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NAVIGATING EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC
EXPLORATION

A Thesis by:

TURQUOISE MARTIN

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies
Texas A&M University-San Antonio
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

(Spring 2024)

Major Subject: Curriculum & Instruction

ABSTRACT

NAVIGATING EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION

(May 2024)

Turquoise Martin Bachelor of Science

Graduate Thesis Chair: Karen Kohler

This autoethnography explores early literacy instruction through the lens of a Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) teacher in a high-quality Pre-K program in South Central Texas. The author highlights the benefits and challenges associated with explicit and systematic early literacy instruction using critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and content analysis. The research examines instances in which curriculum interpretation led to less effective lesson planning and a desire for early literacy resources. The study shares the impact of teacher collaboration, instructional support, and misinterpretation of a used curriculum, shedding light on the experiences of teaching early literacy instruction.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to the countless children whose lives have been or will be influenced by the struggle of reading difficulties. Your resilience and perseverance inspired my commitment as an educator. Through my research journey, I have gained a deeper understanding of educators' critical role in empowering students to overcome such challenges to one day achieve academic success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my chair, Dr. Karen Kohler, I cannot thank you for the time and energy you have poured into me. I want to thank you for playing your role as a teacher and allowing me to be a student. Thank you for meeting me where I was each semester, understanding my learning preferences and the ways I obtain knowledge best, and mostly for your patience and waiting for me to proceed with my master's journey in my way. I chose you to be my chair because I could hear your passion when you spoke on certain topics that I cared about. As a chair, mentor, and educator - you are one of a kind.

To my committee, Dr. Robin Kapavik and Dr. Michael Mary, thank you for being you. Doing so allowed me to feel comfortable choosing you to be a part of this thesis journey at a time when I was insecure about my abilities in writing. Keeping in mind the times you pushed me to think harder and do better, you both played a huge role in my experience as a student. In the future, I will continue to keep you in mind as I build relationships with any students or educators I may encounter in my career. Thank you both for your guidance and patience.

To my son, if it were not for you, I would have never pushed myself this hard to become who I am today. Thank you for always encouraging me to keep going. I hope that we both continue to grow together. Mommy loves you.

To my siblings, without you, I could not have made it through this journey. All five of you motivated me to continue through this process because I saw that you never gave up either, no matter how tough times got. During this time, we have grieved through many losses, but not one of us gave up! As the oldest, I hope you are as proud of me as I am of you all.

To my parents, my partner, my family, and my friends, your support will never go unnoticed. Thank you for your never-ending support. Truly, there are not enough words that exist to express how grateful I am to have a village of support.

Emily and Melissa Williamson, my first experience teaching children all began with you. Without your help, I would not be where I am today, as an educator and as a master's graduate.

Thank you all sincerely.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

One day, as I reflected on the Pre-Kindergarten phonemic awareness lesson I delivered, I wondered what to plan for the next day. I often struggled to find literacy lessons that met my students' needs and interests using the books and resources provided by the school. While mulling this over, I told my assistant, "I just know that every teacher has to be doing something different, and every child here is leaving with different literacy experiences." I scoured the books provided by the school only to realize that I did not feel confident in my knowledge of the curriculum used for phonemic awareness instruction. After parent conferences, I would always sit back and think about the questions parents had throughout the meetings about their children and the usual goals they set for them. The goals were usually for their 3 to 5 year olds to be able to identify their letters (especially the letters in their name) and know how to write their name, and some often made a goal for their child to start reading or at least identifying sight words. After conferences, I would feel motivated to reflect on the lessons and experiences I provided for my students, but I also experienced moments where I doubted if I were truly delivering literacy instruction to this age group appropriately.

When it came to meeting the organization's expectations of planning daily, meeting students where they were developmentally and towards their interests, it was oftentimes difficult to plan effectively during the children's nap time and it left me thinking, "there has to be a better system of planning and delivering instruction for this age group, especially in literacy." Deep down, I knew from prior knowledge in undergraduate experiences that children are like sponges and that as educators, we play a huge role in providing them with rich and positive experiences

in this time. Being a part of other school districts during undergraduate school, I also remember that their curriculum followed a scope and sequence that provided the content, and in which order it should be taught which I perceived would assist me in planning effectively with the time I was given and guide me each day to focus on appropriate objectives. At times during planning, I was left feeling inadequate and unconfident in what I thought I knew about literacy.

I spent the past five years working at a high-quality Pre-Kindergarten program in South Texas. The expectation was for teachers to use the *HighScope* curriculum to implement active learning. The curriculum provides several books that give teachers lesson ideas. The curriculum provides multiple books that give teachers lesson ideas. The literacy component of the curriculum, *Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness* (2002), which is designed to equip preschool teachers with activities to explicitly enhance children's knowledge of the sounds that form words. According to Hohmann (2002), the author of the literacy book I utilized, the book's premise was to provide children with continuous exposure that will encourage opportunities for children to engage in conversation and enjoy language (p.5). Scientific research reviewed by the National Reading Panel (2000), revealed that the effectiveness of teaching the five essential components of learning to read, varies among different approaches, with systematic and explicit instruction emerging as the most effective method (Learning Point Associates, 2004). While *Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness* aimed to align with the national call for literacy initiatives by providing explicit activities to enhance children's phonemic awareness and support systematic alphabet instruction (Hohmann, 2002), I still encountered difficulties in effectively planning and executing literacy instruction. According to Archer and Hughes (2011), explicit instruction emphasizes a structured and direct teaching method aimed at achieving focused learning outcomes.

Explicit instruction involves clear teacher communication of the objectives being taught, as well as effective modeling of its implementation by experienced readers to ensure that students focus on the essential components of the lesson taught (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Systematic instruction involves teaching skills and concepts in a carefully structured and logically sequenced manner (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Hohmann (2002) presents activities in which one can choose to progress through the chapters sequentially or circularly, adapting activities as needed to align with children's interests, daily schedule, or available materials (p. 6). If the expectation was for teachers in the Pre-K program to plan daily to tailor instruction to each student's interests within their respective classrooms, there seemed to be a lack of clarity in the provided literacy lesson resource regarding the terms "explicit" and "systematic." As to my understanding, teachers in the program were planning and implementing lessons differently from each other each day which takes away from the defined sequence that teachers should have available to follow when planning in phonemic awareness skills. There were many instances where I wished there was a defined scope and sequence for literacy lessons and ideas that explicitly told me how I should implement literacy objectives throughout different parts of the daily routine each day.

In the fall of 2021, the campus provided weekly Professional Learning Community (PLC) groups for teachers and teacher assistants, where each group had different areas of focus. I had the opportunity to lead my own PLC over the required curriculum. I agreed to lead this group with hesitation. Each school year, I went in feeling like a first-year teacher. Although I had already taught for more than a few years in that program, I did not think that I was comfortable enough with the curriculum to lead the group. Fortunately, the following year, I could choose the literacy PLC I wanted to join. I was excited to participate in the literacy group to improve my

knowledge and instruction for early literacy. I went into the literacy PLC to understand how literacy should be taught, while also searching for evidence on the topic I chose for my thesis.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores the benefits and challenges one early childhood educator faced when attempting to implement early literacy skills, specifically phonemic awareness, in a Pre-Kindergarten classroom through an autoethnographic lens. Through this lens, the study examines critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and a curriculum analysis on early literacy instruction and the curriculum resources one Pre-Kindergarten program provides in South Texas. Without the necessary knowledge and tools, teachers may face difficulties when delivering early literacy instruction effectively. Teachers may also miss the opportunity to identify potential learning disabilities at an early stage. Effective teachers understand that early literacy should be planned for and taught systematically. “If children do not obtain decent word identification skills, they tend to linger behind in learning to read; without adequate intervention, the student will only have a 1 in 8 chance of catching up to their grade level (Juel, 1988). Further research demonstrated that a lack of phonological awareness typically affects early reading development in individuals with and without disabilities. This study will assist teachers and educational leaders in understanding the benefits of providing positive, effective early literacy instruction in phonemic awareness with appropriate training and resources.

Research Questions

In the ever-changing world of education, the ongoing need for effective pedagogical approaches to teaching early literacy skills remains a top priority. As an early literacy educator at a high-quality Pre-K program, a need to improve instructional effectiveness is important. Professional development programs provide a promising opportunity to improve abilities,

improve methods, and remain current on emerging methodologies. However, the extent to which these initiatives influence pedagogical approaches and overall effectiveness in early literacy instruction is worth exploring.

This study investigates the relationship between professional growth and pedagogical effectiveness in the context of early literacy education. Its specific goal is to investigate how professional development programs affect pedagogical methods and effectiveness among Pre-Kindergarten educators. Furthermore, it seeks to uncover the experiences that educators believe are advantageous in implementing systematic early literacy education in the Pre-Kindergarten setting. Consider the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of professional development programs on my pedagogical approaches and effectiveness as an early literacy educator within a high-quality Pre-Kindergarten program?
2. What experiences did I encounter that I perceived were beneficial in implementing systematic early literacy instruction as a Pre-Kindergarten teacher?

Significance of the Study

The importance of examining the advantages of systematic instruction in early literacy extends beyond specific classrooms. It can impact academic research, policy choices, professional development, and educational practices. This research has the potential to have positive benefits on the educational landscape by explaining the importance of providing early career educators with ongoing professional development in literacy instruction, specifically through the approach of explicit and systematic methods when instructing lessons for phonemic awareness. The goal is for district leadership to have a strong understanding of the importance of consistent professional development, strong foundational knowledge, and high-quality resources

to be able to differentiate and give students an equal opportunity to learn and develop literacy skills. Finally, teachers should be supported when making instructional decisions about interventions and evidence-based practices.

Researcher Positionality

After obtaining my teaching degree in Early Childhood – 6th grade teacher education, I taught in a Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) setting for 5 years. My background as an educator helped shape my lens as I dove into this research. My role also provides me with unique insights into the dynamic of early literacy instruction and the different challenges that educators face. During my first few years of teaching, I did not fully comprehend or appreciate the importance of teaching early reading skills explicitly and systematically to Pre-K students. The school curriculum I utilized did not emphasize the value of systematic teaching in literacy or provide teachers with high-quality professional development. It also lacked useful resources to ensure effective lessons, activities, and transitions were practiced throughout the school year.

For this thesis, I chose to conduct a more in-depth study on teaching early literacy and analyze the curriculum, teaching practices, and teaching experiences I implemented while working in a Pre-Kindergarten program. My understanding of the idea that we can help young students learn the foundational skills they need to succeed in reading has grown because of letting go of my preconceived notions and approaches to teaching Pre-K students in a way that may have not been developmentally appropriate. Recognizing this allowed me to meet my goals of modifying my literacy teaching instruction and recognizing the diversity of students while simultaneously teaching early literacy explicitly.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Many children in the United States face challenges in mastering fundamental literacy skills for proficient reading, as evidenced by the 2022 Nation's Report Card. The assessment revealed a decline of three points in both fourth and eighth-grade average reading scores compared to 2019, with scores reported on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scales ranging from 0 to 500. Specifically, the fourth-grade score of 217 and the eighth-grade score of 260 represent the lowest fourth-grade average reading score since 2005, with no significant difference observed compared to 1992 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

This concerning statistic emphasizes the significance of early childhood education and the importance of early literacy development in young children. This literature review will examine major areas of early literacy education, such as popular early learning programs, fundamental concepts, and the impact of explicit and systematic instruction on reading outcomes. The review will begin by looking at the roots and development of early childhood education initiatives, such as the Head Start Program and a local initiative that emerged in a city in South Texas. These programs seek to deliver high-quality early childhood education to underserved communities. The literature review will also look at the National Reading Panel's guiding principles for literacy instruction. This review will emphasize the importance of systematic instruction in phonemic awareness and its impact on pre-reading skills, decoding abilities, and long-term literacy success.

Head Start

Throughout American history, education research has often inspired the development of outreach programs that focus on intervening and helping communities in poverty. Following

important research on the impact of poverty, particularly on education, President Lyndon B. Johnson started a strong fight against it in 1964 (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). This program resulted in the creation of the Head Start Program, an important part of the War on Poverty that focused on early childhood education and assisted children born into underprivileged families (Zigler & Styfco 2000). Led by a committee of specialists which included several fields such as medicine, mental health, social work, and education, Head Start is a comprehensive program with broad goals. (Zigler & Styfco, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2023). To break the cycle of poverty by addressing the emotional, social, nutritional, and educational needs of preschoolers from low-income households, the Head Start Program was initially to be a two-month pilot project whose purpose was to provide support to preschoolers in low-income (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). President Johnson and his senior strategist, Sergeant Shriver, saw education as crucial for ending the cycle of poverty, especially after learning that children from poor households suffered academically when compared to their peers from higher-income families (Zigler & Styfco, 2000). Although originally intended as a small-scale pilot program, President Johnson's request for immediate and extensive action led to the nationwide launch of Head Start in the summer of 1965 (Zigler & Styfco, 2000; U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2023).

Since its beginning in 1965 as an eight-week trial project, Head Start has grown dramatically, currently providing full-day and full-year services, as well as a variety of program options. Head Start is guided by the Administration for Children and Families, serving more than one million children and their families each year, and serving over 38 million children over time (U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2023). The program has affected families in a variety of geographic regions, including urban, suburban, and rural areas in all fifty states, the District of

Columbia, Puerto Rico, and U.S. territories including assistance for American Indian and Alaska Native communities, in addition to migrants and seasonal workers (U.S. Department of Health and Services, 2023).

A Local Initiative

Research indicates that high-quality Pre-Kindergarten services have a great influence on improving education outcomes for communities, especially those in poverty (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024a). Although the total number of children enrolled in public Pre-K programs in Bexar County has increased substantially over the last two decades, (Villarreal & Lee, 2021) before the 2011-2012 school year, San Antonio communities had limited access to high-quality Pre-K programs and *San Antonio Independent School District* (SAISD) was the only school district that offered high-quality Pre-K (Villarreal & Lee, 2022). Because of raised concerns about the insufficient or restricted access to high-quality preschools in Bexar County, in 2011, former Mayor Julian Castro, created a task force consisting of Chief Executive Officers, Superintendents, and education professionals to identify the most effective approach to increase the quality of education in San Antonio (Villarreal & Lee, 2021; Prek-4 SA, 2024a). After voter approval, the city moved in favor of Pre-K 4 SA in 2012, and in 2013, 700 children were served by *Pre-K 4 SA's* opening of two centers in San Antonio's North and South centers with the East and West centers opening the following year, serving 1,500 children by its second year (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024d). Within the first eight years, *Pre-K 4 SA*, as stated on its website (2024), served over 12,000 children in its education centers. In 2013, the program also launched its professional learning program, which distributes early childhood best practices to teachers around the city through seminars, workshops, and classroom-embedded coaching, allowing teachers to earn state-certified continuing education credits (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024b). Their program's visibility has

been raised through coverage in over fifty local, regional, national, and international media outlets, with officials from other states and countries visiting the campuses as models for educational improvement (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024d). Third-party evaluations demonstrate that the *Pre-K 4 SA*'s methodology for high instructional quality leads to lasting positive impacts on children's achievement, with research indicating continued educational benefits for years after participation in their program (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024c). Collectively, findings from the Year 9 evaluation indicate that children benefit from participating in *Pre-K 4 SA*, with the results highlighting the provision of high-quality instructional environments for over 1,500 predominantly low-income children across San Antonio (Pre-K 4 SA, 2024c).

Foundation of Literacy

Reading is a vital skill essential for success in academia (Moats, 1999). Extensive research underscores the correlation between early reading proficiency and subsequent academic success, as well as socioeconomic prosperity and overall well-being (Stockard & Engelmann, 2010). Recognizing its significance, Congress, in 1997, convened a group of scholars to establish a national panel aimed at assessing research-based knowledge and the effectiveness of various teaching approaches in literacy instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000). Proficiency in English reading entails a child's comprehension of the alphabetic writing system, developed through listening, phonological awareness, and understanding of the system's components, products, and uses (Snow et al., 1998). Language development begins at birth, nurtured by activities like storytelling, rhymes, and singing (Cunningham et al., 2009). Early literacy behaviors emerge in children as young as 2 to 3 years old, progressing to increased awareness of letter-sound relationships by ages 4 to 5 (Snow et al., 1988). Despite minimal instructional time allocated to alphabet teaching post-kindergarten, understanding letter names and sounds remains

crucial to literacy tasks (Tortorelli et al., 2017). Alphabet knowledge is integral to emergent literacy, facilitating the eventual acquisition of literacy skills (Heilmann et al., 2018). Preschool education now plays a significant role in fostering literacy skills, although concerns persist regarding the quantity and effectiveness of literacy instruction in certain settings (Beecher et al., 2017).

The 5 Pillars: Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension

Being able to read is a necessary skill for one to acquire for academic achievement in formal education (Moats, 1999). The five fundamental principles the National Reading Panel (2000), determined for successful reading instruction included phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The five pillars give a strong structure to understand the many details of the important skills needed for reading. The 5 Pillars of Literacy consist of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Phonemic awareness is defined as “the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in words” and is considered one of the most important abilities for developing early literacy. Phonics is the relationship between sounds and letters, connecting the letters with their respective letter sounds to decode words (Birsh & Carreker, 2018). Good phonics instruction assists students in bridging the gap between decoding and meaningful comprehension. Fluency is reading words accurately, at an appropriate rate, and with sufficient expression or prosody (Birsh & Carreker, 2018).

Vocabulary encompasses the words essential for effective communication, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Learning Point Associates, 2004). The goal of reading instruction is comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000), which requires creating clear and precise meaning by integrating existing knowledge with the text being read, requiring critical thinking until a full understanding is reached (Learning Point Associates, 2004). Good readers participate

in a complex process by utilizing their experiences and knowledge of the world, their understanding of vocabulary and language rules, and their knowledge of reading techniques to make sense of the text (Armbruster, 2010).

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness falls under the larger umbrella of phonological awareness.

Phonological awareness is the understanding of different ways that oral language can be divided into smaller components and manipulated. It includes identifying and manipulating larger parts of spoken words, awareness of syllables, onset-rimes, and other aspects of sound such as rhyming, alliteration, and pronunciation." (Armbruster, 2010). Chard and Dickson (1999) structured the components of phonological awareness into a continuum of complexity that is still commonly used today: rhyming songs, sentence segmentation, syllable segmentation and blending, on-set and rime blending and segmentation, and blending and segmenting phonemes which is phonemic awareness. According to Chard and Dickson (1999), the suggestion is made that by the end of kindergarten, children should demonstrate proficiency in phonemic blending and segmentation (phonemic awareness), as well as improvement in using sounds to spell basic words, emphasizing the importance for teachers to possess knowledge of effective instructional strategies for teaching phonological awareness and to monitor their students' ongoing progress.

Proficiency in phonemic awareness strongly indicates future achievements in reading and spelling (Armbruster, 2010). Its importance stems from its capacity to give kids the keys to the world of written language. Children improve their reading, spelling, and writing skills by identifying, manipulating, and comprehending phonemes. Through engaging and planned activities, early childhood educators play a critical role in building phonemic awareness, laying

the foundation for long-term literacy success, and equipping kids with the skills they need to navigate the world of words successfully.

Importance of Explicit and Systematic Instruction in Phonemic Awareness

Before acquiring reading skills, children must develop phonemic awareness, which involves understanding that words consist of individual speech sounds, or phonemes, laying the groundwork for pre-reading skills (Armbruster, 2010). Teaching children specifically about segmentation and blending in the reading process promotes the transfer and application of component skills, such as phonemic awareness, to the act of reading (Cunningham, 1990). Explicit instruction that directs children's attention to the sound structure of oral language and the connections between speech sounds and spellings assists children who have not grasped the alphabetic principle or who do not apply it productively when they encounter unfamiliar printed words (Snow et al., 1998). Adopting a systematic approach, aids in the decoding of words, which facilitates the initial stages of reading acquisition (National Reading Panel, 2000). Beginning readers require explicit instruction and practice that lead to an appreciation that spoken words are composed of smaller units of sounds, familiarity with spelling-sound correspondences and common spelling conventions, and their utilization in identifying printed words, alongside "sight" recognition of frequent words, and independent reading, including reading aloud (Snow et al., 1998). Students who took part in the direct instruction program for four years (kindergarten through third grade) performed near to or at national norms in reading, math, language, and spelling (Snow et al., 1998). By the end of third grade, students should have the abilities, habits, and learning techniques necessary for fourth-grade achievement, meaning that children should be effectively equipped to discuss, learn about, and write about the ideas and material presented in their readings, in addition to reading on grade level (Snow et al., 1998).

This underscores the significance of providing students with a strong foundation in literacy skills early on to ensure academic success across various content areas.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

After multiple conversations and guidance from my professor, I chose to conduct my research through an autoethnographic lens, which would guide my research, capture, and process the experiences I had in teaching early literacy instruction in a Pre-K program. Through initial research and participation in the Literacy PLC group, along with ongoing discussions with fellow teachers and my professor, I uncovered a persistent misunderstanding among educators regarding the most effective methods for teaching early reading skills. Even with extensive studies linking poverty to literacy rates in the United States, it became apparent that a gap exists in implementing strategies for literacy skills that optimize every student's academic achievement.

What is an Autoethnography

Autoethnography involves the exploration and documentation of one's own experiences and social and cultural identities, underpinning the belief that an individual reflects the characteristics of a broader social group (Dyson, 2007; Nicol, 2013; Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 24; Cohen et al., 2018). By submerging myself in my own experiences and reflections, I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges of implementing systematic early literacy training, connecting my experiences as an early career teacher to a larger conversation about education. This approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of my experiences and thoughts, establishing me as both the subject of inquiry as well as the researcher. Using an autoethnographic approach, I place myself within the cultural context of a novice early literacy teacher, displaying my professional identity and abilities. This unique lens also allows me to explore the impact of explicit and systematic instruction on early literacy skills. Through critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and curriculum analysis, the goal was to understand the

complicated nature of early literacy instruction and its impact on student learning and teacher development.

Timeline

The timeline for this study occurred during the Spring semester of the 2022-2023 academic school year. Data collection began in January 2023 and continued until May 2023. Critical reflections began once the Literacy PLC meetings started which were held every Wednesday starting in January of 2023. Over five months, I actively engaged in Literacy PLC meetings, capturing anecdotal notes and reflecting on past instructional experiences. Additionally, I conducted a thorough content analysis of curriculum resource books to inform and enrich my understanding of literacy instruction.

Data Sources

The collected data were analyzed to gain a stronger understanding of my experiences in preparing and delivering lessons for literacy activities. In addition, my perceptions of what was beneficial, and challenging were also examined. The use of multiple data collection methods and sources requires the use of data triangulation for analysis (Glense, 2011). Utilizing triangulation was critical to ensure that the findings from this study were accurate.

Data were collected through critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and a content analysis of provided teacher resources that aligned with the adopted literacy curriculum. These qualitative resources allowed me to better comprehend my experiences as an early literacy educator and how I processed teaching early literacy objectives. The combination of these sources enabled the validity and reliability of this research.

Critical reflections

This source of data was used to reflect on the Literacy PLC meetings. The reflections focused on topics around instruction, conversations with other teachers, and the importance of explicit and systematic instruction. Initially, the reflections provided details about collaboration, lesson planning, and decision-making. As the research progressed, the reflections were more aligned with the importance of supporting the teachers with their understanding of explicit and systematic literacy instruction.

Anecdotal stories

The anecdotal stories included specific experiences and recollections of instructional practices, professional development training, and engagement with instructional specialists or other teachers during the five-year period I worked at the program. Some of these anecdotal stories emerged as I wrote the critical reflections and reflected on past experiences. I chose to journal about these anecdotal stories as the experiences aided in asking more detailed questions as they related to the research.

Curriculum Analysis

The curriculum served as a source of data for this study, as a thorough examination of its content was done. This analysis compared the objectives provided in the curricula to the recommendations made in the National Reading Panel's report (2000) for increasing phonemic awareness. This approach aims to get a better understanding of the instructional materials' effectiveness and comprehensiveness by aligning the curricula with recognized national literacy instruction standards. Three primary resources were examined during the curriculum analysis:

- Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness: 130 Pre-Reading Activities for Preschoolers (Hohmann, 2002)
- HighScope Curriculum Essentials of Active Learning in Preschool (Epstein, 2020)
- Lesson Plans for the First 30 Days: Getting Started with HighScope (Marshall et al. 2016)

Each of these resources provided useful information about the material and teaching practices used in the curriculum. By reviewing and comparing the objectives and activities indicated in these sources, an understanding of the curricular framework and how it complies with national reading standards was gained.

School Setting

This autoethnography study took place in and around my employment in a Pre-K program in a large, urban school district in South Texas. That specific year was my fifth year teaching in the program. Critical reflections and anecdotal stories pertained to experiences in my own Pre-K classroom, during the Literacy PLC meetings, or elsewhere on the program campus.

Participant

I am the only participant in this autoethnographic study. As a thirty-year-old African American and Mexican woman, I am single with a ten-year-old son. I have taught as a certified teacher for five and half years and within those years I taught for five years at the same Pre-K program. During my time at the program, I had the opportunity to go through the four-week *HighScope* curriculum training, becoming *HighScope* certified. In the 2022-2023 academic school year, I served as a teacher leader for my campus. I also participated in the requirements to stay certified for the assessment model used by the program. At the start of the 2023-2024

academic school, I became a substitute teacher, subbing for elementary and middle school children while finishing my Master of Arts degree in Curriculum & Instruction.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The research data were collected through critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and a content analysis of chosen books from the curriculum. I used the critical reflections from my Literacy PLC meetings as a foundation for measuring my experiences in planning for literacy instruction and to process my thoughts and conversations during the Literacy PLC meetings attended. The critical reflections encompassed my assessments of the weekly Literacy PLC sessions, detailing the topics covered and my evolving understanding of early literacy instruction and literacy development. These reflections underscored my growth both as an educator and as a student engaged in research. The data from the critical reflections were utilized to help the reader gain insight into my thoughts and personal experiences on how I processed the benefits of working with other teachers to prepare lesson plans, while I focused on learning the true definition of explicit and systematic instruction through self-analysis.

The anecdotal stories were used to help explain previous experiences during my time in the Pre-K program to reflect upon professional development sessions, relationships with instructional specialists, other teachers on campus, and other connections made while writing the critical reflections. The curriculum analysis seemed necessary to define what HighScope viewed as explicit and systematic instruction within the resources provided for teachers and how it aligned with research-based evidence from the National Reading Panel. During these processes, I was able to reflect on myself as an educator and how my instructional approaches affected young learners (three to five years old) on their literacy journey to prepare them for kindergarten.

The journal entries written in the critical reflections from the Literacy PLC meetings and the anecdotal stories helped to provide much of the information needed for this study. First, I analyzed the critical reflections and anecdotal stories through hand coding, by reading over them multiple times. As I read over the critical reflections and anecdotal stories, I focused on what the research was based on, keeping in mind my struggles, benefits, feelings, and questions experienced. As noted in one of my critical reflections, I said, “What does literacy instruction mean to everyone?” As I selected this phrase I coded it as an interpretation. While continuing to highlight key terms and phrases, I listed common themes that stood out while separating them from some selected terms and phrases that were not mentioned as often in the data. In this way, I was able to identify the common themes as they emerged.

To conduct a content analysis, I used three resource books provided in classrooms as teacher resources for the HighScope curriculum. Again, the three books were: *HighScope Curriculum Essentials of Active Learning in Preschool*, *Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness: 130 Pre Reading-Activities for Preschoolers*, *Lesson Plans for the First 30 Days: Getting Started with HighScope*. I began by creating a table to input any information found about explicit and systematic practices and how the curriculum compared their resources to research-based evidence. Looking through *HighScope Curriculum Essentials of Active Learning in Preschool*, the author starts by expressing that when choosing a curriculum, it is important to choose one that is research-based. The book was mostly an overview of the curriculum with no focal point on literacy instruction. The second book I used, *Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness: 130 Pre Reading-Activities for Preschoolers*, was chosen as it was the usual book I was referred to when needing further explanation or lesson ideas for literacy activities. The third book *Lesson Plans for the First 30 Days: Getting Started with HighScope*, is a book all teachers in the program used

as explicit and systematic instruction during the first 30 days of the academic school year. Its purpose was to help teachers and students adjust to the classroom routine and procedures. After listing data from the curricula, I then pulled definitions from the National Reading Panel's report to compare what was viewed as explicit and systematic instruction in literacy.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

This section will include the findings from the data analyzed through the data sources: critical reflections, anecdotal stories, and content analysis. The four key themes that emerged from the data sources are support, collaboration, interpretation, and planning lessons explicitly and systematically. These themes emphasize the complicated relationship between educators and early literacy instruction.

Support

The emergent theme of support sheds light on several areas where support is needed for efficient and accurate early literacy. In my critical reflections and anecdotal notes, I speak of the lack of support in several areas. There was a need for support in planning effectively through ongoing and consistent professional development. In my critical reflections and anecdotal stories, I continued to notice that within my experiences, I mentioned how allotted time was needed to receive support from other teachers. Support was needed from the curriculum, especially in planning literacy. To follow the criteria to instruct early literacy explicitly and systematically, teachers should be provided a book that explicitly states what lessons should be done each day and in what order, like the “First 30 Days” lesson planning book including ideas to modify lessons depending on children’s interest or for readily available materials.

During the Literacy PLC meetings, a group of teachers met once a week and came together to focus on literacy instruction and ideas and offered time for reflection. During these PLC meetings where I had the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers to research and understand the early literacy instruction process, I felt supported by other Pre-K teachers coming together with the common goal to make planning literacy easier week by week. I felt validated

that I was not the only one with questions or had loose interpretations of the curriculum and when supported by others I was more motivated to fix whatever I was doing wrong when it came to literacy instruction. The need to have time set aside to communicate and receive support from other teachers alike was made clear. Through reflection and analysis, it has been shown that different types of support significantly increased my effectiveness in planning and teaching early literacy.

By allowing the precious commodity of time, educators find the space to support each other in planning and following effective literacy practices with fidelity. With ongoing professional development, support in more explicit and systematic resources and materials to aid in planning literacy activities could be addressed along with the notion that teachers would receive support in having a better understanding of the HighScope curriculum and with research on effective literacy instruction.

Collaboration

The theme support and collaboration overlap with each other as emerging themes, but there was a difference. Collaboration seemed to emerge as collaboration was highlighted many times. In my anecdotal notes, I expressed the many times that I expressed to my campus directors that teacher collaboration was much needed for newer staff members (in administration and teachers) to help and learn from each other and to learn how HighScope worked. In my anecdotal stories, I mentioned, “I have had this feeling over the years that because I was a first-year teacher starting as a teacher in a Pre-K program, my students were leaving each school year with fewer skills and experiences than other students in classrooms with teachers that had more experience.” Oftentimes, coming from another school that did not use *HighScope*, it took educators a while to adjust to teaching and interacting with students in the way *HighScope*

promotes. My first year teaching there, it took me the whole year to work on my language when communicating with students (for example not giving students praise for doing things good or right) and it also took me even longer to utilize the assessment tool effectively. This interfered with lesson planning and overall shifted my attention to other tasks that were not about literacy instruction.

In my time at the Pre-K program, I had the opportunity to become certified in the curriculum used. This required me to participate in four separate one-week training sessions throughout the school year. I held onto the idea that after I finished the four-week training, I would feel more confident as an early childhood educator, and I also had hopes that I would learn from the literacy portion of the HighScope training. The ideas provided during the time we spent on literacy training were not enough for me to leave feeling like I was an expert in teaching early literacy instruction because it was only half day. While there, I knew that I and other teachers felt the urge to be in our classrooms working on planning, gathering materials, or meeting deadlines for tasks due. Upon returning to campus after one of the weeks of HighScope training, I was asked to lead a PLC group called, “Diving Deeper into HighScope.” I was hesitant to say yes but I also felt that by sharing ideas with other teachers and teacher assistants about what I was learning in training at the time, again, I would gain confidence in myself to implement *HighScope* with fidelity. As noted in my critical reflections, “At the end of the year each PLC group presented what they learned and worked on. After the literacy group presented, I remember having a conversation with the literacy PLC leader, telling her about my thoughts on my early literacy instruction journey and the want for more resources.”

In January 2023, each campus once again began its weekly PLC meetings. When I was finally able to join the literacy PLC group, I had the opportunity to collaborate with a group of

teachers and in my opinion, that period was the best literacy instruction I had given in my five years of teaching Pre-K students. In February of 2023, Literacy PLC chose to strategically focus on the different objectives of phonemic awareness. We found different ways to incorporate literacy skills during transitions, planning and recall time, large group time, and small group time. Once found, we would work together to make sure the shared lesson ideas met the HighScope requirements. The following week, we each brought our laptops, laminators, and other materials to start printing and finding the materials needed for the lessons. Each week I would take what we created and implement these ideas throughout each day and each week I could see the literacy growth in myself, and in my students. Being in a group that had that understanding and worked together towards a common goal of giving literacy instruction in a certain way and assessing how it was going was a life-changing opportunity and a huge self-realization moment for myself. I knew that working with this group, I was heard and supported and each week I looked forward to getting together to collaborate. In one meeting, each teacher brought their laptop to look up different lesson ideas to meet this objective.

In my classroom, my assistant and I tried to focus on teaching early literacy more systematically and explicitly. We used the lesson ideas that were prepared in the PLC meeting and found ideas of our own. We chose to find ideas to use during planning and recall time, transition times, and small group and large group times to provide the children with experiences in letter sound recognition, rhyming opportunities, and activities about alliteration. One day, in May of 2023, as the children in my classroom were sitting on the carpet participating in a rhyming activity during large group time, one of my students started to sound out each letter he saw on the board. “P-I-G...P-I,” after a few seconds he yelled, “Wait pig!” “Does that say

pig?” Although I did not extensively assess the children's literacy skills for this research, at that moment, I was on the right path in providing my students with quality literacy experiences.

While analyzing the theme of collaboration, I noticed that when there were opportunities to collaborate, I was able to plan more effectively when it came to early literacy and had a better understanding of the literacy objectives at hand. Having conversations with other teachers also allowed me to express concerns and hear others' concerns, feeling validation from each other. Providing the opportunity for teachers to work together in a setting that focused on early literacy instruction and assessment supported teachers' efforts to understand what early literacy instruction should look like. By allowing consistent opportunities for educators to collaborate outside of the weekly PLC meetings and support teachers in planning effectively in literacy and other subject areas.

Interpretation and Planning

Interpretation emerges as a crucial aspect in early literacy instruction within educational settings, where understanding the complexities of implementing research-based curricula is paramount. Despite efforts to follow systematic and explicit instruction as recommended by National Reading Reports, interpretation has become a central theme among administrators, instructional specialists, and teachers in the Pre-K program. The HighScope curriculum is intended to engage kids in hands-on learning experiences while encouraging positive connections with adults and providing essential support. When developing lesson plans, I regularly used HighScope resources for areas such as math, language arts, physical development, and the creative arts. Planning time for teachers was set aside during students' nap time after lunch and it looked different in every classroom. Teachers were to plan daily for their students making sure to differentiate lesson ideas across classrooms because every room had different

children with different interests. Specifically, when planning for literacy, I struggled to find lessons that meet all their needs and interests and that I could find materials for in the time we had set for planning.

In many cases, I chose lessons that used readily available materials or that aligned with assessment objectives. Research calls for phonemic awareness to be taught explicitly and systematically. The absence of specific instructions for organizing literacy lessons makes it hard for me to plan daily for my students, creating the internal feeling that I was not providing an effective high-quality Pre-K experience for students. It also increased inconsistencies and misinterpretations in day-to-day planning, stressing the need for a better understanding of effective literacy practices and how to interpret the HighScope curriculum framework. When conducting the content analysis, there were many instances in “The HighScope Curriculum: Essentials of Active Learning in Preschool” book and the “Fee, Fie, Phonemic Awareness” literacy resource book, where it was mentioned how the HighScope curriculum and its ideas are research-based (Epstein, 2020; Hohmann, 2002). The curriculum emphasizes the need for systematic and explicit training in early literacy development, which is shown by repeated references to well-known research, including that of the National Reading Panel. For example, this research is cited repeatedly in HighScope's curriculum book 'Fee Fie Phonemic Awareness,' emphasizing the importance of evidence-based techniques in literacy development (Hohmann, 2002). The offered literacy resource book has a variety of lesson ideas but lacks precise guidance, resulting in different interpretations by teachers and administrators across the program in their literacy lesson implementation.

While it is widely agreed that literacy education should follow explicit and systematic methods supported by research, actual implementation fell short in my experience with the lack

of literacy materials and systematic lessons required for effective literacy instruction. One notable exception is the “Lesson Plans for the First 30 Days: Getting Started With HighScope,” curriculum book (Marshall et al., 2016). It provides a structured framework for everyday instruction and is intended to establish a daily routine and procedures in the first few weeks of the school year (Marshall, et.al., 2016). Although it stresses classroom management, its minimal focus on literacy forces educators to look for other resources to meet the literacy goals established in research-based approaches, particularly after the first 30 days of school. To follow the criteria to instruct early literacy explicitly and systematically, teachers should be provided a book that explicitly states what lessons should be done each day and in what order, like the “First 30 Days” lesson planning book including ideas to modify lessons depending on children’s interest or for readily available materials.

In many conversations with my literacy PLC group, I tried to express the need to plan literacy with an explicit and systematic approach for our students aged three to five years old. I explained that due to the recent research I was doing on early literacy instruction, I was reminded that to follow what research considers explicit and systematic for this age group, our focus should not be geared primarily towards letter recognition but first letter sound recognition and on in the continuum. Teachers' understandings of effective early literacy instruction can differ, resulting in inconsistencies in instructional approaches. While some teachers focus on kindergarten-ready abilities like name writing and letter recognition, they may ignore more fundamental features like phonemic awareness and sound-letter correlations. This disparity is apparent at Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings, where talks regarding curriculum objectives show difficulties in having a shared importance. In these meetings I received many ideas for how to incorporate rhyming alliteration and other phonological awareness skills

throughout the day, most conversations revolved around the premise that to be kindergarten-ready, teachers needed to achieve the Pre-K requirements and ensure that our students identified so many letters by the end of the school year. Although it was crucial, I remembered what I was investigating at the time, and that as we focused on how we should teach reading, letter recognition would emerge on its own time. And that for our children to be ready for the following steps in letter recognition, they needed to master certain abilities before they could finally mix letters and sounds together to read words. While letter recognition is critical, it is also important to note that abilities like phonemic awareness establish the framework for future reading success.

Even after becoming HighScope certified and receiving intensive training, worries about the explicitness of literacy instructional materials provided remained. It was not until I began to truly focus on literacy instruction as part of my thesis process that I realized there were few explicit and systematic literacy resources provided, and that even though the literacy book "Fee Fie Phonemic Awareness" claimed to meet research standards, it was more of a book full of ideas to draw from as teachers saw fit or as they interpreted the information that explains how they should be planning. I recognized that the entire time, I was taking interpretations of the curriculum from myself and others and teaching literacy the best way I knew how, without highlighting the knowledge I had gained during my pre-service teacher program. I took pleasure in assisting my students on their social-emotional journeys year after year, but I felt that I had not provided them with the literacy experience they needed, particularly in a high-quality program.

In early childhood education, curriculum selection and implementation play an essential role in shaping young learners' learning experiences. Regarding literacy, if systematic resources are not provided explicitly to teachers, it can leave teachers to interpret curriculum components

sometimes on their own. HighScope curriculum is a popular resource in Pre-K classes, reportedly designed to promote important fundamental literacy skills necessary for future academic success. Through this autoethnographic lens, I analyzed the importance of a curriculum's ability to provide campus administration, instructional specialists, and educators with the knowledge, tools, and resources they require for effective teaching, particularly in literacy development. From the data collected, I learned what I perceived was challenging, beneficial, and needed when instructing early literacy. Through the key themes that emerged during the data analysis, I was able to process all the experiences I had endured and became an early literacy educator, keeping the research questions chosen at the forefront during the data analysis and interpretation process.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The integration of early literacy, poverty, and educational programs emphasizes the importance of addressing literacy development skills at a young age. Research has consistently shown that poverty has a significant impact on literacy outcomes, driving the implementation of Pre-K initiative programs. These programs have contributed to drastic shifts in curriculum frameworks toward research evidence-based literacy instruction, showing an ongoing attempt to reduce the impact of socioeconomic gaps on educational achievement. Despite these developments, there is still a pressing need for districts to equip educators with curriculum tools that provide a strong scope and sequencing for reading education, particularly for children aged 3 to 5. A thorough curriculum framework can serve as an outline for educators, guiding them through the systematic delivery of literacy instruction while also ensuring alignment with developmental milestones and research-based practices. By providing educators with the necessary resources, support, and ongoing professional development, districts can enable them to effectively meet their children's unique needs and promote a culture of literacy excellence from an early age.

Reflecting on my experience as a Pre-K teacher since 2018, I recognize the significance of fully comprehending and embracing my role as an educator, in providing positive adult-child relationships and interactions, social-emotional support, and effective early literacy instruction to my students. The emphasis on early literacy education should be placed not only in pre-service educator programs but also throughout educators' careers. Pre-service teachers' effectiveness in facilitating student learning is dependent on their comprehensive understanding of literacy and instructional methodologies, as evidenced by practical applications that point out the significance of their literacy skills in supporting student development (Snow et al., 1998). Educators must be

well prepared to assist students in learning to read before exiting their Pre-service educator programs. The pre-service programs must prioritize training teachers in evidence-based literacy teaching, providing them with the information and skills required to support literacy growth in a variety of populations throughout their careers.

Continuing professional development is needed for educators to stay current on emerging instructional approaches and ensure consistency with evidence-based research in early literacy instruction. Through my reflective writing and involvement in literacy-focused PLCs, I realized the importance of adjusting my literacy instructional approaches to better suit the needs of my students while following what research suggests is effective for students to learn to read. While collaborative knowledge-sharing between preschool and elementary schools is critical for preventing reading difficulties at any age, preschool educators play an important role in fostering literacy skills through the creation of language-rich environments and early literacy interventions (Snow et al., 1998). Without saying, continued professional development opportunities are critical for in-service teachers to stay current on emerging research and improve their instructional techniques in response to changing educational trends.

To further research in this area, it would be useful to extensively investigate educators' preparedness during and after finishing their teacher preparation programs. This could include measuring their literacy instruction skill and grasp of developmental stages, as well as their perceptions of the curriculum and the availability of literacy support and professional development opportunities. Future studies can improve literacy instruction in early childhood education settings by gathering insights from educators in various circumstances that may use a variety of curriculum sources. Exploring the impact of continuous learning opportunities on instructors' instructional approaches and student outcomes could also help to promote early

literacy education. Addressing the complicated relationship between early literacy, poverty, and academic achievement requires an integrated approach including policy, practice, and professional development. Policymakers, educators, and educational institutions must work together to emphasize early literacy development and provide the resources and support needed to provide equal access to high-quality reading teaching for all children. By embracing these ideas and by districts providing curriculum with a more robust scope and sequence for educators to utilize in their literacy instruction, educators can help to close the achievement gap and create a future in which every child can succeed academically and beyond.

Conclusion

Through this thesis, I have argued the significance of early literacy instruction in phonemic awareness that is explicit and systematic, within a Pre-K program. This autoethnographic exploration has shed light on numerous challenges, experiences, and insights I have faced when planning and providing successful early literacy instruction throughout my teaching career. Reflecting on significant instances and moments of reflection reveals that the environment of early literacy education is complicated, demanding in-depth understanding and careful pedagogical approaches.

The inspiration for this investigation came from a real desire to improve my instructional effectiveness in phonemic awareness, a fundamental part of literacy development. When confronted with the realities of planning literacy instruction within the limits of available resources and curriculum frameworks, I struggled with questions and inconsistencies regarding the effectiveness of my instructional methods. The need for systematic and explicit early literacy training became clear, but the tools and support to make it happen were frequently absent.

In the larger discussion of educational topics, this autoethnographic study provides useful insights into the difficulties of early literacy instruction and the various challenges that educators encounter. By emphasizing the significance of systematic and explicit instruction informed by research-based approaches, the findings emphasize the need to provide educators with the information, resources, and support systems needed to deliver high-quality literacy education. Moving forward, the findings of this study call for a more comprehensive approach to professional development and curriculum implementation for early career educators in an early childhood setting. The findings of this study encourage collaborative efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice, assuring alignment with current standards in early literacy training. Educational stakeholders can work together to establish collaborative partnerships, providing targeted support, and modifying curriculum frameworks. As a result, early childhood educators, especially those early in their career, can promote literacy excellence and equitable learning outcomes for all young learners.

As I complete this autoethnographic journey, I am reminded of the significant effect that early literacy education has on young learners' academic journeys. Educators can provide children with the essential skills they need to excel in their academic careers and beyond by continuing to reflect, collaborate, and commit to evidence-based methods. May this research serve as a spark for important change in early literacy education, empowering educators to embrace the power of knowledge, collaboration, and intentional pedagogy in nurturing future generations' reading development.

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DOI: 10.1177/027112140002000201

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