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Implementing Fidelity of Instructional Practices by Pre-K Teachers for Fostering Emergent Literacy

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Literacy development is a process embedded in young children's social and educational environments and the consistent ways in which they are provided opportunities to become involved with books and writing materials (Isaacs, 2008; Peisner-Feinberg, et al. 1999 and Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Historically, it was not uncommon for children ages birth to four to experience initial literacy opportunities and experiences solely in the home given by parents, notably the mother who assumed the role of teacher and educator (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). However, that practice would change as the roles of women (and mothers) in the workforce evolved, notwithstanding existing research which pointed to the home as the major stimulant of young children's initial images and practices for literacy acquisition (McKay & Kendrick, 1999).

In addition to an increase in the number of families in which both parents work, the United States has experienced an increase of single-parent households due to divorce and unmarried single mothers. The net effect of these circumstances has brought about an increasing need for childcare outside the home and a corresponding decrease in the amount of time and energy that parents would give inside the home to caring for and teaching their young children (Kessler & Harris, n.d.; Klein, 2004 and Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Consequently, the need for a stable, secure, consistent school environment is essential. In effect, changing family structures have resulted in many parents relinquishing their "teaching" roles to those outside the family, particularly to different types of preschool programs and their practitioners. The result is a strong dependence on the personnel in early childhood programs to provide young children with quality literacy instruction and related experiences.

Programs

Various initiatives and programs to assure children's academic success have been established particularly the emergence of Universal Pre-K Programs (UPK), since 1995. The basic rationale for UPK is that, while school readiness discrepancies are greater for children targeted as at risk, middle-income children, too, frequently are not prepared academically to achieve in kindergarten and beyond.

Currently, 38 states are underway for establishing universal (free) preschool education programs for 4-year-olds. At issue with these programs is the variability found in policies and standards regarding teacher credentialing and program curricula and delivery (Ackerman, Barnett, Hawkinson, Brown & McGonigle, 2009, Ackerman, & Barnett, 2005; Ackerman, Barnett & Robin, 2005; Illinois State Board of Education, 2006 and Schulman & Barnett, 2005).

Additionally some states operate a "two-tiered" system (e.g., Georgia, Florida, West Virginia and New York) for

program delivery and teacher qualifications. For example, in West Virginia programs can be delivered within the auspices of public school districts, Headstart and private facilities. Pre-K teachers in public school districts are required to have at least a bachelor's degree while teachers in private facilities can be credentialed with an associate's degree, provided they are working toward full certification. West Virginia also requires that at least one-half of all UPK programs be under the auspices of private facilities (Bushouse (in press); Regional Education Laboratory Appalachia, 2009 and Schumacher, Ewen, Hart & Lombardi, 2005).

Although these tiers of child care delivery increase access to Pre-K programs such settings operate under different controlling bodies with varying expectations and regulations. The effect that these variations might have on program quality is an issue, particularly for curriculum standards, teacher qualifications and the fidelity given to implementing research-based instructional practices.

The growth experienced in these programs has created an enormous need for teachers who are qualified to teach emergent literacy and language learning. Thus, they will need a fund of research-based principles and the dispositions to give fidelity to these principles in practice. It is important for studies in early childhood research to report instructional fidelity results because of the variability that exists in the academic preparation of teachers and the lack of unified curricula standards (O'Donnell, 2008).

Purpose

It is argued that practicing Pre-K teachers with differing teaching credentials, years of teaching experience, and hours of professional development will vary significantly in the instructional fidelity given to research-based, instructional practices. The argument is based upon several existing factors surrounding the early education of young children. First, the field lacks a unified set of curricula standards and guidelines for structuring programs and related teacher preparation qualifications. Second, there is inconclusive evidence about the link between teacher credentials and instructional effectiveness and the academic success of young children. Third, state licensing boards vary in their requirements for licensing and employing Pre-K teachers. Each has its particular credentialing requirements for teachers, varying between child development associate and collegiate preparation (associates, bachelors and masters degrees (Early et al., 2007).

Implementation Fidelity.

Conventional wisdom is that teacher beliefs and expectations about their instructional practices prompt fidelity given to what and how they implement. An assumption is that beliefs and perceptions become part of a valid "self system" of knowing, which likely influences or directs classroom

discourse (Alexander, Murphy, Guan & Murphy P.A., 1998); Chou, 2008; Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992; Williams & Burden, 1997; Woolfolk, Davis & Pape, 2006 and Stodolosky & Grossman, 1995).

Too, existing beliefs may influence novices' perceptions of how to effectively teach reading (Haverback, 2010). Literacy instruction in initial teacher education programs not only must model "best practices" but also dispel existing misconceptions that may run counter to effective practice (Barnyak & Paquette, 2010). In short, teacher beliefs and actions appear to be highly contextual matters layered in different aspects of instructional settings and professional perceptions. It appears that it is not always predictable that beliefs focus efforts or shape related practices (Carradine, 2004).

Rationale

Teachers are the major component of quality programs and compelling evidence is needed attesting to the fidelity given to research-based principles of literacy and language instruction. Existing research has focused extensively on fidelity studies where designed interventions moderated the instruction via specific curricula and lesson guides. Overall, measures were to know whether participants stayed true to the related objectives and to the extent they followed the various lesson scripts or intentions of the designers. Conversely, few fidelity studies have investigated issues of curriculum fidelity in settings where teachers moderated the instruction "unsupervised" e.g., in a typical early childhood classroom with the instructional autonomy primarily in their hands (O'Donnell, 2008).

A beginning path for such research is to assess the perceptions of Pre-K practitioners about appropriate, research-based teaching practices and to what extent they perceive these to be consistently implemented in their classrooms. Self-evaluation and personal performance monitoring can be the first approximations of progressive change. Such results are important to respective practitioners and to their immediate supervisors for evaluating programs to target related, local and state professional development needs. Too, the status of language and literacy practices is important for teacher preparation personnel for correlating their related curricula to such findings, particularly in field-based practica and practice teaching where initial instructional practices arise. Moreover, initial collegiate teacher preparation is an important time and place for candidates to reflect on and to understand how their beliefs and dispositions (and misconceptions) relate to and influence their instructional behaviors. The following methodology was designed to conduct a quantitative research-based investigation of the relationship of these events.

Methodology

Participants/Procedures

This study uses existing data collected from a statewide sample of Pre-K teachers currently practicing in public school, Head Start, private and special education programs for four-year-olds.

Participants included 221 Pre-K practitioners sampled from a statewide population of 760 teachers in four-year-old

classrooms in West Virginia. Teachers were employed, by percentage, in the following types of programs: *Headstart* (19%), *Public School* (59%), *Community-Private* (5.9%), *Special Needs* (13.1 %), and *Other* (4.1%), the latter being a combination of *Head Start* and *Special Needs*. Teaching experience included groupings of 0-3 years (34 %); 4-7 years (27 %) and 8 or more years (38.5 %). Academic credentials were: *Child Development Associate* (2); *Associates Degree* (11); *Bachelors* (n, 90); *Masters and Advanced* (n, 118). Professional development experiences were grouped as the number of clock hours completed over the previous two years, collapsed into four groupings: *18 hours or less* (n, 99), *between 18-30 hours* (n, 61), *more than 30 hours* (n, 52) and *none* (n, 8).

Measures

The data collection tool was the *Language and Literacy Preschool Survey* (LLPS), which included: *Demographic Information*, *Teacher Instructional Practices and Resources and Materials*. Teaching practices were 18 instructional competencies adapted from *The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K* (ELLCO). The ELLCO is an instrument designed to observe and assess the quality of K-2 practitioners' emergent literacy instruction (Smith, Brady & Anastasopoulos, 2008 & Smith & Dickenson, 2002). Its authors report an overall reliability estimate of .84, with .76 for Books & Reading; .75 for Writing and .84 for Literacy Environment. Cronbach reliability for the 18 descriptors on the LLPS estimated overall at .94 with .86 for Language Environment; .88 for Books & Reading and .88 for Print Environment.

The adaptation translated 18 instructional practices into self-evaluative descriptors organized in three literacy domains (*Language Environment*, *Books and Book Reading and Print and Early Writing*), shown in Table 1. Instructional practices were nested into these domains and posed on the survey for teachers to assess their perceptions of the fidelity given to implementing these respective practices. Participants rated each descriptor keyed to a numerical scale, from 1 to 6, with 1 being "Almost Never" (*This is not a common practice in my setting*) and 6 being "Almost Always" (*I do this daily throughout class activities*). The content of the practices is based on research-based principles of early literacy acquisition. For example, item # 10, "During read-alouds features of text, pictures and ideas to support comprehension are demonstrated". Giving fidelity to this outcome means that the teacher consistently and explicitly draws attention to and reinforces these features for the children (Smith, Brady & Anastasopoulos, 2008 and Smith & Dickenson, 2002).

Discussion of Findings

What was the overall degree of implementation fidelity given to the 18 practices by Pre-K teachers? Initially, data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean ranks, sums and standard deviations). These results are shown in Table 1. Inferential analysis was obtained by the Kruskal-Wallis Test for each language and literacy domain in relationship to teacher experience, professional development experiences, academic credentials and type of teaching setting. These results are depicted in Table 2

Table 1 Overall Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Practices

| Language and Literacy Descriptors in Related Domains. | N | Sum | Mean | SD |
|--|-----|------|------|------|
| <i>Language Environment.</i> (Mean Score, 5.51; sd= 7.7) | | | | |
| 1. I talk with children about their ideas, personal experiences, and learning experiences. | 216 | 1213 | 5.62 | .70 |
| 2. I provide opportunities that engage children in individual, small group, and large group conversations. | 218 | 1233 | 5.66 | .72 |
| 3. I use conversation to extend children's knowledge and build oral language skills. | 217 | 1239 | 5.71 | .63 |
| 4. Vocabulary learning is integrated with ongoing classroom learning activities. | 217 | 1177 | 5.42 | .85 |
| 5. Learning activities are used to build phonologic awareness. Books and Book Reading. (Mean Score, 5.63; sd=5.7 | 216 | 1112 | 5.15 | .93 |
| 6. Opportunities are provided for children to freely and independently access books. | 217 | 1276 | 5.88 | .51 |
| 7. Guidance is provided for children's use of books. | 217 | 1145 | 5.28 | 1.01 |
| 8. Read alouds are implemented with small or large groups. | 216 | 1242 | 5.75 | .63 |
| 9. During read alouds, I demonstrate features of text, pictures, and ideas to support comprehension. | 214 | 1217 | 5.69 | .70 |
| 10. During read alouds, I model expressive and fluent reading. | 215 | 1258 | 5.85 | .54 |
| 11. After read alouds, children are engaged in discussions that foster comprehension. | 218 | 1180 | 5.41 | .84 |
| 12. During read aloud discussions, children are encouraged to contribute. | 218 | 1209 | 5.55 | .74 |
| <i>Print and Early Writing.</i> (Mean Score, 5.23; sd=.95) | | | | |
| 13. Planned opportunities are provided for children to use their emergent writing skills. | 216 | 1125 | 5.21 | .96 |
| 14. I model different purposes of writing. | 217 | 1096 | 5.05 | .99 |
| 15. Guidance is provided to enhance children's writing process. | 217 | 1093 | 5.04 | .98 |

| | | | | |
|--|-----|------|------|-----|
| 16. I model active and purposeful use of environmental print. | 217 | 1133 | 5.22 | .94 |
| 17. Environmental print is integrated into children's classroom routines. | 212 | 1152 | 5.43 | .87 |
| 18. I model appropriate print conventions (e.g., correct use of upper- and lower-case letters, spelling, and spacing between words). | 217 | 1179 | 5.43 | .97 |

Overall, participants perceived to be implementing the majority of descriptors very frequently, averaging 5.46 of 6 on the scale. The greatest single ratings (90th percentile) were found for Items # 6 (*Opportunities for children to freely and independently choose books*); # 8 (*Read alouds are implemented in small and large groups*) and # 10 (*During Read-Alouds I model expressive and fluent reading*), all of which occurred in the *Books and Book Reading* domain. However, # 7 (*Guidance is provided for children's use of books*) was among the lowest mean scores (5.28) with the highest variability (s.d., 1.01).

The *Print and Early Writing* domain had the lowest implementation scores (and greatest variability) for emergent writing skills, with a mean score of 5.19. The very lowest scores occurred for Items #14 (*I model different purposes of writing*) and #15 (*Guidance is provided to enhance children's writing process*) respectively at 5.05 and 5.04, with standard deviations near 1.

Language Environment resulted in a mean score of 5.51 indicating a fairly high level of overall implementation fidelity, with the exception of # 5 (*Learning activities are used to build phonological awareness*) with a mean score of 5.15 and a standard deviation of .93. It could be that teachers are unsure about what activities constitute *phonological awareness* or some confusion exists between *teaching awareness* of phonics and *teaching "phonics"*. Of the three domains, respondents perceived the greatest level of implementation fidelity for *Books and Book Reading* (mean, 5.63) with the exception of # 7, "*Guiding children to use books*" (mean, 5.28). In contrast, the highest rating (mean, 5.88) occurred for #6 ("*Children encouraged to independently and freely access books*").

These results indicate that West Virginia Pre-K teachers perceived to be implementing instructional practices that involve children's access to books and small and large group read alouds. Instructional practices involving more guidance from the teacher and engagement with the children were perceived to be less frequently implemented, especially for print and writing and surprisingly for phonological awareness.

Inferential analysis was obtained by the Kruskal-Wallis Test for each language and literacy domain in relationship to teacher experience, professional development experiences, academic credentials and type of program. These results are depicted in Table 2

To what extent did the *teaching experience* of Pre-K

teachers influence implementation fidelity for fostering language and literacy? Preschool teaching experience was identified in three groupings: *between 0-3 years, 4-7 years and 8 or more years*. For *Language Environment*, only Item #2 (*Opportunities to engage children in individual small and large group conversations*) was significant (p .027). Results showed a mean rank of 98.97 for those with *0-3 years* of experience compared to a mean rank of 121.51 for those with *between 4-7 years* of experience (p.022), and a rank of 118.5 for experience beyond 8 years (p. 025).

Table 2
Inferential Data for Implementation and Teacher Experience, Degree Completion, Professional Development and Type of Program

| Language and Literacy Descriptors in Related Domains. | Experi-ence | De-gree | Pro-gram | Profession. Dev. |
|--|-------------|--------------|--------------|------------------|
| <i>Language Environment.</i> (Mean Score, 5.51; s d= 7.7) | | | | |
| 1. I talk with children about their ideas, personal experiences, and learning experiences | n. s | .041 | n. s | n. s |
| 2. I provide opportunities that engage children in individual, small group, and large group conversations. | .027 | n. s. | n. s. | .005 |
| 3. I use conversation to extend children’s knowledge and build oral language skills | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | .024 |
| 4. Vocabulary learning is integrated with ongoing classroom learning activities. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | .010 |
| 5. Learning activities are used to build phonological awareness | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | .004 |
| <i>Books and Book Reading.</i> (Mean Score, 5.63; s d= 5.7) | | | | |
| 6. Opportunities are provided for children to freely and independently access books | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. |
| 7. Guidance is provided for children’s use of books. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s |
| 8. Read alouds are implemented with small or large groups. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s |
| 9. During read alouds, I demonstrate features of text, pictures to support comprehension | n. s. | .013 | n. s. | n.s. |
| 10. During read alouds, I model expressive and fluent reading. | n. s. | .077* | .083* | n. s. |
| 11. After read alouds, children are engaged in discussions that foster comprehension. | .043 | .099* | n. s. | .025 |
| 12. During read aloud discussions, children are encouraged to contribute | .043 | n. s | n. s. | .050 |
| <i>Print and Early Writing.</i> (Mean Score, 5.23; s d=.95) | | | | |
| 13. Planned opportunities provided for children’s emergent writing skills | n. s. | n.s. | n.s. | .020 |
| 14. I model different purposes of writing. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n.s. |

| | | | | |
|--|--------------|-------|-------|-------------|
| 15. Guidance is provided to enhance children’s writing process. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n.s |
| 16. I model active and purposeful use of environmental print. | .088* | n. s. | n. s | .016 |
| 17. Environmental print is integrated into children’s classroom routines. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | .019 |
| 18. I model appropriate print conventions (e.g., correct use of upper- and lower-case letters, spelling, and spacing between words). | n. s. | n. s. | n. s. | n. s |

n.s –not statistically significant

*Item not significant at p < .05 but considered as a noteworthy outcome (p <.10).

Those with greater teaching experience perceived to engage children accordingly in creating and extending conversations in individual and group instructional formats compared to their peers with less teaching experience. However, an experience effect was not operative for all other language and literacy practices in the domain. Perhaps as teachers become more experienced they are able to stray from the curriculum and provide time for conversation. It may be that most new teachers teach straight from a scripted curriculum. Those with greater experience may have realized the importance of “free” conversation and teacher-child interactions for developing language skills. Also, they may have learned to manage their time more efficiently to allow greater opportunities for conversations and discussions.

For *Books and Book Reading*, only two of its seven items (#’s 11 and 12) were significantly related to teaching experience. Experienced teachers perceived to engage and encourage children in discussion after reading a book (p < .05), particularly for those with *8 or more years* of experience. These teachers are likely to give greater fidelity to implementing strategies to foster children’s comprehension and to continue discussions in read alouds. The kinds of books consulted by the teachers in these circumstances were not known, but the kind of literature chosen can be very instrumental in discussion achievement when these resources mirror the social-cultural characteristics of the children (Morgan, 2009).

Print and Early Writing had the lowest mean score (5.23) and the greatest overall variability (SD .95) among the three language and literacy categories in Table 2. None of its six practices showed significance with preschool teaching experience. However, #16 (Opportunities for children to freely and independently access books) was an “important” consideration at p. < .088. However, these results further indicated that lesser emphasis was being given to emergent writing outcomes. Perhaps teachers are unaware of the connection between reading and writing because writing historically has not been emphasized until formal schooling. Also, it may be that teachers are not knowledgeable about pre-writing and associate the teaching of writing as formal, direct instruction such as handwriting and sentence composition.

What was the relationship between *academic training* for teachers and perceived fidelity of implementation of effective literacy instruction? Academic credentials were grouped as: *Child Development Associate (CDA), Associate’s, Bachelor’s, and Master’s/Doctorate*. The latter two categories

comprised over 94 % of the cases. *Language Environment*, Item # 1 (Talking with children about their experiences) was significant; however, no other items were moderated by academic credentials. These results were most likely limited by the great majority of teachers holding either bachelors or master's degrees (94%) and who apparently were on an even keel with the related content of the practices.

For *Books and Book Reading*, only Item #9, (*demonstrate features of text*) was significant ($p .026$), which refers to read alouds emphasizing features of text, pictures and ideas to support comprehension. The difference occurred between teachers with associates and masters degrees with a mean rank of 65.14 for the latter and 15.45 for associates ($p < .035$). However, this finding is limited due to the disproportions in sample sizes (n , 11 for associates and n , 200 plus for bachelors/masters). Although not significant, two items, #'s 10 (Modeling fluent reading) and 11 (Engaging children in discussions), were noted as "important" information given p levels $< .10$.

For *Print and Early Writing*, none of its six descriptors rejected the null hypothesis. The degree level of teachers did not appear to influence their implementation fidelity for modeling different purposes for writing. Overall, this domain continued to be relatively low for fidelity implementation.

Overall, the three domains for language and literacy were modestly related to academic credentials. Interestingly, Justice, Mashburn, Hamre and Pianta (2007) found that teacher credentials negatively predicted language and literacy instructional quality and reported that teachers with advanced degrees received lower ratings for instructional quality. However, the authors noted that the advanced degrees were not all in the area of early childhood education. Although teachers may have advanced degrees, they may not have the specialized knowledge needed for providing quality language and literacy instruction in the preschool setting.

Participants reported the clock hours of *professional development* completed for language and literacy in the past two years. Hours were collapsed into four groupings: *18 or less* (n , 99), *between 18-30* (n , 61), *more than 30* (n , 52) and *none* (n , 8). As seen in Table 2, for *Language Environment*, professional development was significantly related to practice items 2, 3, 4, and 5 for those with *any* amount of professional development. Specifically, those completing *18 hours or less* differed significantly from those completing *more than 30 hours* on all four items ($p .025$). Those with *more than 30 hours* of professional development perceived to implement with greater frequency than did teachers having *18 hours or less* of professional development ($p < .017$). Overall, there is some evidence that teachers with greater hours of language and literacy professional development frequently used conversation to extend knowledge and to build oral language skills, to integrate vocabulary learning in ongoing classroom activities and to implement phonological awareness activities. For *Books and Reading*, items 11 and 12 (*Engaging children before and after read alouds*) were significantly related to those with 30 or more hours of professional development ($p < .05$).

For *Print and Early Writing*, teachers with *more than 30*

hours of professional development perceived to implement planned opportunities for children to use their emergent writing skills more than their peers' with *18 hours or less*. Specifically for items #13 (Opportunities to use emergent writing skills) and #16 (*modeling the use of environmental print*), significance was found for those with between 18-30 hours and greater than 30 hours of professional development ($p .043$). Essentially this held true for Item #17, *Integration of environment print* for those with more than 30 hours of professional development ($p < .019$). Overall, teachers with greater language and literacy professional development experiences perceived to more frequently integrate environmental print into children's classroom routines. This is especially notable given the relatively lower scores throughout for the domain.

Overall Ratings of Abilities

Overall, how did Pre-K teachers rate their ability to effectively foster language and literacy practices for four-year-olds? Item #19 on the *Language and Literacy Practices Survey* assessed the 18 descriptors across the three conceptual domains to examine the perceived level of ability to provide an effective language and literacy environment. Subjects assessed the practices by responding to a 6-point scale as follows: 1 (*Less than Inadequate*); 2 (*Inadequate -Implement few practices; need major improvement and development*); 3 *Functional* (Implement some practices; many not so well; need significant improvement); 4 (*Sufficient*-implement many of the practices; need some specific improvements); 5 (*Competent* -Implement the majority of practices effectively) and 6 (*Optimal*-implement the great majority of practices effectively).

Of 211 respondents, the great majority perceived their overall ability to implement effective language and literacy instructional practices as *Competent* (44.6%) or *Optimal* (38.3%), with a mean score of 5.25. About 13 % perceived their ability as *Sufficient* and one percent (1.4) *Less than sufficient* (one respondent indicated *Functional* and one indicated *Less than Inadequate*). Table 3 highlights the frequencies across the rating categories.

Although the great majority of teachers perceived their overall level of ability as above average for implementing

Table 3
Overall Frequency Ratings for Language and Literacy Perceived Abilities

| | Scale | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Less than Inadequate (1) | 1 | .5 | 5 | .5 |
| | Functional (3) | 1 | .5 | .5 | 9 |
| | Sufficient (4) | 25 | 11.3 | 11.8 | 12.8 |
| | Competent (5) | 99 | 44.6 | 46.9 | 59.7 |
| | Optimal(6) | 85 | 38.3 | 40.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 211 | 95.0 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 11 | 5.0 | | |
| Total | | 222 | 100.0 | | |

Note. No frequencies occurred for Inadequate (2). Rating Scale: 1= Less than Inadequate, 2= Inadequate, 3= Functional, 4= Sufficient, 5= Competent and 6= Optimal

language and literacy instruction, 12.3% (n, 27) indicated that ability as *Sufficient* or less. This is not large proportionally to the sample, yet it is practically important. Twenty-seven teachers potentially impact the learning and development of approximately 540 preschool children. It is a large number of children who may be receiving ordinary or less than adequate language and literacy instruction, thus not benefiting from the jump start preschool should provide.

Discussion

Of the domains, teachers perceived to most frequently implement practices associated with *Books and Book Reading* (Mean, 5.70). Reading to children has long been considered a beneficial endeavor in school and in the home. Often, the quality of language and literacy experiences in the home (or at school) are defined by the amount of books available and the amount of time children spend reading and interacting with books. These relationships have some grounding in the research literature on language and literacy development of young children (Dodici, Draper & Peterson, 2003; Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal, 2005 and Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). Specifically, Roberts, Jurgens & Burchinal (2005) examined four importance aspects of shared book reading in the home. Of those, maternal book reading strategies and maternal sensitivity were significantly related to growth of children's receptive vocabulary. Because maternal book reading strategies can positively affect emergent literacy, the same logic can be implied regarding preschool teachers' book reading strategies and sensitivity. This domain is clearly a perceived strength of West Virginia Pre-K teachers.

However, the same was not true for *Print and Early Writing* (mean 5.19). Although considerable research exists examining the impact of emergent literacy on future reading success, there is limited research on the relationship between early writing skills and future reading and/or writing success. Clearly, young children should be building a foundation of print awareness and early writing skills in addition to book reading and language skills in high-quality preschools. It may be that teachers are not particularly knowledgeable about these connections and how to implement effective print and writing instructional practices. Or, they may be giving emphasis to other areas of language and literacy mandated by local/state policies and related requirements (Madison, 1991).

Results for *Language Environment* showed that teachers consistently implemented the associated practices for engaging children in conversations to extend oral language skills and vocabulary development, with the exception of using *learning activities to build phonological awareness*. In high-quality preschool programs, knowledge about the effective implementation of phonological activities is of great importance because research has suggested it to be a strong predictor of future success in reading (Beverly, Giles & Buck, 2009; Gettelfinger, 2000; Koehler, 1996); Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000 and Paulson, 2004).

Relatively large standard deviations (.85 >) occurred for eight of the literacy practices, indicating that respondents varied in their assessments, including phonological awareness activities, guidance for children's use of books, print awareness and early writing environment. These

variations most likely mean that instruction is not a linear process keyed to the consistent implementation of practices known or believed to be qualitative. Variations are likely related to the emphases given by teachers for the reasons noted previously, including local curriculum mandates or policies.

We argued that Pre-K practitioners would vary significantly in their perceptions about fidelity given to implementing instructional practices distinguished by types of programs, academic training, teaching experience and professional development experiences. Overall, teachers perceived to give fidelity to the associated practices and reported the ability to deliver the majority of these practices. Specifically, *Books and Book Reading* emerged as a perceived strength (mean 5.63) followed by *Language Environment* (mean 5.51) However, the lowest level occurred for *Print and Early Writing* (mean 5.23). Preschool teaching experience only moderately affected respondents' perceptions related to incorporating book literature and reading. Additionally, preschool teaching experience was not an important factor related to emergent print and early writing, with the exception of modeling environmental print.

While it was assumed that academic training would be a factor, academic credentials of participants had little effect on perceived implementation for the great majority of descriptors. For example, it was expected that those with master's degrees would have acquired practical and theoretical training and therefore be more knowledgeable about practices aimed toward building stronger literacy foundations. But, teachers with higher academic training perceived to significantly implement but a single practice: *enhancing comprehension skills by pointing out features of text, pictures and ideas during read alouds*. However, read aloud engagement items # 10 and # 11, were considered as "important" outcomes. Perhaps as teachers move farther away from their initial collegiate degree programs and gain practical classroom experience and know-how, the effects of generalized teacher preparation become less applicable in instructional environments that are highly structured to promote specific reading and literacy growth.

The type of *professional development training* completed by participants was unknown. However, the data showed that professional development had the most significant relationship across the domains. Nine of the 18 practices are noted as significant in Table 2. Teachers with greater hours of language and literacy professional development reported to implement the majority of these practices more frequently than their peers with lesser hours of professional development. Justice, Mashburn, Hamre and Pianta (2007) found that the number of language and literacy development workshops attended by teachers was a strong predictor of quality language and literacy instruction. The current results point to the general conclusion that *professional development training* is the strongest indicator of teachers' perceived levels of implementation of effective language and literacy instruction. Consequently, program planners should pay considerable attention to the amounts and kinds of professional development training for Pre-K practitioners, regardless of their existing academic credentials and years of teaching experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, West Virginia Pre-K practitioners perceived to be implementing quality language and literacy experiences and instruction for young children. However, the results point to varying associated strengths and weaknesses inherent in their practices. These findings are important to local and state policy makers responsible for funding and evaluating West Virginia Pre-K programs, to teacher education programs and to curriculum supervisors who will design and implement future professional development endeavors. Future studies should be designed to collect objective data that directly measure the actual growth of children's emergent literacy using research-based principles of language and literacy acquisition. Howe, Radcliff & Higginson (1999) note the need for research to focus on literacy comprehension in content areas. The authors propose that the current lack of content literacy instruction in the early grades is tied to unjustified beliefs that such instruction is too difficult for the young learner. They advocate that young learners can progress to at least a rudimentary understanding of expository text through appropriate literacy instruction supported with reading materials matched to their emerging abilities.

While the current study concentrated on academic descriptors and related literacy skills, preschool educators are reminded that the concomitant development of social and emotional skills and a positive sense of identity among preschool children are important elements in a program that is developmentally appropriate. Affective components go hand in hand with the development of *cognitive learning* (e.g., attending, perceiving, associating and scaffolding) and *academic learning* skills (e.g., letter naming, decoding, letter-sound correspondence and rhyming) in high quality programs for four-year-olds. Moreover, educators must recognize that, notwithstanding the efforts and mandates from NCLB, the gap in reading and literacy achievement continues to hold for minority children and for those who are at risk for other causes (Burt, Ortlieb, & Cheek, 2009).

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