

# Journal of Educational Research and Innovation

---

Volume 5

Number 1 *EXPERIENCES THAT PROMOTE  
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION*

Article 2

---

2016

## Early Literacy Experiences of Independent University Youth

Christina Taylor

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Taylor, Christina (2016) "Early Literacy Experiences of Independent University Youth," *Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol5/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Research and Innovation by an authorized editor of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact [Jane.Monson@unco.edu](mailto:Jane.Monson@unco.edu).

# Early Literacy Experiences of Independent University Youth

*Christina Taylor*  
*University of Northern Colorado*

A new student orientation leader shared her story with me after a summer event at a public university. As an independent student, her path to the university had been a tumultuous one, fraught with the ups and downs of a family in crisis whose members were perpetually in and out of one another's lives depending on the trauma of the moment. She recounted, with animation and vivid detail, the people, places, and interactions which had propelled her toward higher education. Some of these stories involved experiences with reading and writing.

The student spoke fondly of an early bonding experience when an adult held her as they read together. She recalled a foster mom who patiently practiced letter writing with her at the kitchen table each day after kindergarten. She blinked back tears as she recalled the first time an adult, a single foster mother still dear to her, suggested she was smart enough to go to college and that together they would make it happen if she so wanted. She connected her presence at the university with such moments.

This exceptional young woman ended her story by describing her plan to complete an undergraduate degree at the end of the next academic year and then simultaneously begin graduate studies and take custody of her two younger siblings, who were at that time still sheltered in foster care. I admired her resilience and fortitude and wondered if other

independent students may have had similar early literacy experiences which played a part in their pursuit of advanced studies. The next day I decided to bridge my professional lives in early childhood education and higher education with an investigation of the possibility of such a connection.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the early literacy experiences of independent university students at a mid-size public institution in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The rationale for this exploration was the underlying assumption that the early literacy experiences of these students might differ, given the difficult circumstances of their lives, from what experts consider best practices which lead to educational success.

The major research question was: What were the early literacy experiences of independent university students? Two sub-questions were: What best practices in early literacy education were present in their lives? What was the connection between their early literacy experiences and their pursuit of higher education? It was anticipated the disciplines of early childhood and higher education, social service providers, and those in relationship with independent students might benefit as a result of what was learned from the research. Findings had the potential to fill a knowledge gap; inform the practices of such educators, caregivers, and service

providers; and also to unearth questions about whether or not early literacy experiences were at all related to the successful university matriculation of this student population, in spite of their challenging life experiences.

### **Relevant Literature**

Many students with independent status live in a perpetual state of risk which influences their social, emotional, and physical growth, as well as their ability to attain educational goals (Murphy, 2011). Typical challenges of the independent youth population include poverty and high mobility, which often contribute to low academic success (Murphey, 2012; Murphy, 2011). Tremendous support is needed for the healthy development of children who do not live in crisis; children in crisis need even more (Aviles de Bradley, 2011). Independent youth are children in crisis and most lack the presence of trusted adults in their lives, a crucial component of wellbeing (Elster, 2008).

Despite these trials, data drawn from the most recent longitudinal study published by the National Center for Education Statistics indicate approximately 2% of beginning postsecondary students at public four year institutions nationwide in 2004 were recent high school graduates seeking a Bachelor's degree who had declared an independent status (National Center for Education Statistics, NCES, 2009). Roughly 18% persisted to graduation by spring 2009 at their first institution, and about an additional 2% at any institution within five years, as compared to approximately 58% of the total population who began a Bachelor's degree at the same time (Radford, 2010). Executive function/self-regulation skills as related to resilience are linked to such academic

success, and intelligence certainly plays a role (Masten, Herbers, Desjardins, McCormick, Sapienza, Long, & Zelazo, 2012).

Best practices in early literacy have been studied for decades (Dooley, 2011; Lee, C., 2011). Young children acquire emergent literacy skills in social and cultural contexts (Justice, 2003). The development of such skills is typically supported by family members (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2012; Torgeson, 2000). Children begin to acquire book knowledge, print knowledge, and interpretive knowledge in their earliest years (Lee, B. Y., 2011). Pleasurable early experiences with books lead to a positive attitude toward reading (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Emergent literacy skills upon entry to kindergarten are a predictor of academic success, and an inability to read well in elementary school is a predictor of academic failure (Dennis & Horn, 2011). An early emerging and persistent risk of achievement gaps is evident in the relationship between early reading skills and academic achievement of students who are poor and highly mobile (Herbers, Cutuli, Supkoff, Heistad, Chan, Hinz, & Masten, 2012).

Much has been written about best practices in early literacy (Dennis & Horn, 2011; Lee, C., 2011; Weinberger 1996) and some authors have addressed characteristics common to independent status, such as poverty and high mobility, which shape a student's success in education (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Murphy 2011). Herbers et al. (2012) explored literacy skills as related to independent youth, but I found a gap in the scholarship regarding the relationship between early literacy experiences and a student's continued interest in and pursuit of education at the university level.

For the purposes of this study I employed definitions drawn from the literature. I defined “early” as prekindergarten and “literacy experiences” as interactions with people, places, and things related to reading and writing. I used the definition of “independent” status of the Federal Student Aid in the Office of The U.S. Department of Education which states for the purposes of applying for federal student aid:

An independent student is one of the following: at least 24 years old, married, a graduate or professional student, a veteran, a member of the armed forces, an orphan, a ward of the court, or someone with legal dependents other than a spouse, an emancipated minor or someone who is homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. (U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Office, 2013).

I also adopted the university’s further definition of “independent” students as those identified by the institution’s financial aid office personnel as belonging to this population either by interview, or because they self-identified as one of the following when filling out the Free Application for Student Aid (FAFSA): orphan, ward of court, foster care; legal guardianship; unaccompanied youth (identified) by (their high) school; unaccompanied youth (identified) by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; or at risk of homelessness.

## **Methodology**

### ***Methodological and Theoretical Framework***

My goal as a qualitative researcher was to describe, understand, and interpret the multidimensional, intersecting life

experiences of this study’s participants as related to the research questions. Framed in the paradigm of Interpretivism (Rossman & Rallis, 1998), I focused this constructivist research (Mertens, 2010) on the examination of the participants’ literacy experiences in early life and their relationship to the pursuit of higher education. A narrative design (Creswell, 2012) was chosen to reveal how these students interpreted their experiences, constructed their worlds, and what meaning they attributed to their life events (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methodology offered the opportunity to explore this topic in a simultaneously structured and open ended manner, to make meaning of the data collected, and then to present the data with appropriate supporting documentation (Creswell, 2012).

### ***Researcher Stance***

I spent the first twenty years of my professional life in the field of early childhood education. Later I became a practitioner in the field of higher education and one of the most interesting groups of students I met during that time were independent students. In admiration of their pluck and resilience, I became interested in bridging the two fields in which I have passionate interest and expertise in order to explore possible connections between early literacy experiences and the pursuit of advanced education by this special student population.

### ***Trustworthiness***

The trustworthiness of this study was addressed in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Credibility was increased during the data collection process by the use of purposeful sampling, member-checking of transcripts

and report drafts with participants (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1995), and through the collection of drawings from participants as artifacts (Merriam, 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Credibility and dependability were supported by using peer debriefing with colleagues about the research throughout the process (Merriam, 1995). Dependability was addressed through the triangulation of data from multiple sources such as drawings and interviews (Merriam, 2009). Dependability and confirmability were reinforced by maintaining an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1995). Transferability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and user generalizability (Merriam, 1995) were anticipated in that the findings were likely to prove useful by informing the practices of educators and care providers.

## Methods

### Setting

The setting of the study was a mid-size public university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. The four-year institution served approximately 10,000 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students in 100 undergraduate and 100 graduate programs at the time of the study. The demographics of the university's student population at that time were as follows: 62% female and 38% male; 36% first generation students; and 23% who self-identified as people of color. The total number of independent students at the institution was estimated by personnel in the financial aid office to be 60 - 100 during the semester the research was conducted. This estimate was considered an underrepresentation of the true number of independent students on campus given that not all students had filled out a FAFSA application.

### Participants and Sampling Method

Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants for their knowledge and understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2007). Selection of information-rich participants (Merriam, 2009) was bound by the predetermined criteria of adult (over age 18) independent (as previously defined), undergraduate university students at the institution. This population was not considered vulnerable as defined by the federal government, but it was potentially vulnerable depending on the context of its independent status. The academic coach for this population distributed an abbreviated description of the study and an invitation to participate via email to his distribution list of 63 independent students on campus. The students were asked to contact me by email, phone, or in person if they were interested in participating. A sample size of five was determined by the number of students who volunteered for the study. The self-identified demographics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

### Data Collection

Participants met with me for a single, one-hour, face-to-face interview at a time of their choosing at the University Center. The interviews were digitally recorded and followed an interview script. Each interview began with a review of the purpose of the study, the signing of the consent form, the collection of basic demographic information including independent status, and the thoughtful selection of a pseudonym (Lahman, Rodriguez, Moses, Griffin, Mendoza, & Yacoub, 2008).

Aesthetic and psychological dynamics are inherent in the art process, and both the creative process and artistic products are inseparable from a creator's psyche (Acosta, 2001). Since graphic symbolization

is inherent in the marks of an artist (Arnheim, 1974; Pufall, 1997) and art speaks beyond the scope of verbal language (Spackman, 2012), I believed drawings would express students' experiences in ways words could not. Each student was given a permanent marker and a template on which to write their pseudonym and

draw two nonrepresentational drawings: one a portrait of the student's early life and one a portrait of the student's current life. The following prompt was used to elicit the drawings: "Think back to how your life felt in your youngest years and then think about how your life feels now, and draw two life portraits using abstract lines."

Table 1

*Self-identified Demographics of Participants*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Race/ethnicity                 | Class status at the university | Independent status  | Other identities   |
|-----------|-----|--------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|--|
| Anthony   | 22  | Male   | White and Hispanic             | Senior                         | Unaccompanied, not legally emancipated but had no legal guardian upon graduation from high school, declared homeless by high school | Single, oldest of four siblings, straight, no religious beliefs, no disabilities |
| Cynthia   | 21  | Female | Hispanic                       | Senior                         | Based on annual interview with financial aid office   | None   |
| Irene     | 21  | Female | African American and Caucasian | Junior                         | Ward of the court and under legal guardianship of someone other than parents  | Youngest sibling   |
| Jamie     | 20  | Female | Caucasian                      | Senior                         | Emancipated minor, now married  | Christian  |
| Rae       | 19  | Female | Native American-Lakota Sioux   | Freshman                       | Unaccompanied, no parents, both deceased  | None   |

The interviews were semi-structured in that the major and sub-questions were asked and answered, and both the participant and I guided the scope and path of the conversation to add other relevant content (Merriam, 2009). Sample questions included the following:

- Who read to you as a preschooler?
- What literacy materials were available to you as a preschooler?

- Did you visit a library before you entered kindergarten?
- Do you have a favorite memory involving a preschool literacy experience?
- What is the connection between your early literacy experiences and your pursuit of higher education?

Clarification, examples, and/or explanations were requested as a means to validate the data. Incidental hand written observation notes were made before, during, and after the interviews. Some of these notes were documented as reflective writing on the transcription documents and others as part of the study's audit trail (Merriam, 2009). I also brought along a physical material artifact (Merriam, 1995; Rossman & Rallis, 1998), a book from my own early childhood titled *The Pokey Little Puppy* (Lowrey, 1942), to elicit conversation during the interview.

### Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were lightly cleaned during transcription for distractions, clarity, and readability, but nothing of significance was omitted from the documents (Poland, 1995). The transcripts were then coded, analyzed and interpreted. Data analysis consisted of on-going and open-ended review for content, themes, and narrative (Merriam, 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Analysis began with open coding and proceeded to axial/analytical coding, and themes were responsive to the research question, sensitive to the data, exhaustive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 2009). This process of inductive analysis was emergent by design and allowed the stories from each student and my individual process of analysis to reveal themes and patterns (Patton, 2002). Participants were involved in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data as well as validation of the final report (Creswell, 2012) through member checking.

### Findings

Portraits of the five students unveiled the findings of the study in their storied lives. While the players and events in each

tale differed, commonality of the shared human experience was present.

Components of the portraits included salient quotes from participants' interviews which were used as section titles for the study, the student's life portrait drawings, and personal narratives.

***"I'm the only person in my family to graduate high school and go to college."* - Anthony**

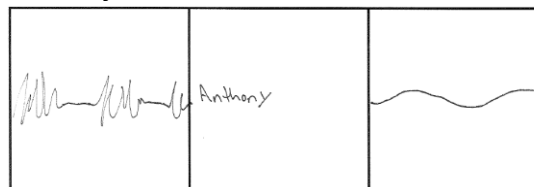


Figure 1. Anthony's early (left) and current (right) life portraits.

Anthony did not have many memories at all from his earliest years. He attended a free, public preschool in a large metropolitan area, mostly because his mother saw it is an opportunity for childcare. He had absolutely no memories from preschool, but was sure reading happened there. He remembered hearing *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1983) read in kindergarten and recalled the illustrations and how the pages got larger and larger. He did not recall other favorite authors or illustrators or lap reading with an adult. He laughed at the notion of his mother singing to him because "it is just not something she would do." Anthony did not remember his mother reading to him, but she did work with him on the mechanics of reading and he became proficient quickly. His earliest memories of independent reading took him back to riding the bus with his mom in the first grade, "...I just remember reading signs; I don't remember ever actually learning to read them."

Anthony recalled no memory of writing before the first grade, when he began to invest a great deal of time doing so because he “must have thought it was important.” His school supply list was purchased annually and he kept his writing materials in his backpack. In elementary school, Anthony particularly liked books about animals and learned how to make and maintain an earwig farm. While the earwig farm did not materialize, he said he is now a biology major. Anthony did not recall visits to a library as a very young child, but remembered being “very independent” and taking the bus across town by himself in middle school to go to public libraries in search of books. He revealed with a slight grin that he “was not always the most responsible” so he may “have some late fees.” He also remembered reading “all of the time” during his middle and high school years to his younger sister, who has developmental delays due to Down Syndrome.

As a child, Anthony attended twelve different schools; three in the first grade alone. His mother was “not physically abusive, but was hanging with the wrong crowd and not making the smartest decisions.” His father was absent, in and out of prison. He and his siblings were in and out of foster care, sometimes together and sometimes separately, and at times even in different states. Eventually he was declared an unaccompanied minor, and then a homeless youth by his high school. He spent his last year of high school living with the family of a friend. He noted, “I’m just different than my family.” He described his journey as “normal” to him and named family friends and educators “who were aware of the situation” as integral to his success.

Anthony said he is forever curious and continually testing himself, citing his early sign reading bus adventures with his mother as evidence. He has always taken pride in his advanced reading abilities and holding onto that pride continues to motivate him academically. School has worn him out for now, and after graduation he plans to live off of his savings for a couple months and then work or serve in the military for a few years. Anthony said he will probably return to higher education for a Master’s degree and eventually become a wildlife officer. He declared, “I think about my future. I think that’s what I’m just ready for, just to go out on my own...I am just ready to start my life.”

**“If I hadn’t been encouraged at a young age...I don’t think I’d be here...” - Cynthia**

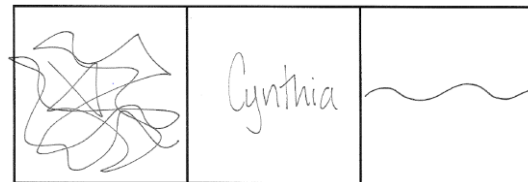


Figure 2. Cynthia’s early (left) and current (right) life portraits.

As a preschooler Cynthia sat with her mother’s husband, whom she called “dad”, for an hour or two every night at home and “read” aloud. She pretended to read before she really knew how, and he corrected her as she went along. Her dad had returned to community college in his mid-twenties, and Cynthia imitated him as he studied in the evenings. He told her, “...this is what’s going to be important, this is going to help you.” They started out with picture books and about once a week he would introduce a challenge to push her reading abilities. Books were abundant in the house, mostly basic science books with pictures and the Dr. Seuss series (1960a, 1960b, 1985).



Cynthia remarked on Seuss's great flow and how fun his books were to read, in part because they could "trip you up." *Go, Dog, Go!* by P.D. Eastman (1961) was a favorite book and she recalled Shel Silverstein (1974) as a favorite illustrator, specifically mentioning his "silly poetry" book *Where the Sidewalk Ends*.

Cynthia attended a public preschool near her paternal grandma's house. Her favorite teacher would gather the children for circle readings and "...sit in the middle, or somewhere where she could ... see us all, and then we'd go around and... each read a sentence from the book." These were simple books with one line per page. This was the best part of Cynthia's day and she particularly remembered the teacher's "nice reading voice." The children had open access to books in the classroom: "They were organized by last name; but it was a little bin and there were just folders sticking up and there were favorite books. There weren't too many, but we had the option if we wanted to." Cynthia could not recall a definitive moment when she learned to read, but she did remember an instance when "I had finished *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* by Dr. Seuss (1960b) by myself without needing help, and...feeling really happy...really accomplished. I had finished a book all by myself!" She remembered reading the book aloud repeatedly after that and thinking, "Yes! I know how to do this now!"

Cynthia recalled having her own little art easel in the common space of the living room with "letter outlines" and a dry erase board where she could practice writing. She drew letters, "really weird, blobby people", and her family on her white board, and a "whole book of rabbits" which she still has. She also remembered watching Sesame Street and educational

programming on television, but mostly it was "books all the time."

Cynthia's grandma took her to the children's section of the public library about twice a month as a young child: "We'd...walk around, but she'd let me choose... what I'd want to go look at. And then we'd sit down and kind of look through the books and she'd make sure they were appropriate and everything, and then just check them out and go home and read." During her elementary years Cynthia spent a great deal of time in school and public libraries as "...getting lost in a book was just kind of a way to escape." She learned how to deal with life's problems by reading how book characters dealt with situations. Such characters made her feel like she was "not really alone in the world."

Cynthia's face looked happy and light when she recalled special moments with her family. She reminisced, "...being close to them and bonding...the simple time of just sitting down with someone you love and just turning the page of a book...those are moments where...I feel just really happy and secure with my past." Cynthia said learning to read, write, and appreciate those abilities at a young age, link to her pursuit of higher education. She did not think she would have made it to college without her dad's encouragement to love literacy and education, and the support of teachers who personally cared about her and her success, which is still appreciated. Cynthia shared that she will be the first person in her family to attend a university and that graduate studies may be in her future. She noted, "...it is exciting...I made it, all by myself...it feels great."

**“... they can take anything and everything away from you, but they can’t take your mind.” - Irene**

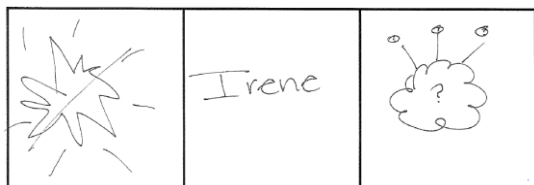


Figure 3. Irene’s early (left) and current (right) life portraits.

Irene did not remember anyone reading to her as a child. She and her older sister spent a lot of time in front of the television watching cartoons and situation comedies, or playing video games, since that was a way for her mother to “put them aside.” Television watching occasionally had other merits. Irene wanted to tie her shoes independently long before she had the skill. This resulted in an endless progression of knots, which annoyed her mother and aunt when it was time for her shoes to be removed. She finally learned to tie them on her own by watching *Sesame Street*, much to the delight of her family.

At the age of four, Irene’s aunt walked her to and from a half day Head Start program close to her aunt’s home, about fifteen minutes each way. When picturing preschool, Irene could “see some of my teachers’ faces”, but she did not “really remember too much of everything that I liked about it.” She had no recollection of being read to there. She did recall independently “reading a little textbook” about the “abc’s” and clearly recalls confusing the letters “a” and “e.” Irene did not remember going to the library with her preschool class or with her family during her earliest years.

In the absence of many preschool memories, Irene turned to kindergarten recollections. She recounted her first day of

kindergarten with animation, complete with a rhyme and clapping: “They had this huge carpet, and it was like a puzzle, and it had different little things on it. And it was red, yellow, blue, purple, but most of it was black.” The teacher sat them in a circle and the group went from person to person chanting: “Chickety, chickety bumble bee- Won’t you say your name for me?-My name is Irene-Hello, Irene.” She remembered *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1983) as an all-time favorite, to the degree that she “always picked that book. The teacher would stop me and say, ‘Read a *different* book.’” She liked it because she related to the hungry caterpillar: “I loved food so much, even at the age of five. I liked the pictures...how colorful it was, and how... it had...the different fruit, and you can see that it was going through it.” She loved that at the end “it just turned, an ugly, little, fat caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly.”

Irene had few books in her “actual” home with her mother, but her grandma had many, and when Irene visited there she read to herself and to her grandma when asked to do so. She recalled books by Dr. Seuss; a basal reader which contained a “see Spot run” story (Gray & Sharp, n.d.); and the series about *The Berenstain Bears* by Jan and Stan Berenstain (n.d.). Her grandma read the Bible at home in Irene’s presence, both silently and aloud. About the time Irene turned six, her grandma also gave the children “a daily prayer...to read...every day that we were with her.” Irene also received “a little kid’s Bible” which had “pictures of...Noah’s Ark, and Adam and Eve.” The older people in her family were fundamentally religious Baptists and read their Bibles faithfully, but they never forced Irene to do so.

Irene’s mother emphasized the importance of reading and writing by

teaching her children through repetitive pronunciation and letter writing drills. She was “not a patient woman” and would become angry when they fell short of her expectations; this impatience frustrated Irene and her sister. Her mother would say, “Just figure it out!” when Irene, even after practicing, could not pronounce a word like “squirrel” when she could pronounce “aluminum foil.” Eventually, Irene learned to sound words out slowly like her mother advised. Irene described writing and coloring with markers and crayons as a child, and she copied her artistic sister’s technique of outlining shapes and then filling them in. She remembered the moment she learned to write during her Head Start years when her mom taught her to write her name, phone number, address, and 911 by having Irene first use stencils on lined paper. The stencils were then removed and she copied the letters. She did this repeatedly and remembered, “I had trouble with threes because I did threes like ‘E’s.”

Irene was born and raised on the east coast by an abusive, mentally ill mother with substance abuse problems. Her mother once disappeared for a week, and at age twelve Irene became a ward of the court. Her legal guardianship was awarded to her uncle and she moved west, missing only one day of school in the process. Irene’s reading level was low at that time and her aunt insisted she read thirty minutes each day. She eventually became excited about reading, started to ask for books as gifts, and also went in search of books at library sales. Less than a grade of “C” was unacceptable in her new household. She started focusing on her education, eventually earned straight “A’s” in high school, and then began college. Irene said her career goal is to work with

the deaf and hard of hearing as a sign language interpreter.

Irene imagined herself as a parent who would take her children to the library, write with them, and read with them, particularly bedtime stories, to impart “just enjoying reading at a younger age.” She planned to be “very strict on education” with her own future family because that was how it was for her: “And this is what has been instilled in me, that they can take anything and everything away from you, but they can’t take your mind.”

***“I...think of people...that encouraged me or believed in me...that helped me persevere...” - Jamie***

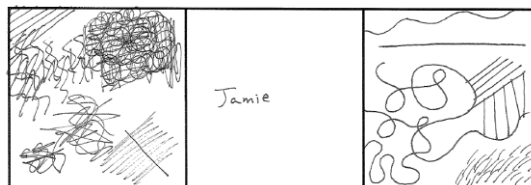


Figure 4. Jamie’s early (left) and current (right) life portraits.

Jamie remembered her dad reading a collection of Dr. Seuss books to her, when his work schedule allowed. She reminisced about the positive feelings associated with these times: “...my favorite one was...about these runaway green pants...I can remember distinctively, him reading that to me. And wanting that...to be read. And after that nobody...” read to her. Her mother was home, but unresponsive. Jamie’s parents were married until she was three or four when her father had a stroke. She recalled, “So for a period of time...I can remember feeling some sense of normalcy, some sense of reliability or dependency when I was a toddler. But I would say after that era in my life, it was not normal.”

Suddenly she, her mother and her two sisters moved from an eastern seaboard

state to a western state to live with her maternal grandmother. They moved with absolutely nothing, stayed with her grandma a few months, and then moved into an apartment near her grandma's home. When Jamie pictured these environments she could not visualize books anywhere, as the places were quite bare, with the exception of a computer and a television. At home Jamie played outside alone or with neighborhood friends. She did not recall sitting down to write or draw because she had no writing materials. As far as music for children, Jamie particularly enjoyed the *Barney* theme song from the television show.

Jamie attended a private Korean preschool in the outskirts of a metropolitan area and she recalled being the only Caucasian child in the school. Most of the people in the program were bilingual, with Korean as their first language and English as their second, and she was spoken and sung to in both languages. At preschool she "learned words, and how to spell, and how to color and all of those types of things." She remembered playing with sand and water, learning different letters and doing worksheets, but "of all the memories of that place I can't remember one time...being read to." Her preschool class went on a single walking field trip to the public library. There was a story time during the visit and the librarians talked about the library and how to find books, and each child was allowed to choose and borrow one book to take to the preschool.

Jamie remembered writing her name on a preschool homework assignment and her mom and sisters "saying that I was writing my name so well. And that's like one of the few times I can remember writing at home." She recollected the happy memory of her oldest sister teaching

her "the singular digits...zero through nine. And...all of the letters in the alphabet, and she would have me make them into little animals or whatever I saw them as...like turning "a's" into bunnies, or...a four into a little person." She recalled "kindergarten and picking out a book...understanding what the letter 'a' was, and knowing my 'ABC's'." She loved to read in kindergarten and first grade and "...can't pinpoint anybody teaching me directly, but just kind of learning on my own." Jamie remembered having a passion for reading in elementary school and reading books to earn points, which could be redeemed for prizes.

Jamie was emotionally attached to a book she won in the first grade and she described it in vivid detail. She was in foster care at the time and it was the first time she ever felt like she had won anything. The story was written in Spanish on the right side and English on the left side and was about half of a chicken in search of its other half, who eventually embraced being just half a chicken. Her eyes welled as she spoke, "And I think it was just the association of winning...like some symbol of goodness that that book held for me." The book also represented hope, and in retrospect she understands why she "would relate to that story so much. But at that point I didn't make any sort of intellectual assessment that I was half a chicken. Or that my half a chicken qualities had merit to them." She said she no longer had the book and while she could not recall its title during the interview, the book was later determined to be *Medio Pollito/Half Chicken* by Alma Flor Ada (1995).

Jamie described teachers who were aware of her situation and one who was particularly kind. Her older sisters had moved out of the home at ages fourteen

and sixteen and that left Jamie, a middle school aged child, as the primary caretaker of herself, a mother who struggled with mental illness, and the household. She began to sleep in class and fail quizzes. She confided in a teacher that she was tired from staying up late handling things and that she had no food. The teacher bought her a sandwich for lunch that day and allowed her to make up her quizzes. When Jamie moved to a new classroom, the teacher gave her a little journal and told her it was a “positive” journal in which she could write the things she was thankful for.

Jamie had no idea where this teacher is now, but she remembered “people like that, that encouraged me or believed in me...despite...my circumstances, that helped me persevere and gave me something to hold onto.” As a result of their encouragement, she thought, “Oh I can, I can be something; I can succeed.” Jamie and I scheduled the interview around her appointment to take the Graduate Record Examination in preparation for application to graduate school. (She later reported she was accepted into a Ph.D. program at a prestigious university.) She did not connect her early literacy experiences with her presence at the university. Jamie was never taught to value literacy, as it was not encouraged or affirmed in her youth. Reading and writing were simply what you did at school.

**“My sister said, ‘You’re my role model. You’re my inspiration. I want to be like you.’” - Rae**

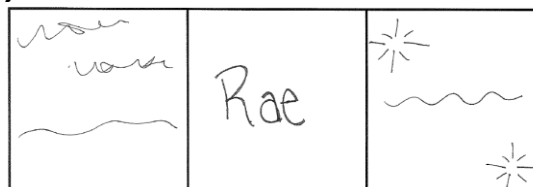


Figure 5. Rae’s early (left) and current (right) life portraits.

Rae could not remember the moment she learned to read. Her earliest memory related to reading dated to her third or fourth birthday when all of her presents were books. Rae liked rhyming books, especially Dr. Seuss. She mentioned *Green Eggs and Ham* (Seuss, 1960a) and *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1985), as favorites. She liked to “picture” what characters were doing “instead of actually...looking at the book, you could just picture it, because of the noises. And especially when my sister’d make a noise, she’d make it funny. So that’s how I remembered reading a book.” When I mentioned how happy her face looked as she told this story she shyly smiled and replied, “Like I said, I’m not that old.” Rae could picture many other books in her mind’s eye, but could not recollect their titles or the names of their authors or illustrators.

Rae recalled, “We didn’t have nothing...we only had our books, because they were...donated.” She said, “...we’d go to places and they’d...give them to us, so they’d stack up...we had a whole collection of all kinds of books...on a little bookshelf” in the living room at home. Her family donated the “little kid books” to others when they outgrew them. Rae’s older sister dressed her up and read books from this shelf to her while “playing school”, and she remembered it as “fun.” They read the *If*

*You Give/Take a Mouse...* series by Laura Joffe Numeroff (n.d.) and thought they were “really funny books.” *Matilda*, written by Roald Dahl and illustrated by Quentin Blake (1988) was a favorite chapter book. Rae and her sister read together for pleasure when playing, and read together to accomplish homework for school. Rae said she now replicates her sister’s mentoring with her own niece and nephew.

Rae remembered attending a public preschool. She described circle time when “we would sit on the carpet and then sometimes we’d act a book out.” She recalled acting out the classic song *Old MacDonald*: “... a pig would go oink, oink, or a duck would go quack, quack...you’d have to stand up and act like a character from the book, and that’s how you’d remember...the reading. I think that was my favorite actually...acting it out.”

When Rae was six her auntie tried to read a book to her and Rae did not understand what she was hearing because the words were “too hard.” Her auntie yelled at her for not knowing the vocabulary and “...from then on I had to know like every word. I had to write it down, write the definition, and rewrite it, and learn that word.” Her auntie reread passages to her and double-checked that Rae knew how to spell and pronounce the words correctly as well as define them. She said, “So I learned a different way, like my auntie yelling at me. I guess that’s a way of learning.” Her auntie thought reading was important and she said, “‘...if you don’t learn this word by tomorrow, then you’re going to have to rewrite it again.’ I was like, ‘okay’. So it was like she was my teacher...at the school...which helped me learn though.”

When they lived in the city, Rae’s sister took her and their siblings ten blocks to the

public library on foot or by train. They went about twice a week, not for books, which they had at home, but so her sister could use a computer and access the Internet, which they did not have. Rae and her siblings “were curious kids” and while her sister was busy on the computer they “would...wander around the library”. They visited the upstairs history area, and played with the old telephones or in a little playpen. They searched for books, but they did not check them out. She disclosed:

We’d just look at them, because...my family’s actually not good with like renting stuff out. Like something always happens. When we’re younger too, that’s what my auntie said. She told my mom, “just don’t let no one check stuff out. Something’s going to happen. And they’re either going to get ripped, or burned, watered on, or something. So we never used to have permission to rent anything out. Just look at it, and put it back.” That’s what I do now with my niece and nephew. Like we’ll go to a library or something, like “Nope, you’re not taking nothing, you’re leaving it here.”...It’s like you already know what’s going to happen.

Rae said her low scores on reading assessments throughout her K-12 education motivated her to work hard enough to reach a college reading level. Rae was also driven to succeed by the unkind words of friends and family. She said she is still “sensitive” about their remarks and her voice trembled as she recounted the hurtful messages. When offered the opportunity to move on to another question she said, “No, I want to...just to let it out.” She had been told, “‘You’re going to end up an alcoholic like your mom’ and ‘You’re going to end up in and out of jail like your

brother’.” Friends said her older sister “had set an image” on the family as “gang-bangers” who were often incarcerated. She said, “Everybody said I was going to be like that. I’m like, ‘No, I’m going to be better.’ That was my motivation...to prove them wrong. And I’m here now, so when I graduate...I’m going to shut them up.” Rae said her family members “weren’t bad people”, but she wanted to “do better” and not drink or use drugs, abandon her children, or live off of food stamps from the government. She just figured she would “be better than that...at least lead my younger sister and brother to do better...because my older sister and my older brother didn’t do that for me.”

Rae thought “going through hard things, actually...motivates a person.” When her younger sister recently declared Rae her role model, Rae replied, “Follow my footsteps...even do better...go above and beyond. So our family could at least have a good image on them. Because not all struggle should bring you down.” Rae spoke of finishing her own undergraduate degree in four years, marrying her fiancé, and then continuing in graduate school at her current institution, which she loves for its resources and support, interesting things to do, and large, diverse campus. She stated that she and her fiancé hope her older sister, who dropped out of high school in the tenth grade and is disabled, will live with them once they are stable, since she is unable to care for herself. Rae said, “That motivates me to just keep going...with my career and graduate.”

## Discussion

All of the participants mindfully drew their portraits with care and appeared comfortable in body and speech in the telling of their histories. On occasion a

voice cracked with emotion and a tear was dried, but open sharing continued, even when the content was obviously painful. A sense of accomplishment and hope was embedded throughout their tales. The life experiences of these diverse students were both parallel and divergent. However, memory recall, detailed early literacy experiences, and motivation regarding life and education were topics present in each conversation.

It was noteworthy that participants drew similar life portraits using the universal language of line. The students’ use of aggressive line and the nonrepresentational visual patterns of triangles and diagonal lines in early life portraits may indicate anger born of their chaotic lives; while the use of round or curving lines in their current life portraits may indicate happiness (Aronoff, 2006). It was remarkable that four of the five participants carefully drew a gently rising and falling horizontal line in their current life portraits, perhaps suggestive of the ebb and flow of a more settled present existence.

Memory is the cornerstone of self-concept, as autobiographical stories shape what we think of ourselves and what others think of us (Peterson, 2002). The participants’ degree of memory recall of their early years ranged from miniscule to great. Determinants of memorability are distinctiveness, personal significance, duration, and association with strong emotion (Cordón, Pipe, Sayfan, Melinder, & Goodman, 2004). Negative memories, including trauma, are more common than positive ones (Cordón, et al., 2004; Howes, Siegel & Brown, 1993). Memories before age three are rarely accessible, unless an event was highly salient and distinctive; recall of events beginning at age three tend

to be remarkably accurate (Peterson, 2002). An absence of memories may relate to a child's lack of interaction with an adult who discusses stressors or traumatic events as they happen, and socializes him or her to cope (Cordón et al., 2004). Poverty and high mobility were present in the lives of all participants to varying degrees, as is characteristic of independent youth (Murphey, 2012; Murphy, 2011). Perhaps these stressors, coupled with unresponsive adults, lead to inaccessible memories for some of the students. A lack of memory is also related to the quality of parent-child memory talk, which creates a sense of self (Pillemer, 1998). It is unknown whether such talk was a part of the participants' early lives, but one may suspect it was absent in most cases.

Best practices in early literacy were present in the lives of all of the participants. Most students mentioned many home factors which predict literacy attainment in school: having favorite books, choosing books for one's self, reading with an adult often, having letter knowledge and sensitivity to rhyme, and accessing libraries (Weinberger, 1996). Participants spoke about the bonds created with others when sharing songs, rhymes, and books (Brickmayer, Kennedy, & Stonehouse, 2010). The students recalled favorite stories, some with silly plots, and some with story lines which personally resonated for reasons unknown, and reasons known, such as the main character confronting dilemmas which informed the participants' own problems (Abrahamson & Shannon, 1983). Favorite illustrators came to mind as well, reinforcing the notion that a synergy of text and illustration can lift a picture book's parts to something greater than its whole (Sipe, 1998) to the degree it can be remembered with fondness decades later.

These independent students were intrinsically and extrinsically motivated in their quests for higher education. Several appeared to have been born life-long learners; others had been moved towards post-secondary education by their circumstances or the well timed, powerful words of another. Some, but not all, linked their early literacy experiences to their pursuit of higher education. Memories of understanding this link were clear for the students who connected the two. Perhaps the students who made no connection were unable to recall an intellectualization of the association, or maybe relationship never existed in the first place.

Adults would be wise to carefully consider these stories as they foster the growth of children in their presence. Stereotypes which educators and caregivers may hold about household environments and the potential educational and individual achievement of children from poor and likely dysfunctional families might be challenged by these tales. Visceral and intellectual responses to the positive and negative childhood experiences encountered by these students may serve as a guide to help shape healthy personal and professional relationships. The testimony of the participants can inform our decision making with regards to emergent literacy as it relates to educational and life success, as the accounts are laden with detrimental and supportive encounters which may be avoided or modelled.

## Conclusion

This study confirmed the findings of previous researchers regarding the transformative nature of best practices in early literacy and affirmed the importance of such experiences in formal and informal



settings with caregivers and educators. It shared how even small or infrequent early interactions around literacy may have extraordinarily long-lived, constructive consequences, a reminder to adults about the inherent magnitude of such moments with children. Findings illuminated that families which are poverty stricken and seemingly dysfunctional may provide positive early literacy experiences for their children in spite of the inherent challenges in their lives. Findings also implied that such affirmative, fundamental experiences, when coupled with particular personality traits and other life experiences, may be significant enough to launch a child on a path which leads all the way to post-secondary education. This work paves the way for further qualitative research to illuminate the power which results when best practices in early literacy intersect with the strength of will required to persevere to higher education, especially when by all rights such will should be exhausted, as evidenced in the histories of these resilient, hopeful, and inspirational students.

*Christina Taylor, M.A., has over twenty years of professional experience in early childhood education supporting the holistic growth of diverse preschool to adult learners. She is a Doctoral Student in the Educational Studies Ed.D. program at the University of Northern Colorado. Her research interests include best practices in assessment in early childhood education, early literacy, the ethics of working with young children, and multi-modal data collection and reporting. She can be reached at christina.taylor@unco.edu.*

## References

- Abrahamson, R. F., & Shannon, P. (1983). A plot structure analysis of favorite picture books. *The Reading Teacher* 37(1) 44-48.
- Acosta, I. (2001) Rediscovering the dynamic properties inherent in art. *American Journal of Art Therapy* 39.
- Ada, A. F. (1995). *Medio pollito/Half-chicken*. New York: Random House.
- Anderson, J., Anderson, A., Friedrich, N., & Kim, J. E. (2012). Taking stock of family literacy: Some contemporary perspectives. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 10(1), 33-53. doi: 10.1177/1468798409357387
- Arnheim, R. (1974). *Art and visual perception*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Aronoff, J. (2006). How we recognize angry and happy emotion in people, places, and things. *Cross-Cultural Research* 40. 83-105.
- Aviles de Bradley, A. (2011). Unaccompanied homeless youth: Intersections of homelessness, school experiences and educational policy. *Child and Youth Services*, 32:2, 55-172. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2011.583176>
- Berenstain, J. & Berenstain, S. (n.d.). Series available from The Berenstain Bears website: <http://www.berenstainbears.com/>
- Brickmayer, J., Kennedy, A., Stonehouse, A. (2010). Sharing spoken language: Sounds, conversations, and told stories. *Young Children* 35(1). 34-39.
- Carle, E. (1983). *The very hungry caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books.
- Cordón, I. M., Pipe, M., Sayfan, L., Melinder, A., & Goodman, G.S. (2004). Memory for traumatic experiences in early childhood. *Developmental Review* 24(1), 101-132. <http://0-dx.doi.org.source.unco.edu/10.1016/j.dr.2003.09.003>

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Dahl, R., & Blake, Q. (1988). *Matilda*. New York, N.Y: Viking Kestrel.
- Dennis, L., & Horn, E. (2011). Strategies for supporting early literacy development. *Young Exceptional Children, 14*(29). doi: 10.1177/1096250611420553
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dickinson, D. K., & Tabors, P. O. (Eds.). (2011). *Beginning literacy with language: Young children learning at home and school*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.
- Dooley, C. (2011). The emergence of comprehension: A decade of research 2000-2010. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 4*(1), 169-184.
- Eastman, P. D. (1961). *Go, dog, go!* New York, NY: Beginner Books.
- Elster, A. (2008). Promoting healthy adolescent development: The view through a half-full looking glass. MedscapeCME Public Health & Prevention. *Medscape*. Retrieved from <http://cme.medscape.com/viewarticle/575415>
- Feathers, K. M., Arya, P. (2012). The role of illustrations during children's reading. *Journal of Children's Literature 38*(1). 36-43.
- Gray, W. S., & Sharp, Z. (n.d.) Basal reader series about Sally, Dick and Jane. Chicago, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Herbers, J., Cutuli, J., Supkoff, L., Heistad, D. Chan, C., Hinz, E., & Masten, A. (2012). Early reading skills and academic achievement trajectories of students facing poverty, homelessness, and high residential mobility. *Educational Researcher, 41*, 366. doi: 10.3201/0013189X12445320
- Howes, M., Siegel, M., & Brown, F. (1993). Early childhood memories: Accuracy and affect. *Cognition, 47*, 95-119.
- Justice, L. M., & Pullen, P. C. (2003). Promising intervention for promoting emergent literacy skills: Three evidence-based approaches. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 23*(3), 99-113.
- Lahman, M. K. E., Rodriguez, K. L., Moses, L., Griffin, K. M., Mendoza, B. M., & Yacoub, W. (2015). A rose by any other name is still a rose? Problematizing pseudonyms in research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 21*(5), 445-453. doi: 10.1177/1077800415572391
- Lee, B. Y. (2011). Assessing book knowledge through independent reading in the earliest years: practical strategies and implications for teachers. *Early Childhood Journal, 39*, 285-290. doi:10.1007/s10643-011-0464-y
- Lee, C. (2011). On the way to the best strategy in literacy education: A journey of philosophical investigations. *Educational Philosophy & Theory, 43*(8), 888-897. doi: 10.1111/j.1469-5812.2009.00562.x
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lowrey, J. S. & Tenggren, G. (1942). *The pokey little puppy*. New York City, NY: Simon and Schuster.

- Masten, A.S., Herbers, J. E., Desjardins, C. D., McCormick, C. M., Sapienza, J. K., & Zelano, P. D. (2012). Executive function skills and school success in young children. *Educational Researcher*, *41*, 375-384.
- Merriam, S. B. (1995). What can you tell from an N of 1?: Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *PAACE Journal of Lifelong Learning*, *4*, 51-60.
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Introduction to qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. M. (2010). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Murphey, D., Bandy, T., & Moore, K. (2012). Frequent residential mobility and young children's well-being. *Child Trends Research Brief*, January 2012. Washington D.C.
- Murphy, J. (2011). Homeless children and youth at risk: The educational impact of displacement. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *16*(1), 38-55.  
doi: 10.1080/10824669.2011.554143
- Numeroff, L. (n.d.) Series available from the Numeroff website:  
<http://lauranumeroff.com/books/index.htm>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Peterson, C. (2002). Children's long-term memory for autobiographical events. *Developmental Review* *22*, 370-402.
- Pillemer, D. B. (1998). What is remembered about early childhood event? *Clinical Psychology Review*, *18*(8), 895-913.
- Poland, B. D. (1995). Transcription quality as an aspect of rigor in qualitative research. *Qualitative inquiry*, *1*(3), 290-310.
- Pufall, P. B. (1997). Framing a development psychology of art. *Human Development* *40*(3), 169-180.
- Radford, A. W., Berkner, L., Wheelless, S.C., & Shepherd, B. (2010). *Persistence and attainment of 2003–04 beginning postsecondary students: After 6 years (NCES 2011-151)*. U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.  
Retrieved 12/04/13 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011151.pdf>
- Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. F. (1998). *Learning in the field. An introduction to qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seuss, D. (1960a). *Green eggs and ham*. New York: Beginner Books; distributed by Random House.
- Seuss, D. (1960b). *One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish*. New York: Beginner Books; distributed by Random House.
- Seuss, D. (1985). *The cat in the hat*. New York: Random House.
- Sipe, L.R. (1998). How picture books work: A semiotically framed theory of text-picture relationships. *Children's Literature in Education*, *29*(2), 97-108.
- Silverstein, S. (1974). *Where the sidewalk ends: The poems & drawings of shel silverstein*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Spackman, J. (2012). Expressiveness, ineffability, and nonconceptuality. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* *70*(3). 303-313.

- Torgeson, J. K. (2000). Individual differences in response to early intervention in reading: The lingering problem of treatment resister. *Learning Disabilities and Research & Practice, 15*, 55-64.
- U.S. Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Office. (2013). *Glossary*. Retrieved from [https://studentaid.ed.gov/glossary#letter\\_i](https://studentaid.ed.gov/glossary#letter_i)
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Choosing a postsecondary institution: Considerations reported by students* (NCES Publication 2009-186). Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009186.pdf>
- Weinberger, J. (1996). A longitudinal study of children's early literacy experiences at home and later literacy development at home and school. *Journal of Research in Reading 19*(1), 14-24.