak English, even if it is not correct, the teacher advises the students that it is alright to make mistakes when learning, and positivity acknowledges and encourages all attempts while enunciating and using proper grammar." She does this so they will not be afraid to continue trying. The next support is the use of cognates. Cognates are words in English and Spanish, in this case, that sound similar. An example of a cognate in English and Spanish would be animal/animale. Story play is used by this teacher to reinforce the understanding of the different elements of the book, nursery rhyme, etc. using puppets, or having the children act out the story. The element can include new vocabulary words, characters, plot, etc. She stated that she finds that having the students act out the story leads to them re-reading the book during free play and reacting to it amongst themselves which increases their understanding. In this way, they also learn from each other. The last support she uses is incorporating at least one activity every month with the families. She said, "Monthly, an activity is sent home with the students, for which the directions are in English and Spanish, and the activity must be completed with both a parent(s) and the student, "After it is completed and returned to school, the teacher allows each student to present their completed activity to the class and explain what they did. The teacher finds that this helps improve their English language skills and increases their self-confidence not just with the English language, but also in a social-emotional context. When engaging the students in small and large groups, the teacher stated that she purposefully groups and/or sits certain children next to each other who have varied levels of abilities that complement each

other's learning. In this way, she stated that she uses Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to instruct students. She believes that these groupings support the comprehension of English and also increase social-emotional levels. There are also times when a student-to-student approach (also called pair and share) is used for part of instruction that incorporates sociocultural theory. During this approach, students are given a task, once they complete the task, there is time for them to discuss and then share. When the teacher was asked if there was anything else she would like to discuss or add, she stated that she would like more professional development geared toward early childhood education ELL students and she expressed her concern for the low vocabulary that students have entered preschool with during the last two years. Not only does the teacher believe that low-income factors play a part in this, but in the last two years she believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to the lack of vocabulary knowledge and social-emotional skills that the students are presenting when entering preschool. From Teacher A's journaling experience, she wrote that one activity she did was with the book *Whistle for Willie* (Keats, 1964). During this activity, she used not only the book, but story props (real items including a toy dog and a boy doll), and photo cards. She was able to differentiate for the ELL learners through the use of the story props and photo cards to cement the idea that the word she was saying meant that item. She was able to use their background schema to further scaffold their learning.

Teacher B

Teacher B became a teacher after earning a Bachelor of Education and then a Master of Education in the state of Arizona. Her first teaching certificate was obtained in Arizona, along with a full language immersion (ELL) certificate. Since Arizona reciprocates most teaching certificates with New Jersey, and vice-versa, she was able to obtain a State of New Jersey

Preschool through Grade Three certificate, but not the full language immersion (ELL) certificate. She has been a teacher for eighteen years, teaching preschool for all of those years, however, the last fourteen years have been teaching ELL students. The first school she taught at in Arizona was a private school with all English-speaking students. When teaching literacy, she first feels it is very important to take the time to get to know her students very well before scaffolding their learning. She then meets the students at each level several times before challenging them. She stated," I cut out the strategy of gesturing to her ELL students. In the alternative, she uses more words and vocabulary including visual cards that contain pictures and words, puppets with stories, and lots of pictures with labels in English and Spanish of not only educational materials in the classroom but of everyday items in the classroom such as doors, windows, desks, chairs, etc." Her main pedagogical instructional approach is to mix students who can model English with each other during small group activities and in front of the whole group during large group activities. Before the start of small group time, she had predetermined color-coded names for different groupings of students. For example, red, green, blue, and purple groups are created which contain a mix not only of different levels of students but of ELL and English-speaking students. The students are not aware of the significance of color coding. She stated that when scaffolding, she utilizes the same techniques with English students and ELL students and does this because of her training in full immersion ELL language. She believes that her technique has worked the best for her, and the students have had better academic results when doing this. When reading books while reading aloud, she states that starting last year she has begun the practice of not just reading the book three times in two weeks as her curriculum dictates, but every day. After each reading, she puts the book into one of the learning centers and encourages students to read it during free play. When doing so, she sees that they are modeling with each other and

learning from each other's knowledge thereby utilizing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. She then has the opportunity to enter their play and scaffold the student's learning by asking many questions, including higher-order thinking questions utilizing various levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. After she observes and assesses that the students understand the book and the new vocabulary word, it is then that she moves on to the next book. She has also been doing this at times with daily lesson plans. Planning for each daily lesson plan to be done at least two-three times during the week to allow her students to gain mastery of the material. She stated that she feels it is fruitless to continue with a new lesson the next day until they understand the current lesson. She states, "This is unconventional to the teaching and training of the current curriculum of the school, but that she feels this modification is necessary because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student academic levels coming into preschool." When asked if there was anything else she'd like to discuss related to her experiences teaching literacy, she stated that she believes the past two years had been increasingly more challenging for students and that repeating lesson plans seems to be key in combating this phenomenon. From Teacher B's journaling experience, she expressed that during an environmental print activity, she used milk cartons, playdoh containers, and food item containers that the students brought in from home. This allowed her to equate new vocabulary words with these familiar items in a way that aligned to their culture and family life. She stated that the students seemed more apt to participate and discuss the items, especially the specific ones they each brought in. The students were able to discuss what the items were, and the teacher was able to scaffold the students' knowledge of the item by asking them questions about how they eat and use the item at their house.

Teacher C

Teacher C started her career with a bachelor's degree in business and then obtained a master's in education when starting her second career as a teacher. She has been teaching in the current school district at the same school for seventeen years, which has been the length of her teaching career to date. She has only taught preschool. During her 17 years of teaching, she has taught ELL students every year adding that she has never received formal training in the Spanish language in high school or college. When describing her experiences utilizing scaffolding techniques during literacy instructions, she said that when she teaches new concepts or ideas, she wants the students to see, hear, and observe, more of a multimodal approach. The teacher also described one particular literacy lesson that she taught. She stated," When I was teaching the letters B and P and their corresponding sounds, it was explained, and several short clips of pictures of snow foxes, cats, and a wolf were shown jumping to catch, which is pouncing." She added, "The children then had to stand and act out pouncing on a beanbag." The letters of the word pouncing were discussed, along with the meaning and the actual action of the word. She added that this was intentionally done using a multimodal approach that would appeal to several types of learners. She stated that the way she describes her experiences utilizing modeling techniques in teaching literacy is to not just read books but to make them understand what the main characters are experiencing. She often reflects on the characters, and their facial expressions to have the children try and understand the what's and how's of a story. For instance, she gave the example of when a book is read about a little girl's family recovering from a house fire, unless the children have experienced a total loss like that, they have no idea why the girl would not have furniture. Several images of a home before and after a fire were shown to talk

about the result of the fire. They also discussed how clothing, furniture, and the home in general are unlivable and affected. When asked how she utilizes her pedagogical interactions when teaching literacy, she stated that she makes things relevant. She explained by saying, "Why would a student want to learn about pouncing when they do have an animal that pounces?" She then said that now they do because it has become personal to them. After all, they have participated in the act of pouncing during the activity. She explained that when activities or letters have significance to the student, she believes it is more likely to be retained. The teacher then went on to say that she implements scaffolding techniques for ELL students during literacy instruction by exposing them to letters, vocabulary, and stories with gestures, facial recognition, and seeing actions. During literacy instruction, the teacher models for EL students by having other students practice by saying new words. Also, showing an exaggerated pronunciation, saying the word, and having a visual. During stories, throwing in a few words that she knows in Spanish that coordinate with the book. She had nothing to add regarding whether she wanted to discuss anything else related to her experiences teaching literacy. In Teacher C's journaling experience, she took a tactile approach to her literacy lesson and used shaving cream and a letter chart along with the students' individual name tags. The students were asked to identify their own names and the first letter they started with. During the activity, they were asked to write that letter in the shaving cream with their finger. If they were able to identify and write their own letter, they were challenged to pick the first letter of a friend's name to identify and write the letter. Teacher B asked the students, through inquiry questions, what would happen if they used something else to write the letter in the shaving cream or what would happen if they used something besides shaving cream.

Teacher D

Teacher D earned a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in education. Teaching was her first and only career which she has been doing for the past thirty-two years at two different schools. She possesses a State of New Jersey Elementary Education teaching certificate for Kindergarten through Grade 6 and a State of New Jersey Teacher of Preschool through Grade Three certificate. She has only ever taught preschool. For the whole thirty-two years, she has been teaching ELL students. She describes her experience utilizing scaffolding techniques in literacy instruction by presenting lessons at levels depending on the needs of the small groups. Children are grouped by both level and mixed levels depending on the lesson being presented. The children are given numerous opportunities and exposures to the activity according to the teacher. She describes her experience utilizing modeling techniques in teaching literacy as constantly modeling good language and proper grammar skills and reinforcing language through interactions with the students. While teaching literacy, she utilizes her pedagogical interactions by working with small groups of children in different activities including small groups and free play, all the while modeling good language skills. The teacher implements scaffolding techniques for ELL students during literacy instruction by using visual and hand gestures to reinforce their learning. Her experiences observing and utilizing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in teaching literacy include first knowing that children learn best in their home language. She states, "It is important to have someone in the classroom who speaks their language available to instruct and model proper use of the home language before she can even begin to teach the proper use of the English language." When asked if there was anything she would like to discuss or add related to her experiences in literacy instructions, she stated, "I like to use the strategy of

the repeated use of stories to help the children gain an understanding of story structure." She also uses interactive pieces and manipulatives to help the children increase their understanding. During Teacher's D journaling experience, one lesson she conducted involved reflecting on a recent school trip. The school trip occurred when they visited a local bowling alley for the conclusion of their study on balls. During the trip, the students were individually asked about their experience, and then upon return to the school, they each drew a picture of that experience. After they drew, the teacher asked each child what they drew and to tell her about what they drew. She scaffolded their learning by asking them questions about what they were doing in the picture, or if the bowling ball was bigger or smaller than another type of ball, or if it was heavy or light. The teacher put all this together, with the help of the students, to form a class book which was put in the classroom library.

Teacher E

Teacher E's holds a master's degree in education and possesses a State of New Jersey teacher of Preschool through Grade Three certificate plus a State of New Jersey Master Teacher endorsement. She has been a teacher for twenty-four years and has spent two years in this district. She stated that all through her 24 years she has had experience teaching ELL students. When describing her experience utilizing scaffolding techniques in teaching literacy, she said, "I use objects, speak slowly, and set up the learning centers internationally with hands-on materials that make it easier for me and the students to interact." During modeling, she uses pictures, and points to show you, I, me, and we, and asks the students to name things in their home language and then she shares the name of those things in English. As she speaks, she touches the objects she is speaking about. To implement scaffolding for ELL students in literacy instructions, the teacher reads stories at least three times and asks different questions each reading. She also uses

props such as flannel pieces, real objects, or pictures that students can also use to retell the story. The teacher also stated," I point to most of the words that I am reading and if warranted, I move the objects and describe what I am doing." She also frequently retells the directions int eh student's home language. When utilizing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, she stated," I use the learning centers to create interactions between me and the students and peer-to-peer interactions while doing activities related to the current study." She advised that currently her class is doing a tree study and she brought in real items that would simulate a woodworking shop. They sorted wood items from non-wood items in the science center, used materials to create trees in art, and built an apple orchard in blocks. She did not have anything else to add when asked. One of Teacher E's experiences with journaling involved an activity she did with the students identifying the b sound as the beginning sound of a word. The teacher used many familiar words, like ball, blue, and block, but also Spanish-English cognates such as banana, bicycle, and baby. During this activity, she used real objects or real photos of the objects. Some of the objects were educational materials that students were already familiar with from the different learning centers. She stated that she believed this made it somewhat easier for them since they were aware of the objects and had played with them before. She scaffolded by asking what words they thought sounded like they started with b by making the b sound and having the students repeat it. Once they did that, and learned the b sound, she asked them to pick up the objects or the photo of items that started with b. If they picked up an item that did not start with b, she asked them what it was, they stated it and then she made the beginning sound for that item. She then asked them if that sound sounded like b. This was a way that she scaffolded their learning to get them up to a level where they were able to identify the b sound instantly.

Teacher F

Teacher F's highest degree earned is a bachelor's degree plus thirty credits towards her master's degree. She has been teaching in this district for seventeen years and has been a teacher for 18 years, all of which she has taught preschool. This teacher possesses a State of New Jersey Teacher of Preschool through Grade Three certificate and a New Jersey Teacher of Students with Disabilities certificate. She has had experience teaching ELL students since this school district has a high population of ELL students whose native language is Spanish. When describing her experience utilizing scaffolding techniques in teaching literacy, she explained that using prior knowledge is the key to helping students with understanding. She added that students are scaffolded on different levels according to their developmental levels. When describing her experiences utilizing modeling techniques while teaching literacy, she stated that she uses illustrations to help students connect to what is happening in the story. Also, she models by pointing out concepts with the written word. During the utilization of pedagogical interactions when teaching literacy, she uses familiar tense engaging the students to make connections to their own lives and what is happening in the literacy lesson. She implements scaffolding techniques for ELL students during literacy instruction by sometimes using vocabulary words with pictures in both English and Spanish language. Her bilingual teacher's aide supports students by translating and asking students questions. While modeling for ELL students during literacy instruction the teacher uses word walls with accompanying pictures, pointing to the written language, modeling how some words are repeated through texts. The teacher's aide will read the book in the student's home language. When asked about her experiences utilizing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in literacy instruction, the teacher stated, "From what I

understand and have observed from students who are social with their peers and adults, I can insight and knowledge in all areas." Also, interactions are important for social, emotional, and educational growth. She did not have anything else to add related to her experiences teaching literacy. Teacher F's experience was a little different than the others in that she focused on the preparation of the lessons in her journaling and the importance of connecting key components so the ELL students can learn through a variety of avenues. She focused on learning style. She wrote that being prepared with predetermined scaffolding and inquiry questions works the best for her.

Teacher G

Teacher G holds a bachelor's degree along with New Jersey Teacher Certificates in Business Administration, Secondary Education, and Preschool through Grade Three. She has been teaching preschool for 19 years and preschool is the only grade level she has taught. She claims to have experience teaching ELL students but stated that she does not usually get a lot of ELL students in her class each year. She described her experience utilizing scaffolding techniques while instructing literacy by stating that it gives students the ability to learn big concepts in smaller chunks of time. She added," Scaffolding involves asking questions and giving students examples of what you are looking for; modeling, building on what they already know, and checking for understanding." She further added," I understand that each student has a different learning style and I work hard to ensure that is reflected in my teaching style." When describing her experience utilizing modeling techniques in teaching literacy, she stated that modeling is most important. She believes that modeling is the way students learn best and that modeling during play is optimal. The teacher utilizes pedagogical interactions while teaching literacy through speech by incorporating a variety of conversations with her students every day.

She claims that she does this during every activity, even handwashing and at meals because she believes that she must not only converse about teaching topics but about home life and interests because this gives them more chances to practice their speech. When scaffolding children during literacy instructions, she uses what the students already know, role modeling, encouragement, and also visual aids such as puppets. She said, "I like to make students aware of new vocabulary through music and movement because I believe that this helps increase their comprehension." While modeling ELL students during literacy instruction, she uses interactive storybooks with pretend reading and writing. She also uses poems, nursery rhymes, songs, and fingerplays to encourage a love of learning and speech. To utilize Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in literacy instruction, Teacher G believes that pretend play is key. She said, "I believe this helps children develop their confidence in private speech and increase their imagination along with problem-solving skills." She uses peer-to-peer interactions with one peer acting as the teacher because he feels this makes the children feel more comfortable, but she is there to oversee. She also incorporates the students' interests and home life in the learning process to keep them more engaged while checking for understanding with direct instruction. When asked if there was anything she would like to discuss concerning her experience teaching literacy she said, "I feel that literacy is the foundation of a preschooler's education and the beginning of a love for books and increasing their imaginations." One of Teacher G's journaling experiences constituted a literacy lesson which was not planned. Teacher G decided to read a book to the children at the start of lunch time. She wrote that she thought this was a great time since they were all eating, she had everyone's attention! While reading, she followed the words along with her finger. When she came to words that had the same starting letter as the student's name, she would ask anyone who a word that started with that letter. She also noted that often an ELL student will

respond with a word that starts with that letter in their home language. When that happens, sometimes she knows the word and other times she does not. When she does, she says, for example, manzana starts with m, but in English manzana is apple. What letter does apple start with? She believes that in this way, they are seeing the picture, telling her the word in their home language and she is telling them the word in English so net time this word or picture comes up, they will have the new knowledge they acquired.

Teacher H

Teacher H has earned a bachelor's degree in liberal arts by going on to the New Jersey Alternate Route Teacher program at Montclair University Preschool to Grade Three certificate. She holds a New Jersey Teacher of Preschool through Grade Three as a result. She has been teaching for 26 years and for the last 18 years has been teaching in this district. For the first eight years, she taught in a preschool in a private day care center. She notes that while she has been working in this district, she has taught ELL students consistently. Her experiences utilizing scaffolding techniques during literacy instruction involve a lot of repetition and modeling. She stated, "If you want students to internalize new information, you need to expose them to it several times." She also said it was important to read clearly and slowly and speak in the home language when possible. From her experience she said," Through modeling the children get a vision of what you are asking them to do, and they can connect the language you are speaking to a picture." When instructing literacy, she utilizes her pedagogical interactions by reading slowly and clearly while pointing to the words. She said she also uses pictures of new vocabulary words by saying the new word in their home language and then in English. Teacher H expressed that when she is instructing literacy, she tries to explain the activity and tries to have visuals to have them try and understand during scaffolding. She repeated that she relies a lot on visual cards with

words during literacy instruction to try to get the students to understand not only nouns but also verbs. She also demonstrates the verb, for instance, if it jumps, she will say the word in Spanish (saltar) and then in English (jump) and then physically jump. In her experience with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in literacy instruction, she stated that children are social beings meaningful learning occurs in a social environment that is rich in interactions, and learners use their prior experience to build upon what they already know. She stated, "Through my experience, some children are shy and won't talk in group settings, but once they are playing during free play, they tend to open up and socialize. When asked if she had anything else to add, she reinforced the fact of how important she believes it is to speak slowly and with proper grammar. Teacher H's journaling experience described a lesson she did entitled, "Can you make a ball?" She had visuals of different balls, some real items, and some pictures which she showed to all the students. Then she asked," What does ball begin with? What sound does b make? Does anybody's name start with b? What other words start with b?" Afterward, she provided the students with a choice of different materials including yarn, rubber bands, paper, and play dough. She scaffolded their building of the ball by asking them questions such as, "What shape is the ball?', "What does the ball feel like?". This allowed the students to further create their ball by using materials to color it or small three-dimensional items like gems, pom-poms, etc. to give it texture.

Teacher I

Teacher I is a fluent Spanish speaker. She holds a bachelor's degree in liberal studies but is currently attending Montclair University to earn her Preschool through Grade Three certification. Currently, she holds a State of New Jersey Limited Certificate of Eligibility for Preschool through Grade Three. Recently, a new certificate from the State of New Jersey just

started issuing in 2023. This is her first year as a teacher, but previously was an instructional

aide for four years, and only ever taught in the district she is currently in. She has only ever

taught preschool children. All five years, she has experience teaching ELL students. She relayed

that since this is her first-year teaching, she is still trying to learn and find different ways to

utilize scaffolding techniques during literacy instruction. She stated," I believe using modeling

techniques helps the children better comprehend because they are seeing what must be done

before they do it." She uses pedagogical interactions in literacy instruction by getting to know

the student's needs and basing goals around what they already know and what they do not know.

She tries to teach in smaller chunks, introduces a new word or items first, and ensures

comprehension before moving on. She said, "I model instruction by using pictures, having

content presented in their own native language, hand movements, repeating the words while

enunciating them, speaking slowly and checking to see if they understand, and translating some

of the words into their home language if necessary." During small groups and choice time,

Teacher I makes certain the students have the opportunity to work and socialize together while I

role-play a scenario in the learning center to get students involved and socializing. Once they are

involved, the teacher removes herself from the center. She also makes sure she differentiates the

learning within small group literacy instruction according to their sone of proximal development.

She did not have anything additional to add when asked. In Teacher I's journaling experience,

she noted an activity she did with the students involving a morning activity she does every

morning. During the opening group, Teacher I welcomed each student, but she added a literacy

component to it by not only welcoming each child by name but sounding out the first letter of

their name. For some students, she pointed to the rest of the letters, and they can identify each

letter. Once they identified the letter and the sound it made, she asked if they knew any other

word that started with that letter. If they did not, she scaffolded their learning by asking them to pick an item in the room, tell her what it was, and then try to identify fi that sound was the same as the sound that their name started with. She noted that almost all of the children at this time of the school year are able to at least identify the first letter of their name and the sound it makes.

Teacher J

Teacher J has earned a bachelor's degree and possesses a State of New Jersey Preschool through Grade Three teaching certificate. This is her first year as a teacher in this district but has several years of substituting experience in various grade levels from preschool through grade eight in another district. She said that she has had experience teaching ELL students during her time as a substitute. When modeling for literacy instruction, she always explains to the students what she is doing, especially when writing. She added, "I make sure to speak slowly and clearly so that all students can understand and repeat what I say when necessary, and I also ask meaningful questions to get their understanding." She implements scaffolding techniques by speaking slowly so everyone understands and having her instructional aide translate when needed. One of the ways she models is by writing down the question of the day on chart paper in front of the students while sounding out each word and enunciating the syllables. When applying Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, she stated, "I tend to focus on socialization whether it is from teacher to student or student to teacher, and I pay attention to the students who do not interact during large group when they are interacting with classmates during center time." She did not have anything additional to add when asked. For Teacher J's journaling experience, since she was a first-year teacher, her experience she was more focused on keeping the behaviors down and students engaged. She did an activity where she read a book about a mouse entitled, *The Doorbell Rang* (Hutchins, 1989). Teacher J brought out a toy doll house and every time the

doorbell rang in the story, she rang the doorbell sound on her phone and explained a new vocabulary word from the story. She wrote that the students were engaged and listened well to the story because they were anticipating the doorbell to ring. Afterward, she put the book and the house in the dramatic play center and saw several students modeling her actions. Teacher J had the opportunity to go into the center and scaffold their learning and reiterate the new vocabulary words.

Teacher K

Teacher K has earned a master's degree in education and holds a State of New Jersey Preschool through Grade Three teaching certificate. She has been teaching for a total of eight years, but three of those years in this district. She has only ever taught preschool. She has experience teaching ELL students all eight years of teaching. She reported that she scaffolds during story time, and large groups by asking prompting questions, offering alternative questions for the children to answer, modeling, demonstrations, story play, and providing suggestions. When asked to describe her experiences utilizing modeling techniques in teaching literacy, she said, "I try to utilize modeling with my students daily by having the students imitating reading words and sentences." "The students will observe me writing and they will repeat the words in the sentence." "I also encourage students to flip through the pages of books and identify letters". She stated that she uses pedagogical interactions during literacy by modifying instruction based on student outcomes, using small and large group activities, guided learning, differentiated instruction, and assessments. She also added that she tries to regularly encourage the students to speak by creating questions geared toward discussions, asking for opinions, and discussing culture and home environments. She implements the use of scaffolding techniques for ELL students by having her Spanish-speaking instructional aide speak the content or ask questions in

Spanish that she asked in English. She encourages students to repeat both words, English, and Spanish, but she tends to emphasize answering in English when possible. She also uses visual cues to aid in instruction. Teacher K utilizes Vygotsky's sociocultural theory during instruction by using academic-level variation student grouping. When asked if there was anything she wanted to add concerning literacy instruction, she said, "I believe that exposing students to as many words as possible increases literacy." "We introduce students to higher level words and discuss their meanings." "I love to hear vocabulary." "Children are exposed to books throughout the day." "I have several story play bins in our library center to encourage reading, and the bins are filled with books and related toys for the children to play and expand their imagination." For Teacher K's journaling experience, she focused on multimodal methods to teach the students alphabet recognition. She documented that she used giant alphabet letters that she made and cut out. She focused on H. She said the name of the letter, and then the sound it makes. She had the students put one hand in front of their mouth and say the letter, and the sound it made. When she modeled the name and sound of the letter, she exaggerated slowly. After, she asked the students to do the same as her. She had put the giant letter up on the board and had them make the letter with their finger like they were writing. She wrote that the experience helped them understand the full concept of the letter H because they used visual, auditory, and tactile skills.

Results

Data was collected from the participants' teaching experiences teaching literacy ELL students in a low-income school through interviews, observations, and journals. Each teacher interview was done individually in person or by telephone. None of the participants volunteered to keep a journal. The data was stored on a password-protected computer and a thumb drive that was locked in a cabinet.

Horizontalization was used to derive categories and themes that represented the data (Burland, et al., 2018). Themes were extracted from the data through analyzation of the participant experiences in a structured analytic approach. This approach follows the general guideline of analyzing the data into themes and presenting an exhaustive description of the phenomenon (Crewell & Poth, 2018).

Data was extracted and organized from the transcripts of the interviews, observations, and journals were put into codes. The observational data and interview data were coded into broad codes linked to the primary aims of the research (Houghton, Murphy, Shaw & Casey, 2015). Hermeneutic phenomenology was used to analyze the lived experiences of the participants. Using this type of phenomenology as a research methodology, one has to apply the skill of reading texts, such as the text of transcripts spoken accounts of personal experience and, as van Manen (1997) put it, isolating themes (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Table 2

Themes & Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes	In Vivo Evidence
Student Grouping	Non-ELL/ELL	Pairing peer-to-peer, Spanish-speaking teacher-to-student
	Academic Level Variation	High with low, mixing all three levels (high, medium, low)
	Social/Non-Social	Painting social students with non-social students
Visual Clues	Picture Cards with Words	Pictures with words on word walls, pictures with words on bracelets or necklaces on a ring, or pictures with words on a ring at different learning centers
	Labeling Real Items	Labeling of all educational materials and real items in the classroom.
Story Play	Using Props	Puppets, flannel board pieces, homemade laminated pictures with Velcro.

Speaking with Proper Grammar	None	Sounding out words, letter sounds, and syllables, enunciating words, and using inflection when speaking and reading.
Music	None	ABC songs, color songs, nursery rhymes, poems.

Student Grouping

The core of student grouping comes directly from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky claimed that zones of proximal development were crossed when students work through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky,1978; Robert, 2016). Students have an advantage over their teachers as they are more likely to work closely together (Wald & Harland, 2022). Generally, the viewpoint of the teachers who use student grouping feels that because they are peers and often interact in play and other activities and are relatable; they will be more apt to open up to other students and learn from each other. Teachers A and D used student grouping in literacy instruction. They mixed students who were non-ELL and ELL, of academic level variations, and who were social and non-social. Teacher A stated that she found that the other students' modeling of their peers was effective in supporting her literacy instruction.

ELL/Non-ELL Students

The first grouping is by placing an ELL student with a non-ELL student. Teachers A and D believe that the ELL student will model the language and vocabulary from the non-ELL in a less judgmental setting, meaning without doing so directly in front of the teacher or the whole class. They both believe, based on their experiences, that this supported and enhanced their literacy instruction. This grouping method is part of reciprocal teaching which is a cooperative

learning strategy involving grouping students (McAllum, 2014). It requires collaboration and group thinking while emphasis is placed on students providing instructional support for each other.

Academic Level Variation

The second type of student grouping is mixing academic levels. Teachers A, D, and K frequently used a student of a higher level paired with a student of a lower level. In this situation, the student on the higher academic level acted as a teacher. If a peer is helping someone else learn, they are engaged in some form of teaching (Wald & Harland, 2021). The teacher was entrusting the other students to help the lower-level academic student strive toward a higher ZPD while the teacher provided support in the form of scaffolding. Through interaction in mixed-ability groups, students who are developing skills in comprehension are supported by the social context and reciprocal teaching frameworks (McAllum, 2014). Teachers A, D, and K used academic variation in their instruction of literacy to ELL students. Teacher A used specific assessment criteria she had created to group students by academic level. Teacher D reported that this method was used based on the type of lesson being presented, but that for literacy this was her common practice. Teacher K experienced grouping students in academic levels of only low and high together in pairs. She stated that this was helpful for her to use scaffolding and prompts to move the students to the goal of higher-level thinking and to push their individual abilities more effectively.

Social and Non-Social Students

The third type of student grouping is pairing social and non-social students when working in small groups. Teachers A and D found in their experiences that the more social students could bring out the non-social students to speak and join in on the group project because there were

fewer people to speak to. In the more intimate setting, the student seemed to feel more comfortable. Their experience was that this type of student grouping did not bring in academic levels, it seemed to be very productive because the students' ideas and thoughts flowed more freely to enrich the discussion.

Visual Clues

During a variety of activities in the classroom whether formal such as read-alouds, small groups, and large groups, or during play, visual clues were used. These visual clues included pictures with the word underneath, labels on educational materials, and general items in the classroom such as windows and doors. Labels with words are used to infuse the classroom environment with print. Teachers A, B, D, E, F, G, H, and K used visual clues and stated that it also helps the students use self-directed learning as they can start recognizing that the words have meaning and can represent these different objects.

Picture Cards with Words

Teachers A, B, D, F, E, G, and K used picture cards. They expressed that they could correlate the word the ELL student uses for that object to the English word written on the label effectively teaching them the new English word. Some of the teachers wore picture cards with words underneath in a sort of necklace. Another teacher utilized these cards in the form of a bracelet and yet another hung them up in and around each main area of the classroom, so they were student accessible. The students were then able to go to the picture cards and show the teacher what they needed or wanted by finding the picture with the word. One teacher's necklace also included common pictures with words on it for items including the bathroom, tissues, water fountain, pencil, scissors, and paper.

Labeling Real Items

All the teacher participants conveyed that they used labels on educational materials and other real items in the classroom to convey literacy, but also because the district required it. They stated that the educational materials were labeled, whether on a shelf or in a bin, with the picture and word to provide environmental print for the students so they can learn to associate the item with the word, learn that words have meaning, start to recognize letters, and also help the students during clean-up time to match the picture to the object to put it away. Teachers noted that once students realized the item matched the label, they were able to put things away and easily correlate that the picture represented the item and word. In the different learning centers, the teachers had put environmental print items such as cereal boxes, plastic coffee jars, and pictures of familiar places like McDonald's and Walmart.

Story Play

Teachers A, B, D, G, and K noted that story play helped their students understand language and word meaning during literacy instruction. The teachers stated that they would read stories not just three times as the *Creative Curriculum* required, but once or even twice a day for a week so the students were familiar with the story and the vocabulary (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). After reading it for a week, the teachers conveyed that they would assign students to act out different character roles and retell the story as a group, like a mini, informal school play. The teacher would let the students act out the story with leading questions. By using these leading questions such as asking students how the character felt or what did they next, the students were able to complete the story play. The teacher then would ask them questions as an exit ticket to ascertain their understanding of the book, the characters, and the setting.

Using Props

Teachers A, B, D, G, H, I, and K confirmed that they used props such as puppets, felt board or Velcro story pieces (store-bought or homemade), and even real items to retell stories. Often, they allowed the students to participate in the retelling with them by assigning them roles. Teachers who used this method expressed that the children seemed more apt to want to participate in the retelling activity when they saw their peers being able to utilize a prop. Teachers also said that students who were normally shy and less social seemed to feel more comfortable using a prop to speak to the other students during retelling. In their experience, these teachers said that the retelling could be used further to have the students show their knowledge of the book's beginning, middle, and end, the characters, the setting, and the plot.

Proper Grammar Usage

Teachers C, D, E, F, G, and H said that in their experience it was important to use proper grammar in teaching literacy instruction. They expressed that the usage of slang vocabulary, in their opinion, is detrimental to the ELL students learning English. Teacher C stated that she used proper grammar and intentionally enunciated each word and spoke with different inflections while reading to emphasize letter sounds, syllables, and all-round grammatical correctness. Teacher D stated that she is constantly modeling good language skills and reinforcing language through her interactions with the children. Teacher E added that she opts to speak slowly and enunciate the words correctly and then repeat the word highlighting the syllabus in the word. Teachers F and G noted similar experiences. They stated that they incorporate new vocabulary every day by modeling speech, making the students aware of the vocabulary as they intentionally go over the proper pronunciation of each word. Both teachers also indicated that they deliberately read slowly, and clearly to the students repeating words if necessary.

Music

Music and language skills rely upon auditory processing, although reading may not be thought of as a primarily auditory activity, a child must first be able to make sense of incoming auditory input in order to map sounds (phonemes) correctly onto orthographic representations (graphemes) as reading skills develop (Slater, et al., 2014). Teacher G, H, and I expressed that in their experience, using music to enhance and teach literacy was a valuable and important method. Both teachers expressed that this encourages a love of learning and of speech. They both frequently use music to teach the alphabet, letter sounds, and rhyming words. Poems fingerplays, and nursery rhymes are most often utilized, but Teacher G admitted that YouTube videos with music and dancing while teaching literacy skills were also very useful because it keeps the children more engaged. Teacher H incorporates music whenever she can because her students respond well to instruction when music is incorporated. She feels her students this year have a learning style that makes using music in instruction valuable because they seem to learn the material faster when it is included. She regularly uses it for clapping the syllables of words, learning the alphabet, colors, shapes, and the days of the week. Teacher I, who is also fluent in Spanish, uses music as a tool to teach picture-word association when introducing new words and putting them onto the word wall. She says shows the picture, says the word in Spanish, and then in English. She believes this gives them a better understanding of the new word.

Outlier Data and Findings

One unexpected finding occurred with Teacher G. All the other teachers communicated that the majority of their students are ELL students. Out of fifteen students, one to four on average are not ELL students. In this classroom, there was only one ELL student. Considering all the teachers work in the same school district and the make-up of the community of mostly

Spanish-speaking, I anticipated that all the classes would have the same demographic. Teacher G did have a teacher's aide who spoke Spanish, and the aide did support the ELL student. I assumed that all the classes would look the same regarding the average number of non-ELL students that populated the classes. This outlier that emerged was a surprise.

Demographics

Teacher G's students were all African American or of a mixed race that included African American and Caucasian. Despite being in the same school district, Teacher G was from another school within the district that is near a large, low-income apartment complex where the majority of the families are African American. Because of the proximity of the school to the apartment complex, the students attend Teacher G's school. The school district does not mix up the neighborhood and bus students across town. Instead, they have the students attend the school that is nearest to where they live. She stated that this happens almost every year with the make-up of the students in her class. The other participants do not have this demographic in their classrooms as their schools are located near areas of large Spanish-speaking families.

Research Question Responses

In this study, the researcher searched for information to understand the experiences of teachers in preschool through grade three on how they instructed literacy to ELL students while incorporating Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in their practice. Data compilation, review, and analysis of the triangulated data, which included interviews and observations, was compiled to examine the participant's experiences teaching literacy to ELL students. The researcher used horizontalization to build on the answers to the research questions, go through the interview and observation transcriptions, and highlight significant statements, and sentences that provide an understanding of how the participants experience this phenomenon (Crewell & Poth, 2018).

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of early childhood education teachers teaching literacy to low-income ELL students through different scaffolding techniques during social interactions and activities? The participants' viewpoint is that when instructing ELL students in literacy, teacher participants noted that they focus on vocabulary and their meaning. They use scaffolding to try to reach the next academic level of the child by utilizing proper support. One of the supports used is picture cards with words. Other teachers focus on using reinforcement of vocabulary and proper grammar when doing a read-aloud and introducing new vocabulary. All the participant teachers use labeling in the classroom on educational materials and real items. Teacher B expressed that to properly scaffold her students, she needs to build a relationship with them first and get to know them on a personal level. She likes to learn about them, their home life, and their interests. She believes that she can then correlate the scaffolding to this knowledge and enhance learning.

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe their experiences using the five key concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in literacy instruction with ELL students during planned activities and social interactions?

Teacher C responded, "When demonstrating new vocabulary, I wrote down the word and highlighted the letter it starts with. Then after making the sound of the letter and sounding out the word, I either show them a real visual of the word or if an action, I show them, let's say a cat pouncing." Teacher C also added, "To reinforce the meaning of the word, *pouncing*, I act the word out and invite the students to do so as I believe this reinforces their comprehension of the word." Teacher H responded," If you want the students to internalize the new information, you need to expose them to it several times". Teacher I stated, "Since I am fluent in Spanish, I

reinforce the ELL students who speak Spanish understanding by repeating what I said in English, in Spanish to them while speaking slowly and sounding out English words and letter sounds so they can see the way my mouth moves." Teacher K stated, "I try to utilize modeling of new vocabulary words daily by having the students imitate reading words and sentences. After, they will observe me writing and they will repeat the words in the sentence." Seven out of eleven of the participants thought that while teaching the five key concepts in literacy instruction it was imperative to make sure there was an understanding of the vocabulary word before that word was not discussed anymore in future lessons.

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of teachers supporting ELL students with special needs as they attempt to learn the five key concepts of literacy instruction during planned activities and social interaction?

Teacher F stated," I engage ELL students with special needs, because I have four in my inclusion classroom, by engaging these students to make a connection in their own life, using my word wall with pictures to reinforce vocabulary and then making sure I repeat the new vocabulary words many times." Teacher G expressed, "I used music because at first the music engages the student and gets their attention, and then after singing or playing the song again, the student will eventually learn the words and then correlate the words with their meanings." Teacher G then added, "I also show pictures or a real item to cement their comprehension of the new word." Teacher I said, "I model instruction by using pictures, having content presented in their home language, and with hand movements, then checking of understanding." Three out of the 11 teacher participants had an inclusion classroom where there were students with IEP's, the

other eight teacher participants had students who were not classified, but from their experience believed that they could be in the future.

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe their experiences, from the most successful to the least successful, in teaching literacy to ELL students and ELL special needs students during the planned activities and social interactions?

Teacher A said," My most successful experience when instructing ELL students involves using story play. After reading the book several times, I use puppets to retell it and have the children join in to also use the puppets and act out the story. I then put the book and the props in the literacy center so the students can do story play." Teacher I stated, "My most successful strategy with ELL students involves making very large letters and introducing each letter one at a time." Teacher I added, "I then show them the letter from the word wall with a picture while saying the letter sound and then the word. I then use a song to reinforce the letter sound and for letter recognition".

Teacher I stated, "My least successful strategy teaching ELL students' literacy involves using a word wall with no pictures to correlate with the word. The students had hardly any interest in the words on the word wall until pictures were added and then students would often during instruction and play reference the word wall." Teacher J stated, "I have tried to group social and non-social ELL students during instruction activities, but I fine that they do not open up unless they are in free play together." However, Teacher K reports, "I pair students with higher and lower skills together during planned lessons, which has been successful because often I can prompt the lower-level student to a new goal or higher level of thinking." Interestingly, only three of the 11 teachers reported that they utilize student grouping in literacy instruction.

Summary

The main themes that were seen in this study included student grouping, visual clues, story play, proper grammar usage, and music. All the teacher participants, except Teacher J, agreed that using visual clues in the classroom such as picture cards with words was essential in the instruction of teaching literacy to ELL students. They reported that the correlation between the picture with the word was very valuable to the students being able to match the pictures to the words and if the children were not able to match the word, they were able to remember the name of the item in the picture. Teachers A, B, D, G, and K reported that using story play to retell, the parts of the story (beginning, middle, and end), learn about characters, and setting was key to comprehension of words in English and using puppets or other props made the activity more enticing. The teachers found that when they read the book several times, did the story play, and then put the book in a learning center for the children to read, they often found that almost the whole class at some point over the next few days engaged in their own story play. They were able to assess their word knowledge by listening to the student groupings of children playing together and modeling off of each other.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. The research design for this study was a qualitative transcendental phenomenology. The researcher investigated the experiences of the teachers, discussed the methods they use, and analyzed the qualifications and rationale of the teachers. Today, teachers are facing enormous challenges in knowing how to best serve and educate ELL students in their schools (Cheung & Slavin, 2012). In reviewing the literature on teaching literacy to ELL students, it was discovered that there was not one preferred method or any method by which teachers seemed to agree produced the most academic results. Teachers, in early childhood education, experienced five major ways of enhancing literacy instruction to ELL students in their opinion, garnered more success. These methods included student grouping, visual clues, story play, proper grammar usage, and music which emerged as the distinctive themes. It seemed as though the more teaching experience the teacher accumulated, the more methods she used. Evidence from this study may be used to add more breadth to the literature. Eidetic reduction was used in the analysis of the data to find patterns of meaning or unique, distinct themes that emerged (Heinonen, 2015). In chapter five, the interpretation of the findings, implications for practice, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research were extracted from the experiences of the teacher participants in this study.

Discussion

This researcher sought to discover and describe the experiences of social interactions and literacy instruction for low-income ELL students by early childhood teachers in a southern New Jersey elementary school. Teacher participants expressed varied experiences with the use of several dominant methods of literacy instruction and encouraged social interactions whether between the teacher and student, or student to student. Data compilation, review, and analysis of the triangulated data, which included interviews and observations, was compiled to examine the participant's experiences teaching literacy to ELL students. The researcher used horizontalization to build on the answers to the research questions, go through the interview and observation transcriptions, and highlight significant statements, and sentences that provide an understanding of how the participants experience this phenomenon (Crewell & Poth, 2018). The themes will be discussed along with the findings, which are supported by the empirical and theatrical bases, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations that will be made for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

The central research question in this study was, "What are the experiences of early childhood education teachers teaching literacy to low-income ELL students through different scaffolding techniques during social interactions and activities?" which guided this study. There were three sub-questions. The first sub-question focused on the experiences of teachers using the five key concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in literacy instruction and social interactions with ELL students. The second sub-question focused on the same key concepts during literacy instruction and social interactions but was directed toward ELL students with special needs. The third and last sub-question asked the teacher participants to describe their experiences teaching literacy to ELL students from the most to the

least successful. After eidetic reduction was used in the analysis of the data to find patterns of meaning or unique, distinct themes that emerged (Heinonen, 2015), the data was triangulated to find different themes that reoccurred with the experiences of the teachers.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Five distinct themes were prevalent which included student grouping, visual clues, story play, speaking with proper grammar, and music. Among these themes, within student grouping visual clues, and story play, subthemes emerged. Student grouping has three subthemes emerge which included non-ELL/ELL students, academic level, and social/non-social pairings. Visual clues had two subthemes which included picture cards with words and labeling real items. The last theme with a subtheme, story play, has one subtheme using props. The literacy instruction methods varied in their use by the different teacher participants. The methods varied based on the unique needs of the students in the classroom which differ from year to year. Some classrooms had more inclusion students than others, some had none, one classroom had only one ELL student and some classrooms had no instructional staff that spoke Spanish. All these different variables also affected the methods the teachers could use and how well they could use them.

Student Grouping

The experiences of the teachers yielded the first theme, student grouping. Student grouping directly correlates to Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, according to Vygotsky (1978), which stresses the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live and implies that human learning is mainly a social process (Yaghoubi & Farrokh, 2022). Pairing students together in small groups, or during large group share-outs facilitated more participation of ELL students. In other words, sociocultural theory claims that without social interaction with other more knowledgeable peers, cognitive development will not occur (Yaghoubi & Farrokh,

2022). The pairings included up to four students who were asked to work together on a specific task. Teachers frequently paired students by putting English and ELL students together, students with varying academic levels, and students who were social and non-social. Teachers recognized that by frequently pairing students by putting English and ELL students together, the students tended to open up and participate more allowing for peer-to-peer modeling of different concepts, and the ability of students to more freely share ideas and concepts to form a consensus of how the group could complete the tasks assigned to them. Students who were paired because of language did better comprehending the vocabulary in English and took a shorter time to absorb the meaning of the word and be able to use it in future conversations. One teacher reported that by pairing students in this grouping after the book is read to the whole class, and asking the students to re-read it together, the students were observed flipping through the book retelling it, and trying to identify letters. Teachers also grouped students according to their varied academic levels. Students in almost all the classrooms were put into groups according to levels with the groups having names like the yellow, green, and red groups or the square, circle, and rectangle table groups, etc. These designations were made so the children did not know who was in the high, medium, and low groups and the teachers could easily pick children to pair together who were of varying academic levels for different small group assignments. Teachers noticed that when scaffolding and assessing these student pairings, the students who were of higher academic levels were modeling different skills to the less academically inclined students. These peer-to-peer interactions were received well by the students and the teacher experienced success with this because the students took more ownership of the activity and its completion. Teachers also grouped students who were social and non-social to do activities together. The teachers reported that these groups, especially when the teacher was away from them but still in earshot, produced

the best results with ELL students. Several teachers reported that during large or small groups, certain students who were ELL students would not speak for large periods. However, when placed in learning centers of their choice, the teachers could hear meaningful conversations between the students. These learning conversations were fruitful, and the teachers could hear students utilizing concepts that were previously discussed or taught. Some teachers reported that this allowed for the students eventually to open up in conversations within larger groups after a few months of school.

Visual Clues

Using visual clues was the most highly used method for teaching literacy to ELL students among the teacher participants. It is advantageous to learn vocabulary from word cards (Lei & Reynolds, 2022). The visual clues were picture cards with words, but different teachers used different ways to present these picture cards. Some teachers used a word wall with a picture and corresponding word underneath it for each new vocabulary word that was introduced. This usually occurs through a story, the introduction of a new theme or study, or even through conversations between teachers and students. Teachers also used picture cards and picture cards with words on bracelets or lanyard necklaces so that they would be easily accessible at any time during instruction when needed. Teachers also put pictures with words on rings and put each ring at different learning centers to encompass the vocabulary that might be needed to play and learn in that center. Relevant words to the theme, study, and learning center were included and would help to indirectly scaffold and enhance the student's learning experience. As new words were introduced and explored, these words would be added to the picture cards. The teachers also used picture cards not only for new vocabulary words or words related to themes and studies but for real items that the students may need. These items included a picture of a toilet, a glass of water,

a pencil, paper, scissors, and other necessary items and materials that the students may need to communicate a need for. Included with visual clues, the teachers had all educational materials and real items in the classroom labeled on the bins and shelves and the real items themselves in English and Spanish. This is because this district is funded by the State of New Jersey under the Abbott program funding which under the New Jersey Department of Education requires that the preschool classrooms be ECERS-3 compliant. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale 3rd Edition requires that all classroom education materials, including real items be labeled. The district of this study requires that the labels also be in Spanish because of the high population of Spanish-speaking students. The teachers relayed that having these item labels, and in both languages, helped the students to make word associations with the objects to be able to clean-up after themselves, and aid in learning letter and sound recognition.

Story Play

Story play was a method used by the teachers that yielded positive literacy learning results. Providing purposeful instructional and educational opportunities, especially for low-income children who may come from environments with limited access to print media is essential to facilitate later learning and comprehension of more complex text (Neuman & Celano, 2012 as cited in Neuman, & Danielson, 2021).   Most of the teachers used puppets or story pieces made of felt or even homemade to accompany their story telling. However, a few teachers took it a step further. These teachers read the book more than the three times required by the *Creative Curriculum*, which is the official curriculum for the district for preschool, and after a week of reading the book had the students do story play (State of New Jersey Department of Education, n.d.). Groups of students were taken in small groups, no more than four, and were given the book to look over with the teacher. The teacher then reviewed the book with them and

showed them the props. The students then decided which student would use which prop, which delineated which character they were, and then the teacher would give a directive. Some teachers had the students use story play for retelling, some for parts of the story (beginning, middle, and end) and some took it further and asked them to come up with a different ending. Students were challenged, but they were engaged and learning. The students' knowledge of the story play showed that they understood the concepts of the book. Children might learn best through seeing a chart or diagram (visual), explaining a concept with a video, using pair and share discussions (auditory), or by doing a hands-on project with a group or a performance of a scene from a book (tactile) (Multimodal Learning-Best Practices for P-3 Instruction, n.d.). Having the students come up with a different ending or what would happen if, produced higher order thinking questions and answers from the teacher and students.

Speaking with Proper Grammar

Seven out of the eleven teacher participants expressed the importance, in their experience, of speaking with proper grammar, especially with ELL students learning the language for the first time. Every time they gave directions, read, or instructed they enunciated each word to be clear. Also, during stories, the teachers would use inflection to emphasize feelings or situations to give the students a sense of the meaning of a word. For example, if the teacher read, "Sally was mad at her brother", the teacher would read the sentence using a mad voice. This would give the story more meaning to ELL students because they now know that the teacher was reading about someone mad. One teacher said, "As a preschool teacher, we are constantly modeling good language skills and reinforcing language through our interactions with the children." Teachers sounded out word syllables, made letter sounds to beginning letters in new words, and repeatedly pointed out the letters in the new words when reading. Another

teacher also expressed that proper speech is modeled throughout the day, and it is incorporated into all activities, including lunch, which gives the students a wonderful opportunity to practice their speech.

Music

The final theme of the teacher's experience was music. This occurred in a few different ways. Either in an instructional context through songs teaching the alphabet, colors, shapes, days of the week, and months of the year. Teachers found that there were a good number of students who learned these concepts quickly through music. Music and language skills rely upon auditory processing, although reading may not be thought of as a primarily auditory activity, a child must first be able to make sense of incoming auditory input in order to map sounds (phonemes) correctly onto orthographic representations (graphemes) as reading skills develop (Slater, et al., 2014). Nursery rhymes, fingerplays, and poems that were sung were also used which the teachers believed helped create a love of learning because the activity was fun and engaging. Another teacher believed that incorporating music and movement into the learning process helped to increase comprehension. It has been proposed that music training may strengthen reading ability by increasing underlying neural consistency and thereby supporting critical reading-related sub-skills, including rhythm perception, phonological awareness, and auditory working memory (Slater, et al., 2014).

Implications for Policy or Practice

The experiences of these teachers provide insight into viable and enriching ways to provide successful strategies when instructing literacy to ELL students. By utilizing these experiences in teacher pedagogy, they could alter the way preschool teachers choose to instruct ELL students in literacy and promote a more successful academic outcome. Since most teachers

are not formally trained as ESL teachers, there needs to be more formal professional

development in this area, especially in districts where there are high ELL populations. Also, it is

a good idea to provide this training in a college class or before teacher employment starts, to

preservice teachers. This could better prepare them for the challenge.

Implications for Policy

These implications of this study could be used to formulate better insight into the

challenges of teachers who teach ELL students and how the districts could better support these

teachers. Teachers need to be prepared, not only with training but with materials to properly

instruct the ELL students. Most of the teachers did not know Spanish in this case, so it may be

beneficial to the district to obtain these materials to better equip the teachers. These materials

should be developmentally appropriate for early childhood education students keeping in the

ELL students' culture and experiences. Materials could include dual Spanish and English picture

cards with words. These picture cards could be enhanced by incorporating environmental print in

the early childhood classroom. In a study by Giacovazzi et al. (2021), participants who were

learning English as the second language in Vera's (2007) study furthermore expanded their

alphabet knowledge in the context of English and this promotes the value of using environmental

print in multilingual contexts (such as South African preschools). The use of environmental print

materials as an educational tool has shown the possibilities of a resource that is cost-effective,

flexible in its use for multiple activities, and relevant to the group of children who collect the

materials from their own direct environments (Giacovazzi et al., 2021). Another suggestion

would be the use of translation software on laptops and tablets to enhance the teacher's

knowledge of the ELL students' home language. The language discrepancy between teachers and

children has been cited as one of the reasons why ELLs experience minimal academic success (Lin et al. 2008; Lake & Beisly, 2019).

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice for instructing ELL students in literacy using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory could affect teachers by exploring, enriching, and improving their pedagogical practice while teaching students. Teachers are always learning and crafting their skills. Teachers can use student grouping so ELL students can model language, learn to be more social, or improve students' ZPD. Visual clues, including picture cards with words and labeling of educational materials and real items, also could aid teachers' instruction by not only reinforcing new vocabulary but through using it as environmental print, giving ELL students a constant reminder that these words correlate with a certain specific object or action. Varied or differentiated instruction helps adapt instruction to meet the needs of ELLs (Valiandes, 2015; Owens, & Wells, 2021). Since it seemed that the teacher participants in this study who were less experienced as teachers used fewer of the strategies that were used by more seasoned teachers, it might be beneficial to have these more seasoned teachers give professional development or engage in PLCs with the newer teacher to enhance and enrich their practice. One way is to implement professional development within the PLC's focused on sheltered instruction practices that reflect sociocultural theory using the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) (McIntyre, Kyle, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010). SIOP is an eight-step model that guides teachers toward teaching content to all students and simultaneously assists English learners in developing literacy skills (.McIntyre, Kyle, Muñoz, & Beldon, 2010).

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Teacher Preparation

English Language Learners (ELLs) are the fastest-growing segment of the school population, especially in urban schools (Li & Peters, 2020). Preparing teachers to teach ELL students would help make their pedagogical practices more effective and would allow ELL students to achieve more academic success. Teachers need more formal knowledge not just practical knowledge when they are asked to teach in a context they are not prepared to do. Research on teacher knowledge distinguishes between formal knowledge, which teachers learn in the context of preservice education and professional development, and practical knowledge, which they develop in practice over time (Elbaz, 1991; Johnson, 2019). It is generally agreed that teachers must have basic knowledge and skills to serve ELLs, such as a working knowledge and understanding of L2 (second language) development, cultural diversity and awareness, and certain teaching strategies (Li & Peters, 2020). These studies corroborate that teachers who teach ELL students who are formally trained as ESL teachers need training in this area to improve the academic outcomes of these students.

Student Grouping

The sociocultural theory of mind, created by Vygotsky (1978), is one of the most important theories in learning and has had a significant impact on language instruction (Sarmiento-Campos, et al., 2022). In using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by utilizing student grouping in instruction, teachers can garner more success through scaffolding learning teacher to teacher and peer to peer, and by encouraging more social interactions between ELL students, increasing academic levels, and enriching the learning of English with ELL students.

My research collaborates with previous research by Alkudiry (2022) concerning teaching ELL students. Alkhudiry (2022) recommends encouraging the use of collaborative techniques that integrate both instructors and ELL learners with the socio-cultural norms that can help exploit the full potential for a successful ELL learning experience. I believe that it extends some of the research because a lot of the research was focused on kindergarten through grade 12, not preschool. In preschool, this is where all students, including ELL, are introduced to and hear the most language and literacy concepts for the first time in their young lives. There is a succinct developmental structure that young children follow when learning language and literacy and at the preschool level, children begin to put more than three words together to form a sentence. For the instruction of ELL students especially during social interactions, sociocultural theory offers a theoretical framework that stresses context-based language learning providing practical implications for second-language instruction (Alkhudiry, 2022). Students speak back and forth and learn to understand each other and effectively communicate through this type of practice. During the interaction process, language users can send the messages as output and receive them as input, and if there are any difficulties in encoding or decoding these messages, then the language users restructure and modify their messages so that comprehension becomes possible (Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Alkhudiry, 2023). In terms of ELL learners, learners negotiate in meaning, they change syntax and word forms, repeat the words, and so on, so that understanding and development can take place (Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Alkhudiry, 2023).

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study were two-fold, school approval, and teacher participation. Originally, I had solicited two different school districts to ask for approval to participate in this study. The first school district I sought out did not approve of using their school for this research

study. There were difficulties with their teachers' union and the superintendent even though no names, either of the school or teachers, would be divulged in the study. The second limitation was that even though teachers in preschool through grade 3 were asked to participate, the only teachers who agreed to voluntarily participate were preschool. Teachers in grades kindergarten through grade three were repeatedly reached out to requesting their participation, and a monetary gift certificate worth $25.00 was offered for participation. Teachers expressed that they were too busy at work and that the preparation time they were allotted daily was not enough time to add tasks.

The delimitation of this study was that the researcher chose not to seek approval for another school district to participate in the study and to pursue another school in the district where I completed the study to try to acquire participants in grades kindergarten through grade three. The researcher believes that if the study had included teacher participants from kindergarten through grade three, there might have been a more comprehensive look at the approaches teachers use to teach ELL students literacy.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of the study findings, it is recommended that a future study exploring teaching literacy to ELL students include different school districts, teacher participants from grades preschool through grade three in all the participating districts, and the requirement of journaling for all participants.

Including different school districts would give a better understanding of the ways ELL students are instructed in literacy from a more diverse perspective. Other schools might have more teachers who are ELL learners themselves, who are bilingual, or who are required to

participate in more ELL instruction training, etc. This would make a great comparison and be beneficial to the future practice of other teachers.

Having teachers in more varied grades rather than just preschool participants would also be beneficial to teacher literacy practice because there would be a better look at the progression and progress the students make from preschool through grade three as ELL learners.

Conclusion

The evidence presented in this research study validates the finding that teachers use different ways to teach ELL students, but there is not one method that is agreed upon by all as being best. The methods used appear to be dependent on the teacher's skill level, knowledge, training, and resources. The study also shows the specific methods that these teachers use to facilitate the instruction of ELL students which include pedagogy and environmental. The pedagogical methods used were based on sociocultural theory in student grouping, visual clues, story play, speaking with proper grammar, and through music. The environmental method used was labeling educational materials and real items throughout the classroom atmosphere. Implementing all the pedagogical methods that were experienced, takes training and knowledge to achieve. This means that most teachers need to participate in thorough professional development to acquire these skills. Teachers who are more seasoned professionals should consider mentoring newer teachers in PLC meetings or via separate professional development geared for this purpose. Districts need to ponder the possibility of obtaining educational materials and resources to facilitate the training needed for these teachers and to enhance the current practice of the more experienced teachers. The United States Government offers specific grants entitled, "English Language Acquisition State Grants-Title II, art A" to state education departments to be distributed to their school districts to improve instruction to ELL students in

language and literacy. The environmental use of labeling provides a successful stimulus material to teach print concepts and emergent literacy skills to children (Giacovazzi, et al., 2021). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory also plays a role in the use of environmental print because Vygotsky's theory advocates that the child plays an active role in his or her cognitive development and it also includes within the school environment. The substance of the lived experiences of the teachers instructing literacy to ELL students was that the methods and pedagogy that they chose to use, in their opinion, were the best instructional methods that could be used to ensure the academic success of their students.

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Appendix A

Consent Form for Participants

Title of the Project:

The Experiences of Teachers Using Early Literacy Instruction Supporting ELL Students in a Low-Income School in Southern New Jersey: A Qualitative Study

Principal Investigator: Gia Sparacio Scarani, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be certified early childhood teachers in the State of New Jersey holding a Teacher of Preschool to Grade 3. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of my research is to study the experiences of teachers in early literacy instruction to ELL students using the incorporation of Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory. I will also be exploring how early childhood teachers utilize pedagogical interactions during literacy instruction.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than thirty to forty-five minutes.
2. Participate in one to two observations (not recorded) of literacy instruction.
3. Participate in keeping a journal about your ongoing experiences with teaching literacy instruction to ELL and low-income students. Keeping a journal will be optional but if you choose to do so, a journal will be provided for you.

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

 I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm myself or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.]
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and on a thumb drive which will be locked in a cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years/until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts, and then deleted. The researcher/ researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from this study will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Gia Sparacio Scarani. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ███████████
███████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Jonathan Bracewell, at ████████████████ .

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

_____
Printed Subject Name

Appendix B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

October 3, 2023

Gia Sparacio-Scarani
Jonathan Bracewell

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-364 The Experiences of Teachers Using Early Literacy Instruction Supporting ELL Students in a Low-Income School in Southern New Jersey: A Qualitative Study

Dear Gia Sparacio-Scarani, Jonathan Bracewell,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board ORB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by 546.111 (a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard.
Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix C

Agenda Item Details

Meeting	Nov 14, 2023 - November 14, 2023 Board Agenda @ ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆
Category	3. APPROVAL OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Subject	3.3 Approval of Liberty University Doctoral Student Research
Access	Public
Type	Action (Consent)
Preferred Date	Nov 14, 2023
Absolute Date	Nov 14, 2023
Recommended Action	

To approve Gia Sparacio Scarani, Doctoral student at Liberty University to conduct a research study titled "The Experiences of Teachers in Early Literacy Instruction to ELL students Using the Incorporation of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in a Low-Income School in Southern NJ". The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of social interactions in literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers. Research will begin November 20, 2023 through January 30, 2024. Research would include a 20–40minute observation of the of the teacher providing instruction and a 20-minute interview with the teacher. The research would include Dr. Geraldyn O. Foster Early Childhood Center and Buckshutem Road School Pre-K through Grade 3, approximately 10-12 teachers' total. Participation will be strictly voluntary. The names of the participating teachers and district will NOT be mentioned in the final research project.

Public Content

To approve Gia Sparacio Scarani, Doctoral student at Liberty University to conduct a research study titled "The Experiences of Teachers in Early Literacy Instruction to ELL students Using the Incorporation of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory in a Low-Income School in Southern NJ". The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of social interactions in literacy instruction for low-income and ELL students by early childhood teachers. Research will begin November 20, 2023 through January 30, 2024. Research would include a 20–40-minute observation of the of the teacher providing instruction and a 20-minute interview with the teacher. The research would include ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆ and ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆, approximately 10-12 teachers' total. Participation will be strictly voluntary. The names of the participating teachers and district will NOT be mentioned in the final research project.

Administrative Content

Motion & Voting

Motion to approve all consent agenda items.

Motion by ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆.
Final Resolution: Motion Carried
Yes: ▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆▆

Appendix D

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of early childhood education teachers teaching literacy to low-income ELL students through different scaffolding techniques during social interactions and activities?

Sub-Question One

How do teachers describe their experiences using the five key concepts (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) in literacy instruction with ELL students during planned activities and social interactions?

Sub-Question Two

What are the experiences of teachers supporting ELL students with special needs as they attempt to learn the five key concepts of literacy instruction during planned activities and social interactions?

Sub-Question Three

How do teachers describe their experiences, from most successful to least successful, on teaching literacy to ELL students and ELL special needs students during planned activities and social interactions?

Appendix E

Questionnaire

1. What is your name?

2. Which New Jersey Teaching Certificates do you possess?

3. What is your highest level of education?

4. How long have you been teaching at your current school district? Have many years total as a teacher?

5. What grade do you teach?

6. Do you have experience teaching ELL students?

7. How would you describe your experience utilizing scaffolding techniques in teaching literacy?

8. How would you describe your experiences utilizing modeling techniques in teaching literacy?

9. How do you utilize your pedagogical interactions when teaching literacy?

10. How do you implement scaffolding techniques for ELL students during literacy instruction?

11. How do you model for ELL students during literacy instruction?

12. What are your experiences observing and/or utilizing Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in literacy, teacher to student and/or student to student?

13. Is there anything else you would like to discuss or add related to your experiences in literacy instruction?

Appendix F

Observation Guidelines

1. Name of Teacher(s), room number, time, date of observation, and the number of students present.

2. Does the teacher model during the lesson and model during guided practice?

3. How does the teacher scaffold ELL students?

4. How does the teacher model with ELL students?

5. Is the classroom literacy-rich? Books? Library area?

6. Are there books in different languages?

7. What reading curriculum is utilized? Is it in English and Spanish?

8. Are there any interactions going on relating to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory?

Appendix G

Journal Prompts for Teachers

1. What changes would you make to the modeling of your literacy lesson?

2. Which forms of scaffolding instruction did you use and what worked best?

3. What were some of the higher-order and inquiry-based questions you used to scaffold?

4. How did you differentiate your modeling for ELL students?

5. How did you differentiate your instruction for ELL students?