

**Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education and its Impact on the  
Development of Early Language and Literacy Skills: An Exploration of One Head  
Start Program's Parent Involvement Model**

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Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education and its Impact on the Development of Early Language and Literacy Skills: An Exploration of One Head Start Program's Parent Involvement Model

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## Abstract

### Parent Involvement in Early Childhood Education and its Impact on the Development of Early Language and Literacy Skills: An Exploration of One Head Start Program's Parent Involvement Model

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The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine parent involvement practices of the Early Beginnings Head Start program and to determine the impact that parent involvement has on the early language and literacy development of preschool children. Although parent involvement practices are evident throughout Head Start programs, the specific practices and the effectiveness of early language and literacy acquisition from one preschool site to another may differ. The specific research questions examined in this study were:

1. How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?
2. What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills?
3. How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?

Data sources utilized for this research study include: (a) semi-structured interviews with a Head Start program administrator, preschool teachers and home

visitors, and a small subset of parents; (b) surveys given to all parents and families in the part-time preschool program; (c) researcher field notes and observations, and (d) artifacts collected that represent parent-school interaction. Content analysis procedures were used to analyze the data, collect and identify patterns and trends from both the survey and interview data, and to determine to what extent (if any) the parent involvement practices at Early Beginnings Head Start contribute to the development of early language and literacy skills in preschool children.

This research study revealed that the Early Beginnings program utilizes several different methods of involving and educating parents including the use of workshops, home visits, conferences, and newsletters. The data demonstrated that workshops were the most valuable method of parent involvement used by the program to educate parents regarding early language and literacy skills. The use of multilingual facilitators, hands-on learning, and discussions at the workshop proved to benefit parents greatly. The parent involvement methods used by Early Beginnings that occurred during this research study had varying degrees of impact on parents and the ways they facilitate learning in the home.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

### **Introduction to the Problem**

Research has suggested a correlation between parent involvement and the acquisition of language and literacy skills in young children (Britto, 2011). Parent involvement in early childhood education plays a significant role in the development of both academic and non-academic outcomes (for instance school attendance, behavior, and executive functioning skills) in preschool-aged children. There is also an overwhelming connection between literary resources in the home and the development of children's reading skills (Sheldon, 2009). Parent involvement in early childhood continues to positively affect a child's academic achievement well into primary school, secondary school, and even high school (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009).

According to Sanders and Sheldon (2009), parent involvement in early childhood also positively impacts non-academic outcomes in young children. Some non-academic outcomes impacted by parental involvement include students' school attendance, behavior and attitude towards school, and homework completion (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Parental involvement is critical for a child's social and emotional development and appropriate behavior in school (Sanders & Sheldon, 2009). Because parents play such a critical role in a child's early development, their involvement has a major impact both inside and outside of school. Since parent involvement is associated with lower conduct problems, children are more likely to follow school rules and have a successful school experience with more parent involvement. Many researchers (Reynolds, 1989;

Supplee, Shaw, Hailstones, & Hartman, 2004) also suggest a positive correlation between parent involvement and social functioning.

Along such lines, a child's home learning experiences influence the development of early literacy skills (Melhuish & Phan, 2008). Numerous studies support the idea that the home environment, parent involvement, and parent-child interactions are significant to a child's emergent literacy development (Baroody & Diamond, 2012; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002). Characteristics of parents (education level, employment status, marital status, etc.) have been identified as important predictors of children's language abilities. As a result, one way to assist children in the development of language skills is to enhance partnerships between home and school in early childhood (Lukie, Skwarchuk, LeFevre, & Sowinski, 2014).

Along with positive home learning experiences around early language and literacy development, early childhood education plays a critical role in the development of early language and literacy skills in preschool-age children. According to Anderson et al. (2003), school readiness (having the skills necessary to succeed by the start of formal schooling), particularly among poor children, may help prevent the cascade of consequences of early academic failure and school behavioral problems. Unfortunately, children who enter school with little to no formal early childhood education are often in need of remedial education, leading to behavior problems. Some behavior problems include dropping out of high school, delinquency, unemployment, and psychological and physical morbidity in young adulthood.

Dr. Steve Barnett (1995) discovered, through his research on the impact of early childhood education, that early childhood education can reduce the placement of children

in special education, increase the high school graduation rate, and have an immediate and positive effect on children's intellectual performance. Since there is such a strong connection between early childhood education and school readiness, children who have no early childhood education experience are at a disadvantage when they begin formal schooling. Children who have access to early childhood education are often more prepared for kindergarten and experience more success in formal schooling. Skarda's (2014) research suggests that children who attend early-learning programs demonstrate higher levels of school achievement and better social adjustment than those who have no formal early education. They are also less likely to repeat a grade or be placed in special education classes, since learning issues can be identified and remediated early. Lastly, children who have had formal early-learning experiences are also more likely to graduate from high school.

Head Start is a national preschool education program designed to help children from low-income families for entrance into formal education in the primary grades (Keystone Human Services, 2015). Through these programs, Head Start attempts to bridge the achievement gap by increasing the achievement levels of minority and low-income students. The program is based on a comprehensive view of the child that includes cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, as well as the ability of the family to provide a supportive home environment (Anderson et al., 2003). Head Start also offers children and their families the following services (based on a family needs assessment): health, educational, nutritional, and social services (Keystone Human Services, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to examine one specific Head Start's (referred to as Early Beginnings) parent involvement practices and the impact it has on preschool children's early language and literacy development. The results of this research can help to improve parent-school relationships for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Children's readiness for school is dependent upon parent involvement in the early years. These supports are most critical for children living in low-income families. While a relationship between children living in poverty and academic failure is well established (Ramey & Finkelstein, 1981), not all low-income families have children who are unsuccessful in school; however, a lack of under resourced communities and a lack of quality preschools contribute to the achievement gap. Many factors make early childhood education not feasible or attainable for all families, including the cost, location of center, parental beliefs, etc.

### **Statement of the Problem to be Researched**

A universal problem in our nation is ensuring that all children are provided the resources and environment to develop early language and literacy skills needed to succeed in school. Children living in low-income areas are often less prepared for kindergarten, and they struggle from the very beginning. Early childhood education family programs are one way of closing the achievement gap. Research shows that the earlier parents become involved in their child's literacy practices, the more profound are the results and longer-lasting effects (Mullis, Mullis, Cornille, Ritchson, & Sullender, 2004). While parent involvement has the most profound impact on literacy in the early years, Feinstein and Symons (1999) found parent involvement in early childhood to be the single greatest predictor of success at age 16. There is a great deal of research on

Head Start and early childhood education programs; however, more research on the family aspects of the Head Start program that contribute to positive educational outcomes will impact the ways these programs reach out to and involve parents. This research project examined the family support models utilized by the Head Start program and how they support parents and families in the development of early language and literacy skills in preschool-aged children.

### **Purpose and Significance of the Problem**

Parental involvement in early childhood education is a significant factor in the development of language and literacy skills prior to entering school (Melhuish & Phan, 2008). Early childhood centers are worthy of further research regarding their role in facilitating parent involvement and incorporating activities in the home that can help support early language and literacy development. Both participation in preschool-based activities and regular communication between families and teachers are related to young children's outcomes (Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006). According to Davis (2000), "students, schools, and families will benefit if parents are supported in establishing home environments that foster children's growth and learning" (p. 6).

The intent of this study was to examine one Head Start center's parent involvement practices to understand the following: Are parents learning from the information they are given? Are they utilizing the center's information and resources? And Do parents believe they are fostering early language and literacy skills in the home? This is significant research because determining the aspects of parental support that contribute to the development of early language and literacy skills can assist early childhood centers in creating meaningful partnerships with parents that benefit the

development of young children. Not only do strong home-school relationships matter for children's outcomes in early childhood, the benefits of these relationships continue over time (Weiss et al., 2006).

Early childhood is a time of life when significant learning and developing takes place. The skills children learn in early childhood lay the foundation for later learning. Early childhood is also the time when parents begin to develop beliefs about their children's abilities. Research has suggested that the extent of parental involvement in education depends, among other things, on how regularly the school approaches parents (Glasgow & Whitney, 2009). Along with regular encounters between school and parents, meaningful interactions and communications between home and school positively impact a child's overall education.

### **Research Questions Focused on Solution Finding**

The following three questions guided the research:

4. How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?
5. What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills?
  - 2a. What challenges does the Early Beginnings Head Start center encounter in supporting families in these areas?
  - 2b. To what extent are Early Beginnings Head Start teachers seeing these practices being implemented in their students' homes?

6. How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?

### **Conceptual Framework**

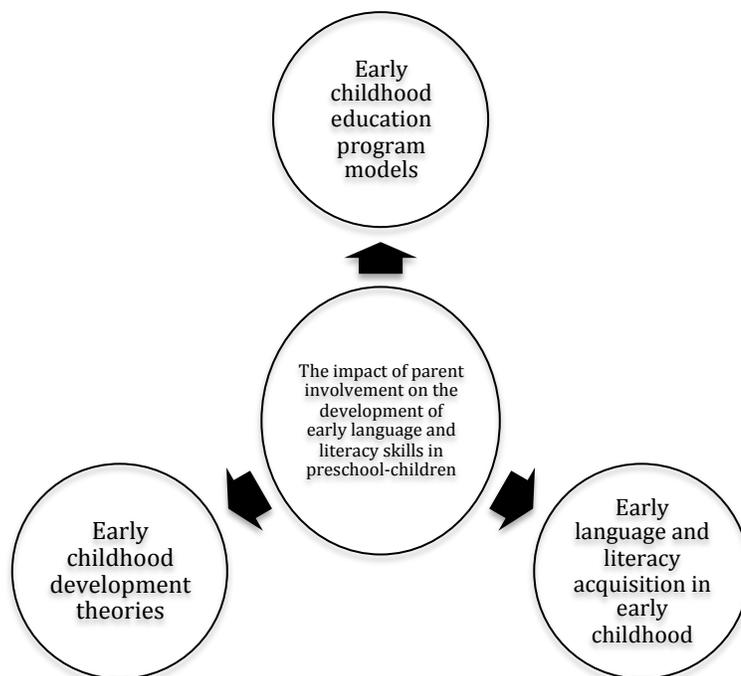
#### **Researcher Stance**

Working as an elementary reading specialist, the researcher has seen firsthand the importance of providing young children with early literacy opportunities prior to entering kindergarten. Emergent-literacy skills are significantly associated with family literacy environments and parental involvement, and children who have been exposed to emergent literacy skills are more prepared and experience more success upon entering kindergarten (Melhuish & Phan, 2008). As a result, the researcher was interested in examining the specific aspects of home-school partnerships that successfully contribute to the development of early language and literacy skills so early childhood centers can support parents appropriately and meaningfully.

#### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) that guided this research focused on important child development theories, language and literacy acquisition in early childhood, and early childhood education models of parent engagement and involvement. Understanding child development and the way children acquire knowledge and skills are significant when considering how early childhood centers can engage and educate parents to support the language and literacy development of their child. As a researcher, it is important to understand the significant theories that play a fundamental role in the development of a child. The stages of development through which children progress play a major role in their ability to acquire information and participate in learning activities. Also, it is important to acknowledge what early language and literacy acquisition looks

like and how children develop these critical skills. Lastly, the researcher examined early childhood parent involvement models that are currently utilized in an effort to involve parents and families in their child's education.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework.

**Theories of early childhood development.** Psychologists continue to study child development, and theories are continuously being established regarding best practices in early childhood. Over the last century, many child development theories have impacted early childhood education and teacher training in early childhood.

John Dewey proposed a theory that all human beings learn by doing (Dewey, 1963). This progressive education approach stipulates that “hands-on” learning allows children to explore their surroundings (Simpson & Jackson, 2003). Dewey’s concept of

early childhood learning puts an emphasis on meaningful activity in learning and participation in the classroom. He argued that curriculum should be relevant to a child's life, and that the development of practical life skills is critical to a child's overall education (Simpson & Jackson, 2003).

Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory provided insight as to how children develop personalities and emphasizes the significance of the social and emotional aspects of growth. Erikson's theory includes eight stages from infancy to late adulthood: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, ego identity vs. role confusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, and ego integrity vs. despair. During each stage, a person confronts, and hopefully masters, new challenges (Boeree, 2006). Erikson believed that basic strengths, including hope, will, and purpose, emerge from the healthy movement through each stage or crisis development a person faces and their experiences emerging from each stage (Karcher & Benne, 2007). It is important for early childhood educators to understand Erikson's theory as it relates to early childhood development. Understanding how development occurs, the stages of development children are currently in, and prior developmental stages is significant when providing children with educational experiences.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory revolves around the idea that children learn through social and culture experiences (Cook & Cook, 2005); interactions with adults and other children are critical to the development process. Vygotsky believed child development is the result of the interactions between children and their social environment. He also believed that language plays a significant role in cognitive development. Vygotsky's theory heavily emphasized the role of community and

caregivers in a child's development and how these interactions guide a child's learning and development (Cook & Cook, 2005).

Piaget believed children naturally attempt to learn what they do not know. He also believed they are active builders of knowledge who construct their own theories of the world (Wood, Smith, & Grossniklaus, 2001). Piaget challenged teachers to think about the ways a child comes to know and learn, instead of about what a child already knows. Piaget's theory on child development has impacted learning in early childhood by encouraging the use of stimulating, hands-on activities that help children build knowledge (Herr, 2008).

**Language and literacy acquisition in early childhood.** Ijalba (2015) defined language acquisition as a set of abilities young children develop at various times, including background knowledge, vocabulary, phonology, dialogue, sentence structure, and the functions of reading and writing. These abilities are developed during early childhood through interactions with adults, other children, and cognitive activities.

Parent-child interactions support language acquisition through the use of semantic contingency, scaffolding, accountability procedures, and the use of routines (Snow, 1983). The interactions also support the development of reading and writing in young children. According to Bishop and Adams (1990), phonological competence at the start of kindergarten accounted for future reading outcomes and a delay in phonological processing, a significant emergent literacy skill, and often resulted in reading delays. A number of early literacy skills benefit preschool-aged children including identifying letters and sounds, understanding print concepts and conventions, developing

phonological awareness, and acquiring oral language and early writing skills (Bohart, Charner, & Koralek, 2014).

**Early childhood education program models.** Meaningful family engagement in children's early learning supports school readiness and later academic success. Parental involvement is a critical element of high-quality early care and education. When children's progress can be tied to classroom activities and home activities, development and learning are strongly reinforced and further family involvement is inspired (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2012).

**Head start home-school model.** Head Start programs support the mental, social, and emotional development of children from low-income families from birth to age five, and encourage parents as their child's first and most important teachers. In addition to educational services for children, Head Start provides an abundance of resources for the family including health, nutrition, social, and other services. The program offers a variety of service models depending on the needs of the families in the community. Some of these models include programs based in centers, schools, or homes. Regardless of the program, home visitors meet with children and families on a regular basis and work with families in the home. Home visiting is a major aspect of the home-school partnerships that are critical to the Head Start program.

The Head Start program is founded on nine principles: (a) high-quality services; (b) activities that promote healthy development and identify atypical development at the earliest stage possible; (c) positive relationships and continuity, with an emphasis on the role of the parent as the child's first and most important relationship; (d) activities that offer parents a meaningful and strategic role in the program's vision, services, and

governance; (e) inclusion strategies that respect the unique developmental trajectories of young children in the context of a typical setting, including children with disabilities; (f) cultural competence that acknowledges the profound role culture plays in early development; (g) comprehensiveness, flexibility, and responsiveness of services that allow children and families to move across various program options over time as their life situation demands; (h) transition planning; and (i) collaboration with community partnerships that allow programs to expand their services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a). These nine principles guide the home-visiting model that Head Start offers to families and emphasizes the importance of fostering positive relationships and opportunities for families to be educated and involved in their child's educational experiences.

***Epstein's framework.*** Epstein (2001) also has a program model for parent involvement in early childhood that includes six types of involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community) all of which are ways that early childhood programs can work to educate and involve families in their child's education.

***Montessori model.*** Montessori's method of education is based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning, and collaborative play. In Montessori classrooms, children are given opportunities to make choices in their learning while receiving age-appropriate activities to guide the process. This child-centered approach provides a supportive and well-prepared environment for children to initiate learning experiences, socialize with children of different ages, and learn by participating in direct sensory-motor experiences.

## **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions were adopted:

### **Comprehension**

Understanding the intended meaning of a communication; accurately understanding what is written or said; the purpose or goal of all reading

### **Cognitive skills**

Skills that enhance the ability to think and reason

### **Early Childhood Centers**

An educational program that serves children during the preschool years

### **Early Literacy**

What children know about reading and writing before they actually read or write

### **Elaborative Talk**

Detailed conversations between a parent and child

### **Emergent Literacy**

“Characteristics of pre-readers that may relate to later reading and writing”

(Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 849)

### **Fluency**

Easy, clear, fluid written or spoken expression of ideas, done without hesitation

### **Head Start**

A program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services that provides comprehensive early childhood education services to low-income children and their families

**Home Learning Environment**

An environment created by the parent or caregivers that has a powerful influence on a child's early cognitive development. Practices in the home such as reading to children, using complex language, responsiveness, and warmth of interactions all contribute to a child's language and literacy development (Melhuish, 2010).

**Literacy**

The ability to read and write

**Print awareness**

Basic understanding that written language has meaning, is different from pictures, and that there are rules about the way we read and write

**Phonological Awareness**

An individual's awareness of the phonological structure, or sound structure, of words

**Shared Book Reading**

An adult reads engaging texts to a child, models effective readings strategies, and discusses text with the child all with the goal of helping children become independent readers (Button & Johnson, 1997)

**Vocabulary**

Background knowledge of words and their meanings in different contexts

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

It was assumed in this study that the Head Start program is currently assisting parents and families and creating partnerships that support the development of early language and literacy skills. Along those same lines, it was assumed that parents were

utilizing the strategies and knowledge gained from Head Start to support their child's development in the home. It was also assumed that respondents would answer all survey and interview questions honestly and to the best of their ability.

There were two identified limitations to this study. First, due to the personal nature of literacy practices taking place in the home, answers to survey and interview questions may not accurately reflect literacy practices taking place in the home. Second, results may not be generalizable beyond each specific early childhood center that participates in the study. The current study is limited to one single Head Start site and the timeline of the study only provided the researcher access to the Head Start site for several months—the end of one school year and the beginning of another school year—not an entire school year.

The delimitation in this study is that it may not be widely applicable across all Head Start sites and locations. This research is a single site research study with one Head Start preschool classroom; the findings and results may not be applicable to other early childhood education programs.

### **Summary**

This study determined the impact that Head Start's home-school model has on the development of the early language and literacy skills of preschool children. The results of this study offer implications for how early childhood centers work with parents and families and what specific practices benefit children's emergent literacy development. Since it has already been established that parent involvement in early childhood leads to children being more prepared and successful at the start of formal schooling, early

childhood centers are a parent or caregiver's greatest resource to support the development of these critical skills.

In Chapter 2, literature about child development theories, language and literacy acquisition, family involvement in early childhood, and early childhood program models is reviewed. The role of early childhood development theories is discussed in terms of social child development, cognitive child development, and the child-centered approach. Early language and literacy research is also reviewed, as well as family involvement in early childhood, specifically, the importance of home-school relationships, evidence-based practices, and challenges of parent involvement in early childhood. Lastly, literature concerning the three early childhood models, Head Start, Epstein, and Montessori, is reviewed.

Chapter 3 introduces the research methodologies utilized in this study. The chapter explains the research design and rationale, site and population participating in the study, the research methods used (semi-structured interviews, surveys, and field observations), data analysis procedures, reliability and validity of the research study, data analysis procedures, and lastly, ethical considerations. The researcher also offers a rationale for utilizing the qualitative research design and explains the benefits of using qualitative research for this particular study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction to Chapter 2**

Parental involvement in early childhood plays a significant role in the development of young children. Research supports the idea that parent involvement and experiences that take place in the home during a child's first few years greatly influence a child's language and literacy development (Ijalba, 2015; Koralek, 2014). Because parents are often the sole caregivers of children before age three, their role is extremely influential in their child's literacy development in early childhood. Parents provide learning opportunities in the home, recognition of and value in children's early achievement, and constant literacy and language interactions (Hannon, 1995).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides a Code of Ethical Conduct that has a primary focus on daily practices involving families with children from birth through age eight (Snow, 2012). This Code ensures that teachers engage parents in early learning and share this information with parents and families. The NAEYC Center for Applied Research (2012) has examined the significant impact parent involvement has on early childhood development. Specifically, when early childhood teachers share assessment data, student growth, and expectations with families, a partnership is developed that supports student learning both in school and in the home.

Despite growing research on the importance of parent involvement in early childhood education, there are still many difficulties when it comes to involving parents. For many parents, the lack of time is an obstacle when trying to be involved in their child's education. Also, some uninvolved parents share that they had negative

experiences in school and feel uncomfortable in a school setting (Brown, 2012).

Regardless of what the obstacles are, early childhood teachers and administrators must encourage parents to become involved in their child's education.

Early childhood centers play a significant role in supporting parents. It is the responsibility of teachers and administrators in early childhood schools to involve parents through volunteering, conferencing, school committees and events, written communication, etc. More significantly, parent support that goes beyond the school and incorporates educating parents on child development and providing them with rich learning opportunities to share with their child at home ensures that parents can be more involved because they are more knowledgeable and informed. In addition, early childhood centers play a critical role in involving parents and providing them with the knowledge and skills necessary to assist with their child's development. Early childhood centers are in the position to educate parents and instill a strong value of participating in their child's education beginning at a young age. Because critical development and experiences occur during early childhood, these facilities are in the best position to get parents involved early on and form positive home-school relationships.

The areas examined in this literature review are noteworthy child development theories as they relate particularly to early childhood development from birth to age three, language and literacy acquisition studies, the significance of parent involvement in early childhood, and what parent involvement looks like at the early childhood level. These theories provide an epistemological basis for informing the main research questions of this study by: (a) examining the theories that are significant to child development and play a critical role in what parent involvement looks like at the early childhood level, (b)

reviewing major aspects of language and literacy development that impact how education programs work with children to develop early language and literacy skills, and (c) examining other program models that are similar to Head Start's current parent involvement model.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Child Development Theories**

A variety of factors influence a child's development. It is important for parents and educators to understand and appreciate the many aspects of child development, including cognitive, social, and emotional development. The major early childhood theories of Erik Erikson, Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey are essential to the field of early childhood. These four theorists are significant to this research study because their theories focus on how young children learn and develop throughout the early childhood years.

**Social child development theories.** Erik Erikson's theory on child development was influenced by Freud and focused on psychosocial stages of development (McLeod, 2008). Erikson's theory focuses on development through eight stages that occur throughout a person's lifespan. The first three stages, trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, and initiative vs. guilt, occur during the first five years of a child's life.

During the trust vs. mistrust stage, infants are unsure about the world in which they live, and spend the first year of their life developing a sense of trust, which they will carry with them to other relationships (McLeod, 2008). McLeod (2008) described that a positive outcome for this stage occurs if "the care the infant receives is consistent, predictable and reliable, they will develop a sense of trust which will carry with them to

other relationships, and they will be able to feel secure even when threatened” (p. 1).

It is during this stage that the presence of stability and consistency of care will contribute to the child developing a sense of trust that will support their development.

The second stage of Erikson’s theory, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, occurs when children are around 18 months to three years old. During this stage, children are developing physically and becoming more mobile. Children are discovering a sense of independence, everything from dressing themselves, choosing toys, to walking away from their parents, etc. (McLeod, 2008). It is critical for parents to allow their children to explore limits “within an encouraging environment which is tolerant of failure” (McLeod, 2008, para. 19). A necessary balance is required of parents, one that emphasizes “self control without a loss of self-esteem” (Gross & Humphreys as cited in McLeod, 2008, para. 21). It is during this stage that parents can provide children opportunities to fail and struggle but also be present to offer encouragement and praise. This balance allows children to become more independent while gaining the necessary self-esteem to be successful.

The third stage children experience during early childhood is initiative vs. guilt. This stage occurs during a child’s preschool years during which they are interacting with other children and play is a major focus of development. Through play, children are able to “develop a sense of initiative, and feel secure in their ability to lead others and make decisions” (McLeod, 2008, para. 27). If children are not given this opportunity, and experience criticism or control instead, they may develop feelings of guilt and lack self-initiative.

Whereas Erikson put more of an emphasis on the importance of successfully completing each stage of development, Vygotsky focused less on stages and more on social interactions as a significant factor in child development. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory focuses on a framework that describes how children acquire new modes of handling knowledge and solving problems (Haenen, Schrijnemakers, & Stufkens, 2003). A major aspect of Vygotsky's child development theory is the significance of social interactions and how interactions play a fundamental role in cognitive development. His developmental framework revolved around the concept that learning occurs on two levels: (a) through interactions with others and (b) through the individual's mental structure (Haenen et al., 2003). The first dimension Vygotsky specified is interaction with others. He placed a strong emphasis on social interactions supporting learning in early childhood. Through social interactions, children are acquiring age-appropriate skills, learning to communicate, and enhancing the development of cognitive skills. Vygotsky believed interactions with someone more knowledgeable are the key for a child to learn and develop a better understanding of the world (McLeod, 2014).

The second aspect of Vygotsky's framework emphasized learning through the individual's mental structure. Vygotsky also believed that learning is sometimes an individual process. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later, on the individual level: "first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

He emphasized the importance of social interactions and social learning (interpsychological) occurring first, which then lead to individual growth and learning (intrapsychological). Both opportunities, while very different, contribute to positive learning experiences for a child.

Vygotsky believed that learning happens by interacting with our environment and that development is enhanced when confronted with new tasks just out of reach of one's present abilities. The zone of proximal development (ZPD), the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help, is an integral aspect of Vygotsky's theory. He believed children are most successful when teachers use cooperative learning exercises, opportunities for less competent children to learn and develop from working with more skillful peers. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) outlined specific processes that assist educators in providing children with learning opportunities in their ZPD: "gaining and maintaining the learner's interest in the task, making the task simple, emphasizing certain aspects that will help with the solution, control the child's level of frustration, and demonstrate the task" (p. 90). The specific processes are important to early childhood development because children need to be given age-appropriate learning opportunities in order to experience growth and success.

**Cognitive child development theories.** Jean Piaget's research on child development, while similar to Erikson's in that it includes stages, focused more on cognitive structures and intellectual development. According to Jean Piaget (1936), children are born with a basic mental structure on which all learning and knowledge are based. Piaget introduced the idea of schemas, defined by him as "a cohesive, repeatable action sequence possessing component actions that are tightly interconnected and

governed by a core meaning” (p. 7). He emphasized the importance of schemas in cognitive development, as this was an effective way to organize knowledge and new information. Utilizing schemas in early childhood provides children with mental representations that can be applied when needed (McLeod, 2015).

Piaget’s understanding of how children acquire knowledge is useful for defining objectives for young children. He identified three sources of knowledge as physical, social and logico-mathematical and believed that in infancy and early childhood, “the three kinds of knowledge exist together in the psychological reality of the child” (Kamil, Miyakawa, & Kato, 2004, para. 12). Piaget’s theory shifts the focus to how children learn (the process), as opposed to the products of learning. It also emphasizes that while children all go through the same processes of development, they do so at different rates, and educators must value and accept individual differences in how children develop.

**Child-centered approach.** John Dewey’s ideas have also been influential in education. His theories differ from other theorists such as Vygotsky and Montessori in that his focused on progressive education, which encompasses the significance of experimental learning in early childhood. It is through progressive education, essentially learning by doing, that human beings learn best (Prawat, 1992). In an early childhood setting, this theory involves children interacting with their environment, teachers and students learning together, and giving an equal voice among all learning participants (Prawat, 1992). He came to believe that educators should connect learning to a child’s own instincts, activities, and interests. According to Dewey (1963), experiences must be carefully selected and structured, and it is the job of the educator to determine where an experience is headed.

Dewey argued that curriculum must be relevant to children's lives and that by utilizing a hands-on approach, children are more likely to gain practical skills necessary to succeed in school. He also believed in participating in a classroom democracy and creating a learning environment where meaningful activity, discussion, and participation take center stage (Prawat, 1992).

Understanding major child development theories will inform how Head Start programs work with parents in developing and enhancing young children's language and literacy skills. These theories will inform one of the aspects of this research study by providing the researcher with a theoretical basis and epistemological framework. It will help the researcher to have a better understanding of the Head Start model and the theoretical foundations of the model. Understanding how children learn best, both in school and at home, provides knowledge to both teachers and parents that can support the development of young children. It is through understanding how children acquire knowledge and retain information that early childhood centers can work with parents to best support their development in the home.

### **Early Language and Literacy Acquisition**

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) examined a variety of research studies regarding literacy instruction in early childhood. Specifically, these studies examined what quality literacy instruction should look like in early childhood in an effort to prevent reading difficulties in young children. Their research suggests that early childhood literacy instruction should revolve around the alphabetic principle, reading sight words, reading words by mapping speech sounds to parts of words, achieving reading fluency, and comprehension. Snow et al. (1998) also suggest that to obtain the skills listed above,

instruction must be explicit and opportunities to practice must be present. In the preschool years, programs should be designed to provide optimal support for cognitive, language, and social development, and specific instruction must be provided to:

. . . stimulate verbal interaction; to enrich children's vocabularies; to encourage talk about books; to provide practice with the sound structure of words; to develop knowledge about print, including the production and recognition of letters; and to generate familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading. (Snow et al., 1998, p. 9)

It is through the development of these skills that preschool children acquire the language and literacy skills necessary to become fluent readers.

Ijalba (2015) defined language acquisition as a set of abilities young children develop at various times including background knowledge, vocabulary, phonology, dialogue, sentence structure, and the functions of reading and writing. Children who experience a difficulty in acquiring language and literacy skills are more likely to exhibit literacy difficulties during the school years (Bishop & Adams, 1990). According to Bishop and Adams (1990), phonological competence at the start of kindergarten accounted for future reading outcomes, and a delay in phonological processing, a significant emergent literacy skill, often resulted in reading delays.

Identifying specific literacy practices that will have a positive impact on the development of language and literacy skills sets the foundation for future literacy success when children begin formal schooling. Learning how to read requires a wide-range of both language-based and literacy-specific skills. Preschool-aged children are in need of appropriate instruction and exposure to a variety of skills including vocabulary, comprehension, and phonological skills (Kaiser & Hemmeter, 2015). The timeline of developing these crucial skills varies widely; therefore, the amount of instruction and

exposure needed for a child to successfully acquire the necessary language and literacy skills differ in every individual situation.

A number of early literacy skills benefit preschool-aged children, such as identifying letters and sounds, understanding print concepts and conventions, developing phonological awareness, and acquiring oral language and early writing skills (Koralek, 2014). Along with those academic skills, acquiring executive functioning skills—skills that enable children to focus attention, remember instructions, stay organized, and juggle multiple tasks (Center on the Developing Child, 2016)—is a crucial aspect of school readiness for preschool-aged children. Shaul and Schwartz (2014) studied 54 children between the ages of five and six from four different kindergarten programs and found a correlation between executive functions and school readiness. While executive functioning skills is only one aspect of school readiness, inhibition, self-regulation, and cognitive flexibility are all important aspects of a child’s development. These executive functioning skills, along with acquiring early literacy and language skills, contribute to academic success when children begin elementary school (Shaul & Schwartz, 2014).

Furthermore, Lonigan, Schatschneider, and Westberg (2008) found several aspects of literacy that are strong predictors of a child’s literacy ability. They conducted three studies involving a total of 348 children where correlations for predictions of reading comprehension at the kindergarten level were examined. These early literacy skills include alphabetic knowledge; phonological awareness; concepts about print; oral language; writing or writing name; and rapid naming of letters, digits, objects, and colors. The acquisition of the skills in early childhood is the strongest predictor of developing decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling skills later on. The skills are usually

present at a very young age, which supports the idea that exposing young children to such aspects of language and literacy throughout early childhood will significantly impact their abilities as readers.

The National Reading Panel (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) conducted the most comprehensive evidence-based review of how children learn to read. Their findings suggest that children, during the early childhood years, should be explicitly taught the following skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency vocabulary, and comprehension. Specifically for preschool-aged children, phonemic awareness skills, such as blending and segmenting, are the most beneficial to the process of learning to read (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). The skills have been determined to be vital when preparing students for literacy instruction in formal schooling.

The research regarding early language and literacy acquisition is helping the researcher understand how reading and writing develops, which was helpful for conducting this research study and identifying aspects of parent involvement that contribute to the development of these skills.

**Family involvement in early childhood.** Family involvement in early childhood benefits the child, family, and school staff (Epstein, 2001). Research has shown that parent involvement in their child's education, beginning in early childhood, enhances social skills and academic competence (Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010; Sheldon & Galindo, 2012). Parent-child relationships and parent participation both relate to positive outcomes in a child's education. Parents have opportunities to nurture their child's growth and development in the home. By being involved in their child's

education, parents create meaningful partnerships and relationships with teachers and are able to continually advocate for their child and provide the best care possible to their children (NAEYC, 2016).

Parent involvement in the early years of a child's life, both at home and in their child's education, must be meaningful to benefit both the children and the family. Zhang (2015) conducted a study on the impact of parent involvement on children's learning and development. The study included 23 participants, a mix of both teachers and parents, in which interviews were conducted, and the findings suggested that a combination of desirability, practicality, and effectuality determined meaningfulness in parent-teacher relationships. Parent-school relationships were meaningful to the families because they wanted, needed, or liked the experiences (Zhang, 2015). To have effective and meaningful parent-child learning experiences, the activity should support the child and should be desirable, practical, and effectual.

***The importance of home-school relationships to early childhood development.***

Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, and Yildirim (2015) conducted a study including both students and their parents to examine the impact parent involvement had on the students' literacy development. Approximately 22 students in each grade participated in the study. The results concluded that parents who participated in the school-based parent involvement plan had children who demonstrated higher levels of foundational literacy competencies. The *Fast Start* parental involvement program being examined in this study revolved around incorporating parents in different aspects of literacy development at home. Parents were given strategies and resources to use with their child in the home. These skills include rhyming, reading, and word play/word study. Although this study focused

strictly on one school's program, the results showed a significant impact on children's literacy development when parents participated in meaningful literacy activities with their children at home (Crosby et al., 2015).

It is during the early childhood years when parents can also build positive and meaningful school-family relationships. Nitecki (2015) examined three best practices for building integrated school-family partnerships at the preschool level that included: fostering multidimensional relationships, creating a welcoming school environment, and enhancing parents' cognitions about school. The successful multidimensional relationships went far beyond just parents being present at conferences, activities, and occasional volunteering (Nitecki, 2015). The successful relationships were deep, supportive, and included all parents. The welcoming environment provided an ideal climate for building positive relationships by continually educating parents about the development of their child. The educational opportunities provided to parents included academic and social-emotional needs. Through this process, parents became excited and empowered to model at home what was being done at school (Nitecki, 2015).

Specific sociocultural family attributes such as attitudes, parental age, employment status, and engagement have also been reported to be an indicator of literacy and language development in young children. Specifically in families from disadvantaged areas, family attributes (attitudes, parental age, employment status, and engagement) and attitudes have been found to affect the literacy and language outcome of young children. Rodriguez et al. (2009) examined the frequency of literacy activities, the quality of the mother's engagement with children, access to age-appropriate learning materials, and family characteristics in families all living at or below the poverty level.

The study concluded that children with enriched literacy environments performed at levels much higher than peers with low literacy experiences throughout their first three years of life. Similarly, maternal age, maternal education, maternal employment, and birth order all contributed to the early language and literacy development of young children. One of the major predictors of language and literacy development is the quality of speech mothers used when interacting with their children. Language skills are enhanced by rich and engaging conversations, while, on the contrary, children who are not engaging in meaningful conversations are at a disadvantage in this area. All in all, for children from low-income families, these findings highlight the enormous disparities of language and literacy development in the first three years of life (Rodriguez et al., 2009).

*Evidence-based practices in early childhood programs.* Craig-Unkefer (2014) asserted that multiple strategies can be used in the home environment to assist in promoting language and literacy development. Encouraging vocabulary use through dramatic play, role-play, and manipulative materials are all options for promoting vocabulary development. By simply engaging in play, parents are creating opportunities for conversation and encouraging vocabulary use (Craig-Unkefer, 2014). Craig-Unkefer (2014) presented another strategy that is significant to early language and literacy development and that is supporting the adult learners present in the child's lives. Offering coaching through seminars and workshops is one way early childhood centers can inform parents of their role in their child's literacy development as well as provide resources to do so. Another strategy is to model parent-child interactions that encourage language use through play. Support and reinforcement should be available for parents whenever they are taught new strategies to use with their children (Craig-Unkefer, 2014).

*Challenges of parent involvement in early childhood.* One of the most difficult aspects of involving parents in a child's education is the lack of continuity between home and school literacy practices. Parents are often hesitant to work with their young children on academic skills for fear of teaching them differently than they are being taught in their early childhood center or program. For example, Schick (2014) examined 127 Latino preschoolers enrolled in a Head Start program to determine the effect of continuity on their language and literacy development. The study concluded that children who experience a lack of continuity between home and school have higher literacy outcomes and score higher on assessments measuring emergent literacy. The results were somewhat surprising, as one may think that continuity between home and school would be beneficial for literacy development. However, children scoring higher as a result of a lack of home and school continuity is a result of them being exposed to diverse book sharing styles, different discussion techniques, and a wider repertoire of styles both in the home and in the classroom. The results suggest that early literacy practices do not need to be limited to traditional literacy practices and that discontinuity in certain emergent literacy practices can lead to positive outcomes for children (Schick, 2014). Nontraditional methods of engaging children are also beneficial for developing early literacy skills, in addition to the more traditional and dominant practices such as read-alouds and book discussions. Hence, parents not in the mainstream can provide quality learning experiences for their children.

Kocyigit (2015) discussed the problems some early childhood education centers face when attempting to involve parents in preschool. Kocyigit (2015) found that the following factors contributed to a lack of parental involvement in preschool:

unwillingness to participate, a lack of time, too many obligations for families, a mismatch between information given and attitudes of the parents, and negative attitudes on the part of the parents. Teachers attempted to overcome these issues in several ways including speaking about the importance of preschool education and parent involvement, adjusting times of meetings, receiving help from school counselors, and trying to involve parents in decision making. This study concluded that the more parents were present in the school setting, the easier it was to overcome some of the challenges mentioned above. Home visits were also used as an option to meet parents, have discussions, and attempt in getting parents more active in their child's preschool (Kocyigit, 2015). While many challenges exist and need to be acknowledged, it is evident that parents play a critical role in their child's development, and early childhood education centers need to find ways to engage and inform parents.

Several different factors must be taken into consideration when early childhood programs attempt to reach out and involve parents in education, and these factors can present themselves as challenges when attempting to involve parents in their child's education. One of those factors is the education level and involvement of one or both parents or guardians. Curenton and Justice (2008) examined the literacy development of children living in a low socio-economic area in an isolated community. Through the use of questionnaires and standardized assessments, they discovered that children with more educated mothers scored significantly higher on all three subscales of a standardized assessment measuring early reading ability. They also discovered that more educated mothers reported a stronger belief in the importance of early literacy than those mothers who were less educated. All in all, students who live in areas of low-socioeconomic

status and have less educated mothers are at risk for poor pre-literacy skills. These students are in need of high-quality instruction in developing their emergent literacy skills in order to be successful when they enter formal schooling. There is a high need for educating parents of young children in low socio-economic communities about the importance of early literacy development as well as for providing strategies and resources for parents to support their children's early literacy development at home (Curenton & Justice, 2008).

Patterns of parental education and early literacy development have several implications for literacy programs and early childhood education centers. One implication is the involvement of fathers in the literacy development of young children. According to Morgan, Nutbrown, and Hannon (2009), fathers' visible participation in programs and at early childhood centers is low; however, they are more likely to be present, visible, and actively engaged during home visits. This suggests that while fathers are involved and play some role in children's literacy development, they are not visible in attending programs outside of the home. Morgan et al. (2009) also found a strong positive correlation between fathers who were reported to have a low involvement in children's literacy activities and children who receive free lunch (live in a low-income household). These findings indicate a need for education centers and programs to work closely with families to determine the best way to involve parents and families, specifically fathers, in the early literacy development of young children.

Understanding the methods and strategies that contribute to families and early childhood education programs working together, the significance of these relationships, and the challenges that both parents and the programs face will all contribute to the

research of how parent involvement in the Early Beginning's program is impacting children's development. This literature gives the researcher insight as to the numerous benefits of school-parent relationships and how they contribute to the development of early language and literacy skills.

### **Early Childhood Education Program Models**

Early childhood education programs use a number of home-school models to increase parent involvement. The following early childhood models all attempt to educate and involve parents in their child's education throughout the preschool years.

**Head Start home-school model.** The Head Start program was created and authorized by the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007. The Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve pregnant women and children from birth to five years old. The program provides early, continuous, intensive, and comprehensive child development and family support services to low-income children and their families and to pregnant women and their families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a). This program attempts to improve access to early childhood education services for families who may otherwise not receive the education and support needed.

Head Start encourages the role of parents in early childhood education. Head Start programs "build relationships with families that support positive parent-child relationships, family well-being, and connections to peers and community" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015b, para. 7). The program embodies the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) framework described as:

A road map for progress in achieving the kinds of outcomes that lead to positive and enduring change for children and families. The PFCE Framework was developed in partnership with programs, families, experts, and the National

Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement. It is a research-based approach to program change that shows how an agency can work together as a whole—across systems and service areas— to promote parent and family engagement and children’s learning and development. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a, para. 3)

The Head Start framework revolves around parent, family, and community engagement. The Head Start programs acknowledge and value partnerships with families and recognize the significance these partnerships have on the education of young children. They continue to adjust their programs to best meet the needs of the children, families, and communities they serve.

**Epstein’s framework.** Epstein’s (2001) framework on parent involvement evolved from examining parent engagement from preschool through high school. This framework has been adopted by early childhood education programs to help assist in promoting family involvement and providing options for families. This framework includes six types of involvement:

1. Parenting—home environments that support achievement
2. Communicating—two-way information sharing between school and home
3. Volunteering—helping with planned activities in and out-side the classroom
4. Learning at home—parents assisting children in the learning process at home
5. Decision making—parent involvement in school decisions
6. Collaborating with the community—use of local services and resources to help children learn (Epstein, 2001, p. 25).

Epstein’s (2001) framework also includes four components: staff and family communication, family-child collaborations, teacher-family relationship building, and community connections. According to Epstein (2001), effective teachers and early

childhood administrators work with families and utilize the specific components that work best for each family. This partnership strategy allows the families to decide how much they want to be involved and in what capacities (Epstein, 2001).

**Montessori model.** Maria Montessori's approach to early childhood education revolves around experiential learning and the fact that this type of learning leads to a deeper understand of language, mathematics, science, social interactions, and more. Montessori is a method of education based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play. In Montessori classrooms, children make creative choices in their learning, while the classroom and the teacher offer age-appropriate activities to guide the process. Children work in groups and individually to discover and explore knowledge of the world and to develop their maximum potential (Montessori Northwest, 2015).

The Montessori model provides a safe and nurturing environment; promotes trust in young children and the world around them; develops confidence in emerging abilities; offers opportunities to gain a sense of independence; and helps with the development of gross motor coordination, fine motor skills, and language skills (Montessori Northwest, 2015). This model stresses the significance of parent involvement to the development of early language and literacy skills. The Montessori model works with parents to create a home environment that encourages exploration and learning, create high but realistic expectations for children both inside and outside of school, and lastly, become involved in their child's education at school and in the community (Montessori Northwest, 2015).

Examining the similarities and differences between the Head Start, Epstein, and Montessori models informs this research by allowing the researcher to explore the important aspects of parent involvement and the best practices for early childhood centers

to involve parents. These three models inform the current research study by highlighting how a variety of early childhood programs work with parents to both educate and involve them and how these relationships contribute to the development of young children.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### **Introduction**

The primary purpose of this study was to determine how the Early Beginnings Head Start program supports families in the development of early language and literacy skills of their preschool-aged children. These skills include narrative skills (e.g., telling stories together, pretend play, storytelling, etc.), letter knowledge, print awareness, phonological awareness, print motivation, and vocabulary development. It is imperative that children enter kindergarten equipped with the skills necessary to be successful readers and writers. This study examined the variety of ways Early Beginnings Head Start program facilitates parent involvement and how they support families in developing their children's language and literacy skills.

Unfortunately, children who enter school with little or no early childhood education are often in need of remedial education from the very beginning. These children are also more likely to need remedial education throughout much of their formal schooling (Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein, & Weikart, 1984). With research showing that early childhood education is a critical aspect of a young child's development (Skarda, 2014), early childhood education centers must find effective ways of facilitating parent involvement so parents can contribute to the development of their children's early language and literacy skills.

This research study investigated how one Head Start program, Early Beginnings, facilitates parent involvement, specifically in the areas of language and literacy

development, and how parents utilize the strategies and resources they are provided.

The following three questions guided the research:

1. How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?
2. What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills?
  - 2a. What challenges does the Early Beginnings Head Start center encounter in supporting families in these areas?
  - 2b. To what extent are Early Beginnings Head Start teachers seeing these practices being implemented in their students' homes?
3. How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?

This chapter discusses the overall study design, the methods that were used to answer the study's research questions, the research site, participation selection, data collection methods, and data analysis methods. This chapter also highlights the ethical considerations that were encountered by the researcher.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

Qualitative research methods were utilized to analyze the practices (e.g., parent communication, distribution of resources, and parent education) of the early childhood center over a period of time. Qualitative research was utilized because it provided the researcher an opportunity to explore the communication practices of Early Beginnings; “the intent [of using qualitative research methods] is not to generalize to a population, but

to develop an in- depth exploration of a central phenomenon. Thus, to best understand this phenomenon, the qualitative researcher purposefully or intentionally selects individuals and sites” (Creswell, 2014, p. 154). Through qualitative research, the researcher was able to explore the home-school practices of the Head Start program in- depth and was able to develop an understanding of how the center utilizes home-school practices to benefit the development of young children. In addition, qualitative methods were appropriate for this study because the researcher developed relationships with the participants through in-depth interviewing and observations (at the center and their homes) during the research timeframe.

A qualitative research design was most effective for the researcher to get a thorough understanding of the current practices of the Early Beginnings Head Start program. Qualitative research designs can provide more in-depth information and allow the researcher to observe, describe, and interpret the setting (Hoepfl, 1997). Qualitative methods help provide rich descriptions of a phenomenon and enhance the understanding of a particular setting or event (Hoepfl, 1997). For the purpose of this research, using qualitative methods also helped identify themes among participant responses.

Qualitative research methods used in this study included: purposeful sampling, one-on-one interviews, observations, and surveys. Maximal variation sampling was the purposeful sampling strategy used. Maximal variation sampling allowed the researcher to sample individuals that differ on some characteristic or trait (Creswell, 2012).

By observing and interviewing Early Beginnings Head Start educators, the researcher determined how this particular program supports families in the area of language and literacy development, the specific family support models used at the center,

the challenges the educators experience in working with the families, and the extent to which educators see the practices being utilized in the home. Surveys with parents and families also provided the researcher with information regarding how families are utilizing the strategies that are taught/provided in the home. These qualitative methods are described in more detail below.

## **Site and Population**

### **Site Description**

Twenty-one community-based locations in the tri-county area of a northeastern region of the United States offer Head Start educational services to children ages 3 to 5 years old. These programs currently serve urban, rural, and suburban areas. The Head Start facility that was examined for the purpose of this research is located in a major city in the northeastern region of the United States. The specific Head Start location where the research was conducted is referred to using the pseudonym Early Beginnings. Head Start provides a variety of different programs for children and families: part-day school year, pre-K Counts, and home-based services. By focusing on a smaller population of teachers, parents, and children in one specific Head Start center, the researcher was able to gain more in-depth knowledge and understanding of the services offered to families and how families are utilizing these resources and was able to conduct on-site and off-site observations in the children's homes.

The program that was examined for this research was a part-day preschool program that served children 3-5 years old. Children attended this program four days a week for three and a half hours each day. Children in this program received comprehensive services, including educational, medical, dental, nutritional, and family

social services (Keystone Human Services, 2016). The researcher chose this specific facility because of the location and accessibility to the program.

### **Site Access**

This site was used in an effort to work closely with one center and examine their policies and procedures working with families. Because the research site is an education facility, the researcher obtained all required clearances required to enter and observe a child-care setting. The researcher contacted the director of the Head Start programs in this region who granted the researcher access to observe, interview, and survey faculty, staff and family members.

### **Participant Description**

The Early Beginnings Head Start program serves low-income families and children ages 3 to 5 years old from this region. There are two part-time preschool programs at this center. The children in the classroom ranged from 3 to 5 years old. Mandatory home-visits, completed by a Head Start teacher, are also a requirement of the part-time preschool program. The researcher was able to obtain consent from 12 families, out of a possible 16 from one classroom. Twelve families completed surveys for this research study and specific inclusion criteria (including a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds as well as two-parent and single-parent families) were used to further explore several families. The researcher originally planned on inviting five to eight families for additional interviews and home visits; however, due to scheduling conflicts, only five families were able participate in these activities. One administrator and the four part-time preschool teachers (two from each classroom) also participated in the study. Consent was obtained from the administrators and teachers at Early Beginnings as well as

the families participating in the research study. Table 1 displays a description of participants.

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

Role of Participant	Participant Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Language(s) Spoken
Administrator	Mrs. Smith	Unknown	White	English
Teacher	Mrs. Jones	Unknown	White	English
Teacher	Mrs. Martin	Unknown	White	English
Teacher	Mrs. Kelly	Unknown	White	English
Teacher	Mrs. Brown	Unknown	White	English
Parent	Mrs. Williams	20-29	Latino/Hispanic	Spanish
Parent	Mrs. Davis	30-39	White	English
Parent	Mrs. Wilson	30-39	Other	Arabic, English
Parent	Mrs. Thomas	20-29	Latino/Hispanic	Spanish, English
Parent	Mr. Jack	20-29	African American	English
Parent	Parent #1 <sup>1</sup>	30-39	White	English
Parent	Parent #2	30-39	African American	English
Parent	Parent #3	20-29	White	English
Parent	Parent #4	20-29	African American	English
Parent	Parent #5	20-29	White	English
Parent	Parent #6	30-39	Latino/Hispanic	Spanish
Grandparent	Parent #7	50 or older	African American	English

<sup>1</sup> Parents #1-7 were survey participants only, therefore no pseudonyms were given.

## **Research Methods**

The data collection tools used for this research study were one-on-one interviews, observations, and surveys.

### **Descriptions of Methods Used**

**Semi-structured interviews.** Qualitative research questions require exploration and often, simple how or what questions can be used so the researcher can get a better and more thorough understanding of the environment and experiences of the participants (Patton, 2002). To explore the extent that the Head Start program supports families in early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development, semi-structured interviews with the administrator and teachers (who are also the home visitors) of the center were conducted. These interviews with the educators and administrator allowed the researcher to understand what family support models the program utilized to assist families in supporting early language and literacy development in the home, the challenges educators face when trying to involve parents, as well as the extent to which educators see these strategies being utilized in the home. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an administrator of Early Beginnings, the part-time preschool teachers, who also serve as home visitors, and four families (see Appendix A). The interview with the administrator provided the researcher with information about the current parent involvement model and the extent to which Early Beginnings utilizes a parent involvement model. The administrator was also able to provide information regarding her opinions on the effectiveness of the parent involvement model in regard to the development of early language and literacy skills. The interview with the teachers (also home visitors) provided the researcher with information regarding the extent to

which they saw these strategies being implemented in the home and how they were impacting the child at school. Lastly, parent interviews provided the researcher with the parents' perspectives as to how Early Beginnings worked with parents and families and the effectiveness (in their point of view) of the parent involvement model. Initial interviews with an administrator and most of the part-time preschool teachers were conducted within the first week of the research phase at Early Beginnings.

The interviews were semi-structured and included a series of open-ended questions designed to elicit a discussion and in-depth answers from the participants. Following guidelines from Creswell (2014), questions were designed so the educators felt comfortable and elaborated as much as possible. Prompts, such as "tell me more" or "can you elaborate on that" were utilized to elicit broad responses and encourage the educators to share as much information as possible. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate method for this study because these kinds of interviews allowed for two-way communication and allowed the researcher to ask more specific follow-up questions, if necessary. Kvale (1996) explains that a benefit of the qualitative research interview is that the interview seeks to identify central themes and gather a deep understanding of what the interviewee is saying.

**Survey methods.** In addition to interview questions, a survey was used so the researcher could collect data from parents and families who have children attending Early Beginnings Head Start program. A survey can examine current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and practices (Creswell, 2012). Surveys are a beneficial tool to use with families because they are flexible, allow parents to answer in their own time, and are a dependable research method. The families who consented to participate were surveyed

regarding the support they received and strategies they utilized in the home (see Appendix B). The survey informed the researcher as to the parents' opinions about the following topics: what Early Beginnings is currently doing to involve parents/families in their child's education and development, the effectiveness of Early Beginnings parent involvement, how the parent involvement model is contributing (or not) to the development of their children's early language and literacy skills, and how the parents are utilizing the strategies or information provided from Early Beginnings in their home.

Surveys were distributed to all Head Start families, who consented to participate, with children enrolled in the part-time preschool program. The families represented in the study included children and families living at or below poverty level, single-parent families, families with multiple children and multilingual families. The surveys distributed to families were designed to measure their attitudes and behaviors towards the home-school model of the Head Start program. Survey items included questions that specifically examine how parents and families are utilizing the strategies both taught and provided by the part-time preschool program in their home.

**Field observations.** Field observations were also utilized to keep record of the researcher's understanding of the people and practices that were the focus of the research. Field notes lend themselves to the observed information being used as data and will help to detail the procedures and practices that took place daily in the early childhood center (Creswell, 2012). Field observations took place in two settings, at the Early Beginnings Head Start program and in the families' homes. Field observations were used during the three workshops as well as the three home visit observations. The researcher conducted observations while school was in session from March 2017 to September 2017. During

each observation, field notes were taken that included information regarding the number of attendees (including demographics such as age, gender and race), a physical map of the facility, classroom or meeting place, a portrayal of how teachers interacted with parents during pick-up and/or drop-off (if applicable), and a description of the activities being observed, specifically detailing activities of interest (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). Field notes also included observations of teacher-parent interactions, parent meetings, conferences, and daily communication practices. A Home Visit Observation Protocol (see Appendix C) was used during the home visit observations in an effort to highlight the early literacy skills and or strategies occurring during the home visits. Lastly, the researcher collected relevant documents that support home-school communication, such as handouts, newsletters, emails, etc. Table 2 summarizes the alignment between the research questions and data collection methods used.

Table 2

*Research Alignment*

Research Question	Data Collection Method(s)
1. How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field observations</li> <li>• Interviews</li> </ul>
2. What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically language and literacy skills?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field observations</li> <li>• Interviews</li> </ul>
2a. What challenges does the Early Beginnings Head Start program encounter in supporting families in these areas?	
2b. To what extent are the teachers seeing these practices being implemented in their students' home?	
3. How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Interviews</li> </ul>

Once the initial survey was completed, a smaller sample size of families was chosen, using specific inclusion criteria so a diverse mix of families was represented. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select families representing a diverse group of families, including both two-parent and single-parent families with a mix of cultural and racial backgrounds. Four families were chosen for interviews and the researcher also observed three families during home visits. The field observations were completed to better understand how these practices, which are being presented at the school, are being transferred in the home.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed verbatim. After the interviews were transcribed, they were coded so the researcher could identify common themes. Content analysis was the coding method utilized so the researcher could identify themes and make judgments. Ryan and Bernard (2000) stated content analysis as being a “major coding tradition” and that through producing a matrix where a set of codes is applied to qualitative data (i.e., written texts), codes of interest that have been previously discovered allowed the researcher to organize the data and then summarize and synthesize the significant aspects of the interviews. The content analysis process the researcher followed included the following steps: (a) summary (preserve the essential content of the text, paraphrase, and generalize information), (b) explication (explaining, clarifying, and annotating the material), and (c) structuring (determine the unit of analysis, extract the relevant information from the text by using a category system) (Mayring, 2000). The researcher created codes for major themes that emerged from the data sources: semi-structured interviews with the administrator, teachers, and parents;

surveys administered to all of the families; field notes collected during field observations; and relevant artifacts.

Specifically, when coding the field notes, pattern coding was used so the researcher could identify trends, patterns, and relationships. Pattern coding allowed the research to “pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 54). By coding the field notes through pattern coding, the researcher was able to develop major themes from the data.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity were factors the researcher was concerned with throughout this study, and several steps were taken to ensure reliability and validity in this particular study. To maintain the reliability and validity of the study, the researcher used more than one method to collect data. The researcher triangulated the data so the information could confirm or disconfirm certain findings when conducting the analysis. Golafshani (2003) explained that triangulation is a strategy that can improve reliability and validity of research findings, for example, “engaging multiple methods, such as, observation, interviews and recordings will lead to more valid, reliable and diverse construction of realities” (p. 604). By using multiple methods, the researcher took steps to strengthen the research study.

Content analysis methods were used to confirm similar findings across all sources of data. The researcher also utilized member checking, which means she engaged in conversations with both the administrator and teachers after the interviews were transcribed in an effort to improve the accuracy of the study.

### **Stages of Data Collection**

The first step in the data collection process was to send out an advertisement. Two versions of an advertisement were sent, one to educators and one to families the researcher was attempting to recruit for the research study. Since only four teachers and one administrator participated in the study, an email advertisement was sent to them, while families received a paper advertisement. This advertisement gave potential participants an overview of the study, the purpose, a timeline, expectations of participants, and any risks or benefits associated with participating in the study.

After obtaining Internal Review Board (IRB) approval from Drexel University, informed consent forms were sent to both the educators involved in the part-time preschool program and the families who had children attending the part-time preschool program. Times were scheduled to begin initial interviews with administrators and teachers of the part-time preschool program. One administrator and four teachers were interviewed.

To begin data collection, the initial surveys were distributed to all families who had children enrolled in one of the part-time preschool program classrooms (16 families) and who consented to participate in the study. After the initial surveys, purposeful sampling was utilized and the researcher selected a smaller sample of families to be more closely examined. In this case, the researcher chose to more closely examine families who differed demographically by race, age, or marital status. These families were determined within the first few weeks of the researcher's time observing the program, and semi-structured interviews and or field observations in the home took place with these chosen families.

Observations were conducted on a weekly basis during March, April, and September 2017 in one preschool classroom. During this time, the researcher spent about two hours a week in the preschool classroom, observing workshops, or observing home visits. Field notes during this time included an account of events taking place in the classroom; what was said in classroom conversation and discussions; how people behaved, reacted, and communicated when parents were present in the classroom; and the researcher's subjective responses to what was observed. The researcher also attended events for parents offered by Head Start throughout this time.

Additionally, the researcher had an opportunity to follow up with the administrator and teachers, at the end of the data collection stage, to obtain clarity. Table 3 illustrates the data collection and study completion timeline.

Table 3

*Data Collection and Study Completion Timeline*

Month	Action Steps
December 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal hearing</li> </ul>
January 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began IRB process</li> <li>• Submitted IRB forms</li> </ul>
February 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Received approval from IRB</li> <li>• Sent out informed consent to employees, parents and families with children in the part-time preschool program</li> <li>• Sent out advertisements to educators and families</li> <li>• Began scheduling initial interviews with employees of Head Start</li> </ul>

Table 3 (continued)

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March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sent out surveys to parents and families with children in the part-time preschool program that consented to participate in the study.</li> <li>• Began observations/writing field notes</li> <li>• Collected initial survey information and analyzed data</li> <li>• Chose smaller sample size of parents and families for closer study.</li> <li>• Contacted these parents and families and set-up time to interview and/or attend a home visit</li> <li>• Continued observations/writing field notes</li> </ul>
April 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conducted interviews with parents and families and attended home visits</li> <li>• Continued observations/writing field notes</li> </ul>
September 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed parent interviews and home visit observations</li> <li>• Transcribed interviews with educators and parents/families</li> <li>• Completed content analysis of all interviews</li> <li>• Completed pattern coding of all field notes</li> </ul>
October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began writing Chapter 4</li> </ul>
November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed Chapter 4</li> <li>• Began writing Chapter 5</li> </ul>
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed writing Chapter 5</li> </ul>
January 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepared for final defense</li> <li>• Completed final dissertation draft and send to committee members</li> <li>• Completed final defense</li> </ul>

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### **Ethical Considerations**

The first ethical consideration was to ensure informed consent was obtained from all subjects. This included families and staff members participating in the part-time preschool program. During this process, it was imperative that a clear purpose of the

study was shared with all participants. Also, IRB permission was secured before beginning any of the research.

In this particular study, all subjects remained anonymous. Participant confidentiality was crucial, especially in a study that dealt with young children and their families. Lastly, since this study required prolonged observation, it was important the researcher be cognizant of her impact and minimize disruption of the physical setting (Creswell, 2014).

In an effort to de-identify information about the early childhood center and the parents or families that participated in the study, pseudonyms were used throughout the research. There was no harm in participating in this study, and participants could choose to withdraw from questioning at any time.

Lastly, in an effort to minimize any concerns, there was a time for survey and interview participants to ask questions regarding the research. Surveys were not distributed and interviews were not conducted until all questions were answered and participants felt confident in their role. Once the proposal hearing was finished, the researcher worked on all the required application and forms for Drexel IRB approval and was approved to begin research in February 2017.

## Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

### Introduction

In describing the importance of parent involvement in a child's education, Epstein (2001) emphasized the importance of helping families establish home environments that support learning, establish ongoing and effective communication between home and school, involve parents in decisions regarding their child's academic development, and utilize community resources to strengthen a child's academic progress. The participants in this study described a variety of ways Early Beginnings Head Start works to engage parents in an effort to improve the overall success of students in their program.

Participants described how Early Beginnings works to bridge two central contexts in a child's young life, the home and school setting, and while each of these individual settings can influence the development a young child, "together the home and school contexts interact to offer a unique influence" (Nokali et al., 2010, para. 5).

This qualitative research study investigated the following questions:

1. How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?
2. What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills?
  - 2a. What challenges does the Early Beginnings Head Start center encounter in supporting families in these areas?

- 2b. To what extent are Early Beginnings Head Start teachers seeing these practices being implemented in their students' homes?
3. How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?

In this chapter, data findings are presented in connection to major themes that emerged from the study, primarily from participant surveys, participant interviews, and researcher observations. Content analysis was the coding method used by the researcher to identify major themes in the data. The content analysis process the researcher used included summarizing the data, annotating the material, and lastly, extracting relevant information from the text using a category system (Mayring, 2000). Survey data are presented first, followed by findings from school and home observations and interviews with the participants. In addition to sharing the results of the data, the researcher also cites examples as to how these findings both coincide and differ from previous research.

## **Findings**

### **Parent Survey**

Sixteen parents participated in the study. At the beginning of the data collection phase, all 16 parents who consented to participate were given a survey. Twelve of the 16 parents returned completed surveys. None of the families who returned the surveys had children attending another daycare program, and all the families had children enrolled only at Early Beginnings. Questions 1-6 on the survey asked parents to fill out background information about themselves and their families. Questions 7-10 asked the participant if they felt welcomed in their child's school and if they attended any of the workshops offered by the program. Questions 11-19 asked parents about specific literacy skills they participated in at home, such as reading with their child, introducing new

words, and practicing writing. Lastly, Questions 20-22 asked parents to rate their level of involvement in the program and to rate their feelings towards how well the program involves parents.

To summarize the demographic information, nine families had one child enrolled in the program, one family had two children enrolled in the program, and two families had three children enrolled in the program. Eight of the families did not speak any other languages, besides English, while four of the families spoke other languages at home. The survey participants were mostly mothers (10 out of 12), while one father and one grandmother also completed the survey. Most of the participants' ages ranged from 30 to 39, while four participants were 20-29 and one participant was older than 50. Lastly, four participants identified as White, four participants identified as Black, three participants identified as Latino, and one participant identified as Other. Table 4 displays an overview of the findings from the survey data that relate specifically to the parents' attitude of the program and the specific literacy skills taking place in the home. The survey questions and responses are also presented in the table as well. Eleven parents/families responded to all the survey questions, and one family did not respond to all of the questions on the survey.

Table 4

*Overview of Survey Findings*

When you visit your child's school, do you feel welcome?	All the time 11	Most of the time 0	Some of the time 1	None of the time 0
Are written communications from the school, such as report cards and newsletters, available in a language you understand?	All the time 12	Most of the time 0	Some of the time 0	None of the time 0
Did you attend any workshops on early language and literacy development offered by the Head Start program this school year?	Yes 5	No 7		
If so, to what extent did you find the workshops helpful? <i>*five parents (who indicated they attended workshops) responded to this survey question</i>	Very helpful 5	Somewhat helpful 0	Not helpful 0	
Do you read stories to your child at home?	Yes 11	No 1		
Do you read to your child at home on a regular basis (at least 3 nights a week?)	Yes 11	No 1		
To what extent do you use strategies provided by Head Start to work with your child at home?	All learned from HS 3	Most learned from HS 9	None learned from HS 0	
Do you go over letters and sounds of the alphabet with your child?	Yes 12	No 0		
Do you work with your child on sounding out letters or words?	Yes 12	No 0		
Do you practice writing with your child?	Yes 10	No 2		
Do you talk about new words and word meanings with your child?	Yes 12	No 0		
Do you have frequent conversations with your child about different experiences they had during the day?	Yes 12	No 0		
Do you feel you are involved in your child's education?	Yes 11	No 0		
How would you rate your level of involvement?	Heavily involved 8	Somewhat involved 3	Not involved 0	
How pleased are you with this Head Start's program effort to involve parents?	Very satisfied 9	Somewhat satisfied 2	Not satisfied 0	

The survey data show that the majority of parents feel welcome at the school and are very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with the school's effort to involve them in their child's education. The survey also asked parents about specific literacy practices that occur in the home, such as reading, going over letters of the alphabet, writing, and sounding out words. All the parents indicated that they review letters of the alphabet with their child, sound out words, discuss the meaning of new words, and have frequent conversations with their child. Most parents (10/12) also practiced writing with their child. Lastly, all the parents indicated that either all or most of the strategies they used

when working with their child at home were learned from the Early Beginnings Head Start program.

### **Major Themes from Interviews and Observations**

Five major themes were identified across participant interviews and observations (through the use of field notes and the home observation protocol<sup>2</sup>) conducted during home visits and parent workshops: (a) communicating expectations, (b) establishing relationships, (c) benefits of meeting in the home, (d) challenges of parent involvement, and (e) implementation of home and school resources. The first theme of communicating expectations relates to the idea of how the Early Beginnings Head Start program communicates with and educates parents about developmentally appropriate expectations for their children. The second theme of establishing relationships suggests the important relationship between the program and the families and the variety of ways these relationships are established and reinforced. The third theme of benefits of meeting in the home pertains to the notion that there are several benefits to conducting home visits and of having the teachers visit the home of their students. The fourth theme, challenges of parent involvement, describes the many challenges faced by the parents/families, teachers, and program as a whole when trying to involve parents. Lastly, the fifth theme, variety of resources, describes how the Early Beginnings Head Start distributes educational resources and how parents and families are taught how to use them in the

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<sup>2</sup> The home visit observation protocol proved to not be as useful in terms of collecting data because the categories were too restrictive and did not capture what was present during the home visit. Most of the observations made during the home visit was outside of the protocol.

home. Table 5 presents an overview of the findings from the study and a few examples from the data that connect to each theme.

Table 5

*Overview of Themes and Examples of Findings*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Examples of Theme from the Data</b>
<b>Theme One: Communicating expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developmentally appropriate expectations</li> <li>• Educating the parents</li> <li>• Use of standards and assessments</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Two: Establishing relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building relationships with parents over two years</li> <li>• Establishing relationships before first home visit</li> <li>• Collaborative goal setting</li> <li>• Parents observing teaching practices in the classroom</li> <li>• Teacher/administration praising parents' effort</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Three: Benefits of meeting in the home</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fathers are more present</li> <li>• Parents are more comfortable in their home</li> <li>• Alerts teachers of any issues</li> <li>• Allows teachers to identify resources in the home</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Four: Challenges of parent involvement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduling/finding time</li> <li>• Language barriers</li> <li>• Education level of parents</li> <li>• Child care</li> <li>• Location of the workshops</li> <li>• Space for HS to hold workshops</li> </ul>
<b>Theme Five: Variety of resources provided to families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers stress the importance of using what you have</li> <li>• Resources distributed at home visits</li> <li>• Availability of outside resources (social services, welfare, public library, etc.)</li> <li>• Workshops for families</li> </ul>

The five themes displayed in Table 5 were evident throughout the interviews with the administrator, teachers, and parents and also through observations of both the home visits and workshops, which are further explained in the next section. In the following sections, the researcher presents the data findings in terms of the different collection methods—administrator interview, teacher interviews, parent interviews, and observations of both workshops and home visit—and how they connect to the major themes.

**Theme one: Communicating expectations.** The theme of communicating expectations pertains to the notion that the Early Beginnings Head Start program utilizes several approaches to educate and inform parents about appropriate developmental expectations. Specifically, the program aims to educate parents regarding child development and age-appropriate activities to ensure that expectations are appropriate and will benefit the child. During the interview with teachers and administrators and observations during the home visits and parent workshops, it became clear that communicating expectations was a critical component of the Early Beginnings Head Start program.

*Teacher interviews*<sup>3</sup>. Four teachers were interviewed for this study: Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Martin, Mrs. Kelly, and Mrs. Brown. All four teachers stated that clearly communicating expectations to parents made their experiences more successful, and what the teachers meant by expectations varied greatly. For example, Mrs. Jones and Mrs.

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<sup>3</sup> Four teachers were interviewed for the study, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin are co-teachers from one classroom (interview March 17, 2017) and Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown were co-teachers from the second classroom (interview September 28, 2017). The teachers were interviewed at the school and each interview lasted 10-20 minutes.

Martin shared that during home visits, they found it very important to stress to the parents what developmental skills the child has mastered or is currently mastering and the skills that need additional support. Skills needing additional support are those observed by the teacher in the school setting. All teachers utilized an assessment titled *Ages and Stages*, which is a developmental and social-emotional screening.

The *Ages and Stages* assessment is a developmental screening tool designed for use by early educators and healthcare professionals and relies on parents as experts, as the teachers are completing the majority of questions on the questionnaire based on the input of the parent. Some questions on the assessment can be completed by the teacher from observations at school. The assessment is very brief and at the conclusion of the assessment, the results are shared with the parents and used to discuss the child's growth and development. The teacher will share with the parent any concerns they have about the child's development while sharing the assessment results. Utilizing this assessment is one method the teachers use to communicate appropriate expectations to the parents. By sharing assessment results with the parents, and indicating the child's strengths and weaknesses, the teachers are able to start a conversation about age-appropriate expectations and activities.

In addition to the assessment, the teacher and parent work together to create goals for a child during the home visit. With the teacher's guidance, parents can create goals for their child around a skill they would like to see improved. Mrs. Jones explained:

We can have a parent-initiated goal, and there's a place on our goal sheet to check that it was parent-initiated. Then we come up with activities that they can do at home to work with their child using the materials they have in their home toward their goal.

While discussing the process of goal-setting, Mrs. Kelly stated:

Whenever we do their child goals at the beginning of the year, I usually only pick one that I see as important and then I let the parents pick one if they want to and say, “Okay, is there an area that you find [a need to be addressed]?” and then of course then they’ll probably work on it because it’s something that they . . . care about.

Although the purpose of the goal-setting activity was to get parents involved and create a more positive relationship, in practice, parents were reluctant to set goals during the home visits, and the majority of goals created for the children was created by the teacher. Ultimately, whether a collaborative effort or teacher initiated, the teachers at Early Beginnings used goal setting to communicate developmentally appropriate expectations to parents.

*Administrator interview*<sup>4</sup>. Mrs. Smith also stressed the importance of sharing standards and expectations with parents through newsletters and handouts. She stressed that sometimes, if parents are unaware of what is developmentally appropriate, they may expect their child to do something he or she is not capable of doing and in turn become frustrated with their child. She expressed that communication is key between the program and the parents/families to educate parents about what is developmentally appropriate for their children. Mrs. Smith stated, “[Parents], especially if either the parent has identified or the teachers have identified language and literacy goal areas, parents often want their kids to be writing. Sometimes they want them to be reading, [and] learn the alphabet.” Often times, if parents are not aware of what is

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<sup>4</sup> The administrator of the Early Beginnings Head Start program, Mrs. Smith, was interviewed on March 17, 2017 for this study. The interview was 20 minutes and took place at the school.

developmentally appropriate, they may expect their child to be proficient at a skill that they are not ready to master. Mrs. Smith continued to explain:

The teachers have to assess what their child's skills are that they've seen, and then help the parents understand what that process is for their individual child, and sometimes bring the parent down a little bit in what their expectations are.

Mrs. Smith stressed that the assessments used, such as the *Ages and Stages* assessment described above, help the teachers explain to the parents what is expected of students and what skills can be worked on in the home.

Mrs. Smith also explained that a portfolio collection is a requirement of the program:

The other thing that we do is we have a portfolio collection that we make, and there is a requirement in that portfolio that there is a writing sample. The teachers have to, in some form or the other, collect a writing sample [from the child] that they save and then give to the parent at the end of the year. That only focuses on that particular piece, but then they will show them, like, "Here's the writing sample. This was the beginning of the year. This was the middle. This was the end." Talk about the scaffolding that's happened, the change in the child's ability, as they present that to the parent.

It is through the sharing of the portfolio that the teacher and parent discuss the improvements the child has made and specific literacy skills, such as expanding ideas, letter writing, and writing stamina that parents can work on with their child at home.

Utilizing student work samples is another way the program communicates expectations to the parents so they can see first-hand the progress that has been made and the steps they can take at home to further development in this area.

***Observations from home visits***<sup>5</sup>. Teachers utilize goal setting as one way to inform parents about what they want the children to accomplish. As previously mentioned, during the first home visit, children are given specific goals that the parent is encouraged to work on in the home. Both teachers and parents create these goals. Some examples of goals that were observed throughout the home observations included goals for behavior and fine motor skills, and literacy goals, such as identifying 10 letters of the alphabet and using the pronouns he/she, him/her correctly. The goals presented by the teacher for the student are skills outlined in the PA Core Knowledge for Competencies for Early Childhood. As a result of following the State recommended competencies, parents are made aware of how the goals are developmentally appropriate and support their child's development. While the teacher creates at least one goal for each child based on developmentally appropriate skills and the needs of the individual child, parents are also asked to provide input and are given an opportunity to create a goal for their child or for their family as a whole. It is through the collaborative goal-setting process that teachers are able to communicate expectations to parents, as all the goals set for children are developmentally appropriate and address specific skills the child needs to improve.

***Observations from workshops***<sup>6</sup>. Lastly, the workshops held by Early Beginnings Head Start were another approach the program used to share expectations with parents.

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<sup>5</sup> Three families were involved in the home visit observations, Mrs. Wilson, Mrs. Thomas (who were both also interviewed for the study) and Mr. Moore.

<sup>6</sup> The number of attendees for the workshops varied, with the minimum number of parents attending being four and the maximum seven. The researcher observed three workshops, two literacy workshops and one first-aid workshop. The two literacy workshops were held on 2/21/2017 and 3/7/2017 and the first-aid workshop was held on 3/31/2017.

The literacy workshops provided parents an opportunity to learn and discuss ways they can encourage learning in their home. The workshops included strategies for enhancing literacy development in the home, such as read-alouds, literacy activities, and conversation starters. At the literacy workshops, parents were also given handouts with appropriate strategies and activities they could do with their children. For example, parents were given a pamphlet from a librarian who visited the workshop to share information. This pamphlet described a variety of ways parents can engage their young children with books. Many of the suggestions included things other than simply reading the text, such as looking at pictures and having a conversation about them, or searching through a book for a specific letter or word. The workshop coordinator reiterated expectations to parents while explaining the activities, for example, when she distributed a handout to trace letters, the workshop coordinator stated that children may not be able to stay in the lines because it is not age appropriate.

In summary, the assessment tool, Ages and Stages, was one of the main methods teachers used to communicate expectations. The assessment provided data the teachers could share with parents regarding where the child should be and where the child is currently performing. Goal setting was another key finding, as this took place at every home visit, and the teachers ensured that the goals created for each individual child are appropriate to his or her needs. Lastly, the workshops provided the families with developmentally appropriate activities they can use to engage children in literacy practices at home. By clearly establishing age-appropriate expectations, goals for the children based on specific needs, and providing resources and or activities that parents

can do with their child in the home, the program is assisting families in supporting their child's overall early language and literacy development.

**Theme two: Establishing relationships.** In an effort to involve parents and families in the education of their children, Early Beginnings Head Start strives to establish positive relationships with the families they serve. This theme relates to the notion of the Head Start Center's aim to create and maintain positive relationships with families. The data for this theme are organized by the specific data collection method and to demonstrate how they connect to the relevant theme.

**Survey data.** A major finding from the survey data revealed that the majority of parents and families feel welcomed at the school. Nine of 11<sup>7</sup> parents were very satisfied with the program's efforts to involve them in their child's education, while two of 11 were somewhat satisfied. One of Nitecki's (2015) three best practices for building integrated school-family partnerships at the preschool level included creating a welcoming school environment. In her research, the establishment of a welcoming school environment helped build positive relationships with parents and form deep, supportive school-family relationships. Overall, Early Beginnings Head Start parents indicated the program offered a welcoming environment for them and their children.

**Teacher interviews.** During the interviews, Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin explained they were successful in getting the home visits moved to September. The home visits used to take place in August right when school began. The teachers explained that often times, parents were hesitant to allow the teachers into their home for

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<sup>7</sup> One family did not complete the entire survey; therefore, the survey questions described above only had 11 responses.

the first home visit because there was no established relationship between the families and the teacher. In most cases, the parents had not met the teachers yet, or if they did meet, they did not have any time to establish a relationship. Mrs. Jones stated, “the first visits sometimes can be awkward because it’s our first time going into the homes, so you have to build that relationship with the parents before you even get into the home.” She then explained the importance of meeting and conversing with the parents at drop-off and or pick-up.

All four teachers also mentioned that since the students are in the same classroom for two years, once they establish a relationship with parents and families, those relationships continue to get stronger and the parents become very comfortable with the teachers. Mrs. Martin mentioned that at the time of the study, she had a student in her class who is the youngest of four siblings, all of whom had previously been in her class. Therefore, this teacher had a great relationship with the family and they worked very well together. While not always the case, the program will accommodate a parent or teacher request to keep siblings in the same class, or place students with the same teacher as their older siblings may have had. There have been several requests made by parents to have the same teacher for all of their children that attend the program.

Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown reported that building relationships with families take time and at first, many of the parents they visit are protective and do not feel comfortable having them in their home. In an effort to build a trusting relationship, both Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown reiterate the purpose of their visits to the parents, for example, they often remind parents they are not an employee of social services and the visits are strictly for

the educational benefit of the child. Mrs. Martin shared a similar experience that highlights the relationships that can be formed through home visits:

People are more comfortable in their home. I think that it makes them feel like you care more about them because you actually took—I mean, it’s part of our job. We have to do it, but you’re taking the time and effort to come into their home. The visit that I did on Friday, she said, “Other than my mom, you’re the only person that’s ever been in my home.” I was like, “Really?” She said, “Yeah. I just don’t let people come in.” It made me feel like, okay, that’s a big deal.

Mrs. Martin’s experience with home visits highlights the fact that home visits can provide an opportunity to enhance parent-teacher relationships because the teacher is taking the time to visit the home and get to know parents on a deeper level.

*Administrator interview.* The Head Start organization as a whole encourages the role of parents as their child's first and most important teachers. One of the nine principles upon which the Head Start program is founded is positive relationships and continuity, with an emphasis on the role of the parent as the child’s first and most important relationship (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a). Mrs. Smith utilizes this principle to encourage positive relationships among the program, teachers, and families.

Mrs. Smith reported that in an effort to establish relationships with parents, the program seeks parent input regarding the topics of the workshops and what information they would find worthwhile or not worthwhile. Mrs. Smith said:

This year it has been, and last year it was, through conversations with parents when they’re here and we’re doing a meeting. It’s like, “What else would you guys be interested in knowing about?” There have been many years, in my experience as a center director, where there have been parent surveys that have been done. I’ll make a list of things that I know we would be able to do, and then ask them to prioritize. Sometimes that works really well, and sometimes you get everybody prioritizing the stuff, and then the people who actually attend, those weren’t their interests.

Mrs. Smith's comment highlights the notion that while parent input plays an important role in determining the services offered to parents, there are challenges in obtaining it. However, the program utilizes informal conversations, most often during other workshops (since it is often the same, or a similar group of, parents that attend the workshops) to request parent insight and asked them about possible topics of interest.

In addition to providing feedback, parents are encouraged to volunteer in their child's classroom. Teachers are required to encourage parents to volunteer and the program will periodically plan something special for the parents, usually around the holidays, such as special activities and or crafts. Mrs. Smith did not indicate that she provided the teachers with strategies to encourage parent volunteers in the classroom. If parents are unable to volunteer, they are encouraged to look around the classroom at drop-off and or pick-up to familiarize themselves with the classroom and observe the word wall and other resources in the classroom. The administrator reported that observing the classroom helps parents understand what their child is doing in the classroom and how they can support learning at home.

*Parent interviews*<sup>8</sup>. Several parents also indicated a variety of ways the program is working to establish relationships with them. First, Mrs. Davis observed her child in the classroom for a few minutes before pick-up, and she observed the teacher creating an activity for the student where paint was placed in a plastic bag and the child was using her finger to trace letters over the plastic bag by moving the paint around. She stated,

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<sup>8</sup> Two parents were interviewed at the school, Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Davis (interviews March 31, 2017), and two parents were interviewed at the conclusion of their home visit observation, Mrs. Wilson (interview September 19, 2017) and Mrs. Thomas (interview September 21, 2017). The interviews lasted 6-10 minutes each.

“Like in the morning, [the teacher] takes one paper and some—I [do] no[t] remember what [she] did, some product, and she put it in plastic. The kids take the finger and [trace] A.” The parent then recreated this activity and used it at home with her child to practice letters. This parent reported that by having the opportunity to observe the classroom, she was able to learn new activities to try in her home.

Mrs. Thomas explained in her interview that she often utilized a behavior technique, Twiggle, in her home that her children learned in school. Through conferences and home visits, the teachers shared this strategy with the family. The family now utilized this behavior technique, which essentially included taking deep breaths and counting before reacting to a situation. Mrs. Thomas stated, “I will say [to her child] you know what, like if we’re at the park, maybe you should Twiggle because you’re really frustrated right now.” The parent indicated to the teacher that she liked this strategy and it is working not only for her children, but also for her when she is parenting her children. She stated:

I don’t do it as often as them, but I walk away. That’s my twiggle because I’d be like . . . I just need to Twiggle . . . I need a time out. Mommy needs a time out. Walk out, get a cup of coffee, do whatever I need to do.

Offering opportunities for parents to observe classroom activities and conversations between the child and the teacher in the school setting, as well as at the home setting when the teacher is present during a home visit, lend themselves to strengthening the relationship between parents and teachers. These opportunities for parent-teacher interactions allow the parent to learn from the teacher and incorporate strategies/activities successful in school into the home as well.

*Observations from home visits.* At the beginning of the home visits, teachers use a family information sheet to gather personal information including parent employment, education level of parents, education goals for parents, health concerns in the family, health insurance for the children, and vision/dental/wellness check-ups. The completion of this form is a requirement of the first home visit of the school year. For example, Mrs. Jones informed Mrs. Wilson during a home visit that her child failed the hearing test at school and they made plans for the parent to follow up with the child's pediatrician. During a separate home visit, Mrs. Davis, a parent, shared her educational goals with Mrs. Jones. Now that both of her children are attending school, she hopes to go back to school and earn a degree. By completing this form together, the teachers have many opportunities to further establish their relationship and support the families in areas outside of the child's education.

Another example of teachers working closely with parents to establish a positive relationship is the opportunity for parents to create goals for their child. One of the goals created for each child is parent initiated, so teachers ask the parents to think about a goal, not necessarily an educational goal, they have for either their child or for the family as a whole. For example, Mrs. Wilson created a family goal that her husband, who is currently being deported, obtain his green card. The teacher spent several minutes asking the parent to explain the necessary steps and how they planned to reach this goal. The teacher did not move on from this until the parent explained the steps the family is taking to reach this goal. This goal, like all the others, will be revisited in a few months at the next home visit.

Establishing positive relationships with the families is a critical component of supporting the families. Not only is the program attempting to establish positive relationships with the families in an effort to help the child, the families also have opportunities to set goals for themselves and be supported in obtaining those goals. The methods this program uses to establish positive relationships between the parents and the program include encouraging volunteering or classroom observation, creating collaborative goals, and asking for parent input/feedback regarding the services the program offers.

**Theme three: Benefits of meeting in the home.** The Head Start framework revolves around parent, family, and community engagement. Head Start utilizes home visits as a way to enhance parenting and promote the growth and development of young children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015b). Benefits of meeting in the home include implications for the teacher, and the program as a whole, in understanding more about the home environment that influences the children's development. The administrator, teachers, and families indicated several reasons why meeting in the home was a beneficial requirement of the program.

**Teacher interview.** In their interviews, Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown reported that during their home visits, fathers are often present and they get to see them interacting with the children, but when the fathers come into the school, they are very quiet and reserved. However, whenever fathers are meeting a teacher in the comfort of their own home, the teachers get to see how the fathers interact with the children. Mrs. Kelly stated:

There's another perk is when we're in their environment they act more like themselves, so like here at school they're kind of shy or bashful, but when we get in their home, like especially the dads, they'll be a little more outgoing. Like there's one dad that he's like silent when he's here and he's one of 'em that was reading the book, wrestling around with his kid on the floor, and we're like, oh, okay, you do have a personality.

The fathers' visible participation in programs and at early childhood centers can be low, but oftentimes they are more likely to be present, visible, and actively engaged during home visits. Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown reiterated that if the home visits did not occur, they would not have had the opportunity to have conversations with the fathers and see them engage with their children.

All the teachers reported that another benefit of home visits is getting to see any glaring issues the family may be facing that could be affecting the child. Mrs. Kelly stated, "You get a better understanding of what the child goes home to." Mrs. Martin stated, "For us to get into the families' homes, work with the families closer, identify any needs that they might have; just gives us a better idea of what type of home life the children are coming from." For example, the teachers explained situations in which the family had no electricity, where the children were living in unsanitary conditions, or when there were signs of obvious drug use. In these cases, the teachers benefit from seeing the issues first-hand and if necessary, summoning outside help, such as social services. The teachers also reported that it was beneficial to see any other factors that could be influencing a child's development and or progress in school. For example, Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown shared that they visited a home where there was no furniture and learned that the child did not have a bed. This was important information for them to consider, as this situation could easily be affecting the child's performance in school.

They continued to share a variety of experiences they had during home visits, which provided them with critical information as to the experiences of the children in the home, “I’ve been in homes where there’s no electric[ity], so that obviously is a challenge for the family, no furniture, homes that been infested with cockroaches . . . sometimes drug use is obvious cuz you smell it or see it.” The experiences described by Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown are ones they would not otherwise been aware of had they not visited the homes of their students.

Lastly, the teachers reported that it is helpful to see the resources available in the home and then use the resources to create goals and activities that can be done with the child. Mrs. Jones stated, “My one parent, she whipped out a stack of easy-read books, workbooks, dry-erase markers, the dry-erase boards, the chalkboards, and so I could totally see work being done.” By seeing the resources parents have available, and seeing what they are doing with those resources, the teachers can create appropriate goals for the child. Mrs. Kelly described having a parent show her that she had pipe cleaners in her home, so the teacher suggested having the child manipulate the pipe cleaner to make letters. In this situation, the teacher was able to see the resources the parent had available and help the parent create an activity that could be done using those resources.

***Observations from home visits.*** Observing the home visits provided the researcher with a clear understanding of the many benefits of conducting home visits. Mrs. William’s home visit took place in the back of a store because the child’s father had temporary custody. In this case, it was immediately clear what challenges this child and his family were facing. In this case, most of the home visit revolved around assisting the father to locate resources that may be helpful to him and his son. These resources

included information about local programs available over the summer for children, as well as resources that were already present in the home (foam letters, books, paper) that can be used to support learning in the home. While the teachers were aware of the current situation, they did not fully understand the extent of the living situation until they visited the home.

Often times, by seeing the resources available in the home, the teachers can encourage learning with what the parents already have access to. During Mrs. Wilson's home visit observation, the teacher was able to see the child's dinosaur collection and have a conversation with the child about his love for dinosaurs. During Mrs. Thomas's home visit observation, it was immediately clear the variety of books the family had in the living room. The teacher briefly looked through the books and asked the child to pick out a few of her favorites. Mrs. Kelly made the point to reiterate during her interview, "I think a lotta times [the parents] think [their children] need iPads and smartphones to learn, but they don't." By observing what is available in the home, the teachers can encourage parents to use materials they and their child have when working with.

All the examples support the idea that conducting home visits is beneficial to teachers and parents because of the immense amount of information the teacher can obtain about the child, the family, and or the living situation they most likely would not have known otherwise.

*Administrator interview.* Mrs. Smith indicated that a benefit of home visits is being able to utilize resources that are already available in the home. While Mrs. Smith does not conduct home visits, she does review the home visit forms completed by the

teachers after they conduct home visits. In reviewing home visit forms, she specifically looks for how teachers are using what they see in the home. Mrs. Smith stated:

One of the things I look at is their use of in-home materials. Are they [teachers] using stuff that the parents have, and how do I know that's what they have, and did they give enough of an explanation, and do they have documentation of that on the form (the form is completed at each home visit to document important aspects of the visit such as who was present, updated contact and health information, and goals for the child)?

Meeting in the home provides teachers the opportunity to see the resources available to the families and help the parents use what they already have to create activities that will support the child's language and literacy development.

In summary, all the participants mentioned there are benefits to meeting in the home, such as seeing language and literacy practices being implemented and how parents and families are utilizing strategies learned from the program in the home. In addition, meeting in the home lends itself to the teachers becoming aware of any situations that may affect the child, anything from a lack of resources, sleeping arrangements, or even unsafe living conditions. Having the fathers present for many of the home visits was also noted by teachers as being a benefit to meeting in the home.

**Theme four: Challenges of parent involvement.** In addition to explaining the many benefits to meeting in the home, many participants also indicated the challenges of trying to involve parents in the Early Beginnings Head Start program. This theme pertains to the idea all the participants in this study see many challenges impacting a parent's ability to be involved in the program as well as challenges of involving parents from the teachers' and administrator's point of view. These challenges also include

barriers to increasing parent participation in school events, such as conferences, home visits, special events, or workshops.

***Parent interviews.*** The parents interviewed for this study all participated in a home visit. Therefore, the interviewed participants did not include any parents with whom the teachers were unable to schedule a home visit or with whom they were having difficulty making contact. During the interview, the parents were asked about the challenges they encountered when participating in, or attempting to participate in, the parent workshops and or conferences. The first challenge described by parents revolved around the timing of workshops and conferences. Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Davis both indicated in their interview that the timing of workshops made it difficult to attend them. The workshops this school year all occurred at 8:30AM immediately after drop-off. Parents who brought younger children (children younger than three years old) were given materials such as coloring books and small toys in an effort to keep the younger children busy while the parents focused on the workshop. Mrs. Thomas also reported that the time of the workshops or events made it difficult for her to attend them. She stated, “I feel like that’s like when you have kids, I know they offer daycare, but I don’t really want someone to watch my kids that I don’t know.” Ultimately, Mrs. Thomas explained that she is not comfortable having someone she does not know care for her children. Therefore, even when the workshop or program being offered was able to provide childcare for parents, Mrs. Thomas described the additional challenges of not having a relationship with the caregivers as a barrier to participation.

The researcher followed up with Mrs. Smith, the administrator, about the parent’s comment regarding the type of childcare offered during parent workshops or other events

offered to parents. Mrs. Smith shared that childcare is always offered at workshops or events; however, the caregivers are not always the child's teachers, so employees the parents do not know are sometimes watching the children. This clarified Mrs. Thomas's concern about having someone she does not know watch her children while she is attending the workshops. These findings also support Brown's (2012) research, which concluded that the lack of time is an obstacle for parents when trying to be involved in their child's education. Brown (2012) also suggested that for some uninvolved parents, their own negative experiences in school could make them feel uncomfortable in a school setting. Parents interviewed for this survey did not report feeling uncomfortable in the school setting; however, as previously mentioned, the parents interviewed for this study were already involved in school-sponsored events and home visits to some degree.

*Teacher interviews.* All four teachers reported that the biggest challenge with home visits is scheduling them along with the cancellations and rescheduling that take place. They have a window of about four weeks to conduct home visits, all of which are done in the afternoon, and the challenges include everything from contacting the parent to scheduling the visit and attempting to reschedule if the parents cancel.

Another factor described by Mrs. Kelly is the education level of the parents. Mrs. Kelly stated, "A challenge last year, we did have a mom who couldn't read, we had a social worker working with her to try to get her some help, some classes and stuff." Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin also indicated that they have had several illiterate parents, which makes any written communication from the teachers and or the school difficult, as well as teaching parents strategies to use books and other written resources in the home.

The teachers also reported that language barriers can be a challenge; however, there are translators available for conferences and home visits that all the teachers had utilized. Mrs. Brown stated, “We have translators . . . in pretty much any language we would need to . . . they can come to home visits but it’s hard talking that way . . . takes a long time.” All four teachers reported that it is still difficult to have a conversation with parents and really establish a relationship when using a translator. Mrs. Martin reported, “We pretty much just do the talking . . . [the parents] usually just nod their head.”

Lastly, all the teachers reported that every year in their classrooms they have parents who are disinterested in their child’s education, which makes it difficult to get them to be involved in any way. Mrs. Brown stated, “Sometimes they just think we are a daycare.” Mrs. Kelly stated, “There’s the mentality that I’m not the teacher. Like you’re the teacher; it’s your job to teach them their letters and numbers. I’ve heard that before.” In addition to the teacher’s interpretations that some parents are just not interested, Mrs. Jones stated, “Some parents are just overwhelmed with life. They have a lot going on, and they really don’t have the time. Even if they have the desire, they might not have the time.” The teachers were in agreement that whether it is purposeful or not, these families face a variety of situations that make involvement in any way difficult.

***Administrator interview.*** Mrs. Smith indicated in her interview that the biggest challenges she faced regarding parent involvement are access to space and parents’ work schedule. Since this program is currently located in a public elementary school building, the availability for them to use space in the school is limited. In discussing this challenge, she stated, “We’re only able to schedule the workshops at a particular time because of space, and that’s not gonna meet everybody’s needs.” The only available

space for the program to use for workshops is a faculty lounge room at the school, but it is often occupied throughout the day. The public elementary school in which the program is located has scheduled a specific time for the program to use this space, which strictly limits the flexibility the program has to offer workshops to parents at other times of the day.

She also indicated that parents' work schedules make it challenging to set up workshops and or events during or after school. As a result, it is indicated on the flyers promoting the workshops that if parents cannot attend, they can still have access to the information and resources distributed at the workshop or event. She has had several parents, usually the same parents, who ask for information from a workshop if they cannot attend.

Lastly, Mrs. Smith described the lack of involvement as being a challenge. Unfortunately, some parents show a "lack of involvement in their children's lives, and the level they take in their role as their child's first teacher." She indicated while this is sometimes the case and it is difficult to change those attitudes, the program has many families that are very involved, always asking questions and always wanting more information. Mrs. Smith explained that she believes often times the parents' own negative experiences in school and or perceptions of school will affect their willingness to participate. Mrs. Smith's input on the challenges of parent involvement align closely with Kocyigit's (2015) research that found that the following factors contributed to a lack of parental involvement in preschool: unwillingness to participate, a lack of time, too many obligations for families, a mismatch between information given and attitudes of the parents, and negative attitudes on the part of the parents.

In summary, Mrs. Smith and the teachers face a variety of challenges and or limitations when attempting to involve parents. Sometimes these are things out of their control such as the availability of space for workshops or language barriers that require additional support for meetings. Parents also face a variety of challenges when trying to be involved in their child's education, such as the timing of meetings and workshops and childcare.

**Theme five: Variety of resources provided to families.** Throughout the data collection process, it was evident that a variety of resources were provided to families throughout their child's participation in the program. This theme highlights the resources the program utilizes when working with parents and the resources offered to parents to assist them. The resources include everything from books, literacy activities, and crafts, to child development and health information, community resources such as the public library, and suggestions given to parents to utilize the resources they already have. The disseminated resources were distributed by the teachers or workshop facilitators and given out at either home visits or at parent workshops. Some of the resources were to help with vital needs, such as a first-aid book given out at a parent workshop, while others were academic, such as books and simple literacy activities.

**Survey data.** In the parent survey, all the parents indicated they relied on the program to teach them strategies to use in the home when working with their child. Nine of 12 parents indicated that most of the early literacy strategies they used with their child were learned through the Early Beginnings Head Start program, and three of 12 indicated that all the strategies they used with their child were learned through the program. The survey data revealed that the program serves an important role in supporting the families

by sharing strategies and resources with them. The NAEYC (2012) research states that when children's progress in school can be tied to activities taking place in the home, greater family involvement is inspired. Therefore, family involvement will further increase if teachers can show parents how a child's achievements are related to the activities taking place in the home.

***Workshop observations.*** Four literacy workshops were offered to parents that focused on early literacy development. The workshops provided parents with a variety of resources they could use with their children at home to encourage learning. At each workshop, parents were given a text to take home, suggestions for reading the text with their child, and activities they could do to enhance literacy development. For example, at one of the observed workshops, parents were given the text *The Day the Crayons Quit* (Daywalt & Jeffers, 2013). The workshop instructor read the text aloud while modeling questions parents can ask their child as they read. The instructor shared some activities parents can do with the text such as discussing different colors with their child and identifying objects that are different colors, and then the instructor distributed a handout to the parents with the names of colors written so students could trace them. It is important to note that all the texts provided at the workshop were in English, so while the facilitator provided parents with activities and strategies that can be used with the text, readability is a limitation for many parents attending the workshops.

In addition to receiving books and activities at the workshops, the parents were also taught several age-appropriate activities they could do with their children, such as using supplied paper plates and scissors to practice shapes with their child. The parents were also given a stack of paper plates and child-sized scissors to take home as well as

large construction paper they could use to trace their child's bodies to use the outline of their child's body to discuss body parts. Lastly, parents were shown a variety of YouTube videos that teach letters, colors, and shapes. At the conclusion of each workshop, there was a raffle where all parents/families got to take something home, such as bath toys, beach towels, snacks, and books.

The workshop also emphasized the importance of using the resources already in the home to work on literacy skills. Parents had the opportunity to share what they have used with their children. One parent shared that they used sidewalk chalk on rocks to practice letters, another parent discussed looking at license plates to discuss letters and another parent shared how they talked about foods and colors at the grocery store. The workshop instructor also shared some of her own experiences working with her own children at home. She shared some of her favorite books, videos, songs, and simple activities that she often used with her children.

The workshops also included information about community resources available to children and families. During one of the workshops, a local librarian shared how parents could utilize library resources including story time at the library, library Internet resources such as TumbleBooks, and the Paws to Read program offered at the library where students have opportunities to read texts to service animals. The librarian also gave suggestions of texts that are great for this age group and also a great option if the parents are English language learners. She shared some wordless picture books with the parents and emphasized this as a great option for parents who are struggling readers or do not speak English. Lastly, the librarian took the information of anyone who had outstanding library fines, and therefore a locked library account, and assured the parents

she would waive the fines so the parents could utilize the library again. Several parents commented that having an outstanding balance was the sole reason they were no longer going to the library with their children.

In addition to the literacy workshops, there was also a first-aid workshop held for parents/families. During this workshop, a PowerPoint and videos were used to discuss safety, everything from car safety, first aid, nutrition, and wound care. All parents who attended were given a child safety book to take home.

***Home visit observations.*** During the first home visit of the school year, all teachers gave parents *Have you Filled a Bucket Today* (McCloud, 2006) and shared how parents could use the concept of bucket filling with their child. Bucket filling is a text and positive behavior concept the teachers were using in the classroom and encouraged parents to use at home. One example the teachers gave the parents was to cut a bucket out of paper and display it in the home. Parents could then use stickers to “fill” the bucket when a child does positive things. This book was the only resource distributed to parents during the home visit. The teachers instead encouraged parents to use what they already had available in their home.

All the teachers reported that they saw the materials already present in the home and utilized those materials when sharing strategies and activities with parents. During Mr. Moore’s home visit observation, Mrs. Moore shared how he relied heavily on the public library, which is in close proximity to his home, for resources. During Mrs. Wilson’s home visit, the teacher shared a goal she created for the child, which was to identify 10 letters of the alphabet. She continued to share with the parent that in the classroom they do a letter hunt to teach and practice new letters and encouraged the

parent to do this at home. Mrs. Wilson stated, “I like doing the letters of the alphabet in the car . . . or looking at license plates to look at letters.” Mrs. Wilson also described how she used dried beans when cooking with her daughter to practice counting. After Mrs. Wilson shared this activity, the teacher encouraged her to watch her daughter closely and make sure she has one-to-one correspondence when counting.

Mrs. Thomas also included a conversation about resources available at home that can be used to work on literacy development. A goal for the child at this home observation was to use pronouns appropriately (he/she, his/her). The teacher suggested they could practice this concept while reading books and asking questions using he/she or him/her such as “what is *he* doing?” The parent then suggested this is a concept they could practice at the grocery store when they saw people, identifying them as he or she.

***Teacher interviews.*** The teachers indicated in their interviews that they tried to keep activities simple for parents by helping them come up with ideas requiring little or no resources. For example, Mrs. Jones stated:

We’re always encouraging them to talk to their children . . . like, say, when they get home from school, ask them what they did. Don’t just say, “How was school?” or— “What did you do at work time today? What toys did you play with? Who did you play with?” getting them to talk about their friends or what they did, cuz we do that in here all the time . . . if it’s a writing goal, we encourage them [parents] to get chalk, write, go outside on a nice day, write on the sidewalk with chalk, practice writing letters, practice writing their name if they’re at that point.

Mrs. Martin also added:

We also always encourage them [parents] to read with their kids. We have a lot of books here that they can borrow if they really don’t have that many books in their home . . . a lot of parents feel like, “I don’t know how to teach a kid to read.” If you break it down for them and show them the steps of teaching their child, like, first they need to identify the letters, and then the sounds that they make . . . then they really can work with their kid and help them learn how to read.

Both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin described the steps they took to assist parents so they could feel comfortable working with their child at home. By making the task simple, and one that requires little to no resources, the teachers demonstrated how everything from conversations, to writing letters, to reading a book can help develop critical early literacy skills.

*Administrator interview.* When discussing the approach teachers used to discuss materials that could be used in the home to support learning, Mrs. Smith shared several questions she encouraged the teachers ask the parents:

When they are planning activities with the parents, the requirement is that that is what they do; that they don't go in and say, "You do this, this, this, and this," but that they have a conversation with the parent about, "What do you think you could do? What kind of materials do you have? What do you already use?" Then, supplementing what the parents are saying with, "Well, maybe you could do this," or, "Do you have this that you could use?"

This approach allows parents to inform the teacher of the resources they already have available in their home, share the ideas they already have, and learn new suggestions. Mrs. Smith encourages the teachers to first see what the parents are doing and build upon that, as opposed to going into the house and being more directive. The conversation between teacher and parent about activities lends itself to collaboration and a sense of partnership.

Mrs. Smith also explained how the Head Start organization as a whole and the Early Beginnings Head Start program both send out monthly newsletters with information and resources for parents. The newsletters can be available in different languages if needed by the parents. Several families were currently enrolled in the program and received a newsletter in a language other than English. These newsletters,

specifically the Early Beginnings Head Start newsletter, informs parents about upcoming events, volunteer opportunities, and community resources available and describes several activities parents can do with their child to support the learning taking place in the classroom.

The variety of resources provided to parents and families supports learning in the home. The workshops provided a variety of topics to parents, such as books and activities that support literacy development. Every parent was given a book at the first home visit that supports a behavior technique used in the classroom. Lastly, the program encourages teachers and parents to use the resources they already have access to, or free resources available in the community, such as the library. The program stresses the importance of educating the parents on ways they can use what they already have when working with their child. The wealth of resources described in this theme supports the many ways the Early Beginnings Head Start program is attempting to support families in early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development

### **Interpretations**

#### **Communicating Expectations**

NAEYC (2009) stated that one of the most significant aspects of creating a positive relationships with parents and families is acknowledging the family's choices and goals for their child, but without abandoning the teacher's responsibility to support a child's early development and learning through developmentally appropriate practices. The teachers in this study explained how goal setting is one method they utilized to communicate expectations to parents and families. Thus, it was through the child's

individual goals that parents were made aware of what is appropriate for their child to be doing and what it is that should be reinforced at home.

Zhang (2015) argued that for learning experiences to be effective and meaningful for the child, they must support the child in practical ways. The teachers at Early Beginnings Head Start used the *Ages and Stages* assessment to share expectations with the parents. They used this assessment to communicate with parents what is developmentally appropriate at each age and stage of early childhood so that in turn, parents could support their child's learning and development in ways that are practical and appropriate for the child.

Mrs. Smith explained several methods of communication used by the program, including newsletters and handouts. One component of Epstein's (2001) framework focuses on staff and family communication. The practices are consistent with Epstein's (2001) parental involvement framework that includes conferences; weekly or monthly folders sent home to parents containing information about school curriculum and sample student work; memos newsletters; phone calls; and clear information on all school policies, programs and activities, as examples of strategies for effectively communicating with parents. Mrs. Smith described that parents in the Early Beginnings Head Start program are given monthly newsletters that often communicate what students are doing in school so parents can work on similar skills and or activities with their children. It is important to note that none of the parents mentioned utilizing the newsletter as a method of learning new strategies or techniques for working with their child in the home. Curenton and Justice (2008) found, through their research of literacy development of children living in a low socio-economic area, that the education level of the mother plays

a critical role. Therefore, it is important when creating newsletters and handouts and sharing a child's work that the program considers the basic reading skills of the parents to ensure they are able to effectively read and understand the information being communicated. All the parents who were interviewed or observed for this research study relayed that the strategies and activities they utilized at home were learned from observation of the classroom, participating in a workshop, or something showed to them directly by their child's teacher, not through the monthly newsletters.

### **Establishing Relationships**

As NAEYC (2009) asserted, positive reciprocal relationships between families and teachers is a fundamental element of good practice. NAEYC (2009) stresses the importance of establishing and maintaining communication between families and practitioners and creating a classroom setting that is open to parents and families to visit and participate. Consistent with the research, all the teachers in this study shared that establishing a positive relationship with families was an important aspect of their job; however, it is not an easy feat. Many of the parents who participated in this study spoke languages other than English and that is the case for many of the families who attend Early Beginnings. Establishing a positive relationship with these families is important and can make a tremendous difference for the student. Hori (2006) found that when establishing a relationship with parents whose first language is not English, it is most effective for communication to be personal and face-to-face. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin explained the success of moving the first home visit a month later in the school year so they would have time to meet the parents face-to-face several times, at drop-off and pick-up, prior to the first home visit. While teachers attempted to utilize best practices such as

establishing a relationship and maintaining communication with parents, they emphasized the difficulties of doing so and it became clear to the researcher that parents who were more present in school (i.e., drop off and pick up regularly, attend volunteer opportunities, conferences, and workshops) developed a more reciprocal relationship with the teachers.

As Breiseth, Robertson, and Lafond (2011) pointed out, when establishing relationships with families, teachers need to begin by soliciting ideas from parents regarding family engagement opportunities and learning opportunities. Breiseth et al. (2011) stressed that this approach will not be successful without support from administration. When asked about establishing relationships with parents, Mrs. Smith, the administrator, described seeking parent input regarding learning opportunities, such as the parent workshops offered through the program. However, she also revealed that the parent survey distributed to seek input regarding workshop topics did not increase participation for the workshops and or events. This finding confirms that there are other barriers, rather than parent interest, that impact their involvement, including scheduling conflicts, timing of events, communication, etc.

Mrs. Smith also mentioned that teachers are required to encourage parents to volunteer in the classroom; however, the specific methods teachers use to encourage involvement can vary with each teacher. Since there is not a mandated or prescribed method of involving parents at Early Beginnings, the responsibility to design parent involvement opportunities falls on the teachers. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Thomas both indicated in their parent interview that they learned an activity to do with their child through observation of the classroom or during conferences/home visits. This finding

further supports Breiseth et al.'s (2011) ideas of soliciting parent ideas and interests regarding involvement opportunities. Since parents revealed they are utilizing strategies and activities learned through Early Beginnings in their homes, it is likely they have opinions regarding what learning opportunities would be most beneficial to them. This information, along with the survey data that indicated nine out of 12 parents are utilizing strategies learned through the Early Beginnings Head Start program with their child at home, shows that parents are willing to learn new strategies and engage in these practices at home. At Early Beginnings, the task of creating parent volunteer opportunities falls upon the teachers, as opposed to being a program-wide initiative. As a result of this being one additional task for teachers, there are not as many volunteer opportunities as there could be if the teachers were supported in their efforts.

Furthermore, Henderson and Berla (1994) suggested that the more programs, or schools, take on a partnership with families, the more successful they are in raising student achievement to national norms. One method the Early Beginnings program utilized to establish partnerships with families was collaborative goal setting, involving communicating with parents regarding the purpose of goals, collaborating on goals that were appropriate for the child and or the family, and lastly, if applicable, ensuring that those goals aligned with the child's development. While observing home visits, the researcher was able to see first-hand the process of creating goals. While one parent, Mrs. Wilson, created a goal for her family as a whole, the other two home observations did not include a goal created by parents. In both of those situations, the parent was asked if they had a goal and did not provide any input; therefore, the teacher shared the academic goals she created for the child. Parents may have been hesitant to come up

with goals for their child for a variety of reasons, especially when they were asked to come up with goals on the spot; therefore, while the practice of collaborative goal-setting is an effective way to establish a relationship with parents, unfortunately in many of the home visits observed by the researcher, the goals were teacher initiated.

In addition, Epstein's (2001) model of parent engagement emphasizes the role of parents as leaders. While utilizing collaborative goal-setting is a practice Early Beginnings used to create a relationship where parents are perceived as leaders who advocate for their child, it was not an actual practice observed at all of the home visits. Since there is a real possibility that parents were unsure of how to respond when asked to create a goal, approaching this task of goal-setting as more of a conversation, rather than a question and answer, could provide parents with opportunities to answer informally and eliminate some of the pressure they may have experienced when asked that question. Additionally, the idea of goal setting may be new and unfamiliar to parents and there is a possibility that cross cultural differences impacted a parent's ability to fully understand what was expected of them during this goal-setting process.

Cowan, Bobby, St. Roseman, and Echandia (2002) completed a three-year evaluation of the Home Visit Project<sup>9</sup>. They found that one of the most essential practices that make home visits successful is to spend the first visit building the relationship and establishing common ground. During this first visit, teachers should encourage parents to talk about their hopes and dreams for their child, as well as their expectations of each other. Their suggestion is to wait until at least the second home visit

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<sup>9</sup> The Home Visit Project was created to strengthen home-school relationships and improve the frequency and quality of parent-teacher relationships. At the time of this study, the Project was operating in the Sacramento City Unified School District.

to focus on any academic goals. While Early Beginnings did attempt to establish a positive relationship with the families during the home visits, the teachers spent very little time working on relationship building during the first visit. While the teachers collected information about the family, such as parent employment, goals, healthcare, needs, etc., this was conducted in a question and answer format and the majority of the time was spent focusing on academic goals and how parents can assist their child to meet each specific goal.

### **Affordances of Home Visits**

Nitecki (2015) examined three best practices for building integrated school-family partnerships at the preschool level that included: fostering multidimensional relationships, creating a welcoming school environment, and enhancing parents' perceptions about school. Home visits were one way that Early Beginnings attempted to promote multidimensional relationships with parents. Nitecki (2015) defined multidimensional relationships as relationships that extend beyond typical parent-teacher relationships to include other interactions that are both professional and social in nature. Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Brown reported that parents were more like themselves in their homes, and even more importantly, they mentioned that meeting in the home gave them an opportunity to see the fathers interacting with their children, something they almost never see in a classroom setting. Morgan et al.'s (2009) research suggests that while fathers may be involved and play some role in children's literacy development in the home, they are often not visible in attending programs outside of the home, such as school events or conferences. This research supports Mrs. Kelly's and Mrs. Brown's perspectives about the fathers not often being present at school but being more present

and engaged during a home visit. Having an opportunity to see this firsthand, the teachers were given an opportunity to see the relationships their students have with their fathers and to incorporate the fathers into goal setting and activities discussed during the home visit.

In their research, Meyer and Mann (2006) not only asserted that home visits result in more positive relationships with children and families, but they also noted how home visits improved the teachers' communication with the parents, provided them with a better understanding of the child, and, most importantly, they provided them with an understanding of how the child's home environment may impact his or her school performance. During their interview, Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Martin, both teachers at Early Beginnings, shared that it was through the home visits that they were made aware of difficult situations some of their students were facing at home, such as not having a bed, being exposed to unsanitary conditions and drug use in the home, or having no electricity. They reiterated that without mandatory home visits, they would not have been aware of the home environment and conditions that can affect the child's development and school performance. The examples they provided are glaring reasons why home visits are beneficial to school programs, especially early childhood programs where children are unable to express and or communicate issues occurring in their homes. Mrs. Kelly's and Mrs. Martin's statement regarding the importance of home visits and the significant information that can be learned during a home visit reinforces Meyer and Mann's (2006) research findings in which the researchers cited the usefulness of home visits in revealing to teachers any issues that may be affecting students on a daily basis and impacting their school performance.

The teachers also referenced that home visits provided them with opportunities to see resources available in the home that could be utilized for teaching opportunities. This was also made apparent during the home visit observations where the teachers pointed out specific resources parents can use for early literacy activities, such as reading a particular book or using foam letters to practice letter-sound correspondence. When Schick (2014) studied Latino preschoolers enrolled in a Head Start program, she found that literacy practices done at home that differed from those done at school, such as book sharing and discussion techniques, still resulted in positive literacy outcomes for children. This finding reiterates the importance of teachers examining the resources available in the home and encouraging parents to participate in literacy activities in ways that are comfortable to them and with resources they already have available in the home. During the home visit observations, the researcher observed teachers looking around the room and commenting on resources that were available. Most often, it was commenting on a book that would be appropriate to use with the child, other times it was noticing the child's love for dinosaurs and discussing how that can be incorporated into literacy practices, or noticing letters of the alphabet stuck on the wall and asking the parent to explain how they used that resource to work with their child. This is consistent with Schick's (2014) recommendations for teachers to encourage parents to utilize what they already have in the home to reinforce literacy practices without worrying about whether it is consistent with the way their child is learning about literacy in school. When parents are made aware of the idea that early literary practices do not need to be limited to traditional school literacy practices, and that they can do what they are already

comfortable with, then home literacy practices can provide the child with diverse learning experiences that can lead to positive literacy outcomes (Schick, 2014).

### **Difficulties of Involving Parents**

Zarate (2007) researched Latino parents' perceptions and expectations as they pertain to parent involvement. This research found the most frequently cited reason for low parental participation and communication with schools was a lack of time, often due to demanding and inflexible work schedules (Zarate, 2007). This finding was reiterated by all the participants in this research study: parents, teachers, and the administrator. The parents described the timing of parent workshops and conferences as the most significant reason for not attending, while teachers shared that finding a mutual time to meet for conferences and or home visits was the most challenging aspect of parent involvement.

Another challenge parents faced when trying to attend the literacy workshops sponsored by Early Beginnings was childcare. Most of the workshops were held in the morning right after parents dropped off their child or children, and many of the parents also had younger children who accompanied them to the workshop. The workshop facilitator, along with Mrs. Smith, provided many activities to the younger children, such as books, coloring books, markers, etc., to keep them engaged so their parents were able to focus on the content of the workshops. Childcare was an issue mentioned by one of the parents, Mrs. Brown, who expressed the concern that even when childcare was provided at some of the workshops and meetings, often times the childcare volunteer was someone she did not know and that made her feel uncomfortable. Therefore, even when childcare was provided so parents could participate in different events sponsored by the program, there were other issues (that the program was not aware of) that created barriers

to parents participating in these activities. In addition, many of the families attending Early Beginnings are English language learners. Valencia, Pérez & Echeveste, and Tomás Rivera Policy Institute (2006) suggest that language and communication challenges along with different cultural expectations could all be reasons why parents are hesitant to attend programs, even with the steps put into place by the programs to make it more appealing to parents. This notion of language being a barrier is discussed in more detail in a later section.

Another aspect of parent involvement that was challenging for the teachers is the education level of a parent. Mrs. Kelly described her experiences having an illiterate parent and the challenges of communicating to that parent in writing, via report cards, newsletters, and important school handouts. Curenton and Justice (2008) found in their examination of the literacy development of children who live in areas of low-socioeconomic status and have less educated mothers are at risk for poor pre-literacy skills. These research findings, along with Ms. Kelly's experiences of working with less educated, and sometimes even illiterate parents, reiterates the need for providing strategies and resources for parents that are not dependent upon the parents possessing reading and writing skills so parents are comfortable and able to support their children's early literacy development at home.

Chavkin and Gonzales (1995) stated that educators must believe, and be committed to, the notion that parents are their children's first, and potentially most powerful, teacher. Educators must accept as a fact that parents do want the best for their children. Mrs. Smith described the lack of involvement as being a challenge as well as working with families who do not see themselves as their child's first teacher and who do

not value home learning experiences. While these attitudes are not the norm with parents in her program, Mrs. Smith indicated that some parents were simply unwilling to participate or get involved.

Nevertheless, while the Early Beginnings administrator often seeks parent input, the teachers need to be active in encouraging parents to participate. Furthermore, a variety of factors influence this type of involvement such as language challenges, communication challenges, and different cultural expectations (Robertson, 2009). Houk (2005) stated, “one of the most important steps in engaging ELL parents is to realize that they may be coming from a very different cultural perspective when it comes to the educational system and their role in their child’s education” (p. 23). Supporting ELL families requires more than just providing childcare for workshops and requiring teachers to conduct home visits. Many barriers need to be broken down and many factors need to be considered when trying to involve parents in their child’s education. For instance, Robertson (2009) recommended creating an event for the entire family towards the beginning of the school year to establish a strong partnership that could be maintained throughout the school year. An event held for families should achieve two objectives: establish shared expectations with parents about the upcoming year and offer suggestions to assist families in helping their child (Robertson, 2009).

### **Implementation of Home and School Resources**

Survey participants revealed they relied on the strategies and activities they learned through the Early Beginnings program at events such as workshops, conferences, and classroom events. Offering coaching through seminars and workshops is one way early childhood centers can educate parents regarding their role in their child’s literacy

development as well as provide resources (Craig-Unkefer, 2014). The workshops observed for this research study revolved around communicating and educating parents on popular topics of interest, such as literacy and first-aid. A small percentage of parents attended these workshops; however, the parents who did were engaged and active in the workshop. The facilitator of the workshops was bilingual, and many of the parents who attended spoke Spanish as well. Right away it was obvious that parents felt comfortable communicating with the facilitator and often times the parents and the facilitator communicated in Spanish. Calderón and Minaya-Rowe (2003) recommended using a family's preferred language during workshops and school events in an effort to increase communication, engagement, and overall comfort level.

It was obvious that the facilitator of the workshops and the parents had established a positive relationship over the course of the year, and since many of the same parents were the ones attending the workshops, the facilitator knew the parents well. This relationship created a welcoming environment where parents felt comfortable sharing experiences and goals. One of the parents who participated in this survey was interviewed at the conclusion of a workshop. Her demeanor changed and she acted quite uncomfortable during the interview. Shortly after the interview began, the facilitator asked if she could act as a translator so the parent could be more descriptive. It was very interesting how the demeanor of the parent immediately changed and she was much more comfortable engaging in a conversation with the facilitator.

It was through the use of workshops and home visits that Early Beginnings was educating parents and providing them with resources to help their children continue learning at home. Breiseth et al. (2011) discussed the importance of using workshops as

a way of empowering parents to become key advocates for their children's education. The parents who attended the workshops benefited from establishing a relationship with the facilitator of the workshops and the director of the program, who attended every session. Workshops provided parents with an opportunity to "learn by doing" and offered the facilitators opportunities to "show" rather than "tell" parents about literacy activities, strategies, and learning standards, a method of instruction that is very beneficial to ELL families (Robertson, 2009).

Unfortunately, only a few parents were able to attend and benefit from everything the workshop had to offer and also due to limited options for workshop times since they were borrowing a space outside of the Head Start center for the workshops. Breiseth et al. (2011) described best practices regarding parent workshops including finding alternative schedules, locations, and kinds of events. Some of the suggestions included visiting student neighborhoods and finding out where families congregate and who the local community leaders are, collaborate with apartment managers regarding an open space to hold a workshop, plan events and put them on the school calendar before the year begins, and consider giving parents options regarding meeting space and time. It is through these practices that teachers and administrators can begin to see parents as partners and establish opportunities to work together that are manageable for everyone.

Epstein (2001) redefined workshops as also meaning "making information about a topic available in a variety of forms that can be viewed, heard, or read any where, any time, in varied forms" (p. 1). While different modes of teaching were used during the workshop (texts were read-aloud, videos were shown, information distributed, etc.), this information was only shared in a variety of ways during the workshops, and parents who

could not attend were only given information via handouts (if they requested information from the workshop). As a result, parents who could not attend the workshops were provided information that could potentially be an overwhelming amount of information or too difficult to read and comprehend. Distributing the information presented at workshops to parents in a variety of forms would especially benefit ELL families and is a recommended best practice (Breiseth et al., 2011).

Breiseth et al. (2011) also recommended inviting members from the community to workshops or school events to inform parents about their services, such as a local librarian. One of the observed workshops included a librarian discussing services available to families, providing information regarding obtaining a library card, and offering to waive any overdue fees as to not discourage parents from utilizing the library. A few of the parents who attended provided their information to the librarian at the conclusion of the session to have overdue fees waived. This was a clear example of how community members accommodated families to meet the needs of the children and provided the families with opportunities to use the resources in the library by breaking down barriers, in this case, financial barriers keeping families from utilizing the library.

Rodriguez et al. (2009) asserted that one of the major predictors of language and literacy development is the quality of speech the mothers use when interacting with their children and that these language skills are enhanced by rich and engaging conversations. Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Martin described how they emphasized this with parents during their home visits. They reiterated to parents that they did not need specific materials to encourage learning at home and that language and literacy skills can be developed through simple conversations. Encouraging learning through conversation, as opposed to

material items that parents need to purchase, alleviates the pressure of not having enough material resources, and instead, using what is already there.

Robertson (2009) emphasized the use of newsletters, specifically weekly newsletters, as a way to eliminate several different papers coming home to parents and instead putting everything in one place that can offer a summary of the events and issues of which parents needed to be aware. Mrs. Smith described the program's use of monthly newsletters, which were available to parents in alternative languages; however, there was no specific newsletter for just ELL families. Robertson (2009) suggested specific newsletters for ELL families as a way of putting all the information in one place and eliminating the possibility of parents feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, these newsletters could offer resources specific to such families and ensure the information is offered in Spanish or in simple English. The way in which Early Beginnings was offering translated newsletters was not consistent with what Robertson asserted regarding using a single newsletter for ELL parents where the information is all in one place.

### **Summary**

Based on participant interviews and observations, many practices are in place to enhance parent involvement in the Early Beginnings program. Research supports creating a reciprocal parent-teacher relationship, encouraging parents to advocate for their child, and involving them in a variety of aspects of their child's education (Epstein, 2001; NAEYC, 2016; Nitecki, 2015). The five themes that emerged from the data in this research study were: communicating expectations, establishing relationships, benefits of meeting in the home, challenges of parent involvement, and variety of resources provided to families. The participants in this study provided insight not only into the procedures

Early Beginnings uses to involve parents, but also into what these procedures look like when they put them into practice, especially with diverse families. Through the data analysis findings, it became clear that Early Beginnings utilizes a variety of parent involvement practices to address the needs of parents and families. The data analysis also revealed that many practices of Early Beginnings align with current research suggestions, such as communicating via newsletters, offering parent workshops, translating documents for ELL families, conducting home visits, providing volunteer opportunities, and utilizing collaborative goal-setting. Nevertheless, there are a variety of challenges facing both Early Beginnings teachers as well as parents when it comes to implementing the practices described above, including but not limited to cultural factors, language barriers, parents educational/literacy background, timing and scheduling of events offered to parents, and childcare.

The following chapter provides suggestions for further improving parent involvement at the Early Beginnings Head Start Center and offers recommendations for directions for future research.

## Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The Early Beginnings Head Start Center utilized a variety of engagement practices to enhance the lives of children and families enrolled in their program. While prior research shows evidence for how meaningful parent-child learning experiences lead to positive educational outcomes (NAEYC, 2016; Sheldon & Galindo, 2012; Zhang, 2015), programs such as Early Beginnings face numerous challenges when attempting to educate and involve parents in their child's education. Even when programs have specific parent-involvement frameworks, policies, and practices in place for involving parents, other factors including a lack of time, resources, and parents' educational background still impact a teacher's ability to implement these initiatives successfully.

The overall purpose of this research study was to examine parent involvement practices of the Early Beginnings Head Start program and to determine what impact parent involvement has on the early language and literacy development of preschool children. In addition, the researcher analyzed the parent involvement at the center of the program through the lens of current literature on effective parent engagement practices. The observations during the home visits, parent workshops, and the interviews with Early Beginnings parents, teachers, and the administrator yielded important insights about a wide range of topics including the challenges of involving parents, benefits of conducting home visits, resources provided to parents and families, and effective methods of communicating with parents. The diversity of perspectives offered by the participants in this study (administrator, teachers, and parents) provided important insights into how

parent involvement is perceived and experienced by each participant and the benefits and challenges of parent involvement for all who are involved in the Early Beginnings program.

Although the study did not contain a large enough sample to make generalizations, and this is not advisable for qualitative research, significant findings emerged during the research process. By examining different aspects of the parent engagement model at Early Beginnings, the researcher was able to generate a variety of recommendations to improve several critical components of their model such as communicating with parents, increasing participating and educating parents.

### **Conclusions**

The study sought to answer the following research questions. Each of the questions is listed below, followed by a summary of the results.

#### **Question One: How does the Early Beginnings Head Start program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?**

In both policy and practice, the Early Beginnings Head Start Center prioritized building strong relationships with parents. All participants in this study noted some form of communication used to educate parents. These methods included the use of workshops, monthly newsletters, and home visits. Calderón and Minaya-Rowe (2003) emphasized the importance of increasing participation among ELL parents through communication, and the researcher found that Early Beginnings uses several methods (newsletters, workshops, and home visits) that are consistent with their research. However, it was clear to the researcher, through observations as well as interviews, that the workshops were the most effective method used to educate parents.

The free workshops offered to families was one approach the Early Beginnings program used to provide additional educational supports to parents. As mentioned earlier, the workshops were the most effective way of educating parents because the parents were engaged in conversation with each other and the facilitator, and they were given information about early literacy practices through a variety of resources (i.e., videos, books, guest speakers, etc.). Some aspects of the workshop that made it so effective for the parents were: (a) the facilitator spoke Spanish, as did many of the attendees, so she spoke to them in their first language; (b) the workshops included hands-on learning experiences; and (c) the parents were given with materials they could take home. Unfortunately, the average attendance for these workshops was about four to six parents for each session out of a possible 32. Some of the parents who were interviewed explained that the timing of the workshop made it difficult for them to attend.

In addition to workshops, home visits were another method the program used to educate parents about early language and literacy practices. Home visits were required, so during the visits, the teachers had an opportunity to converse with parents and educate them as to their child's progress in school, strengths and weaknesses, and strategies they could use to help their child build upon early literacy skills in the home. However, these visits only take place twice a year, and because the first part of the visit is spent updating emergency contact information and the child's health information (as mandated by the program), there was not sufficient time dedicated to educating parents about early literacy development or engaging in conversations about how early literacy development can be supported at home. While Cowan et al. (2002) asserted the significance of using the first home visit to establish a relationship with parents and families, while saving all of the

academic and goal-setting information for a later visit, with only two home visits occurring during the school year, it was not possible for teachers in this program to follow this recommendation. They had to use the first visit as a time to discuss academics, such as goal setting and strategies that can be used at home to support the child in meeting his or her goals. With only two home visits occurring each year, and each one only being about an hour long, time is a limitation this program faces when attempting to use home visits as an opportunity to build strong relationships with parents. However, it is clear to the researcher that home visits were a positive aspect of this program, as they provided opportunities for teachers to get to know their students and families outside of a traditional school and provide parents with resources they may otherwise be unaware of, all of which are positive aspects of home visits described by the National Education Association (NEA) (n.d).

Lastly, monthly newsletters were also sent home to all parents; however, none of the parents who were interviewed for the study mentioned the newsletters as a source of information they used for literacy activity ideas. The newsletters often provided information to parents about child development and early learning based upon PA Early Learning Standards or High Scope Key Developmental Indicators. Even though the program translated the newsletters that were sent home, which is consistent with research recommendations (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003; Houk, 2005; Robertson, 2009), the researcher found through parent interviews that the newsletters were not a preferred learning tool for the parents.

**Question Two: What family support models does the Early Beginnings Head Start program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills? What challenges does the Early Beginnings Head Start**

**center encounter in supporting families in these areas? To what extent are Early Beginnings Head Start teachers seeing these practices being implemented in their students' homes?**

The Early Beginnings program encourages parents as their child's first and most important teachers. The foundation of the Early Beginnings Head Start program revolves around building relationships with families that support their overall well-being and to create ongoing learning and development for both the parents and children. The program utilizes the Parent, Family and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework described as “a road map for progress in achieving the kinds of outcomes that lead to positive and enduring change for children and families” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a, para. 3).

While the program emphasizes the importance of educating, forming relationships with, and supporting families, through the use of workshops, conferences, home visits, volunteer opportunities and newsletters, there is some tension between the program attempting to support and value what families are already doing and ensuring that goals are being created, supported, and reached using the PA Early Learning Standards. For instance, the home visits were an integral aspect of this program, but here are many administrative tasks that had to occur during the short visit, including updating emergency contacts and health information, which limited the amount of time the teachers could spend talking to parents. Even after the administrative tasks were completed, the teachers used more of a question and answer format in their conversations with the parents, and there were no opportunities for observing parents with their children, for role-playing, or for hands-on learning activities. One family literacy model that emphasizes home literacy practices is The Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool

Youngsters (HIPPIY) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017) program that focuses on the use of role-play activities with parents to support their learning throughout the program. A more holistic approach to educating parents during home visits, such as the HIPPIY program that involves role-play and observation, could benefit the Early Beginnings program and increase its emphasis on family learning as a whole.

The Early Beginnings Head Start program encountered several challenges, both foreseen and unforeseen, in their work with families from diverse backgrounds. Language barriers were a significant issue in communicating with parents. Along the same lines as language barriers, cultural differences can also create challenges for both teachers and parents. Houk (2005) asserted the importance of realizing that families have a variety of different cultural perspectives when it comes to involvement and their idea of involvement may be very different than what the teacher's beliefs about parent involvement may be. Similarly, the educational level of parents is a challenge, as cited by Mrs. Kelly, a teacher, who shared her experiences working with an illiterate parent and the difficulties she faced when communicating with this parent through writing. Furthermore, parents who are literate may still struggle with utilizing some of the strategies and resources they are given, specifically reading and engaging in a text that may be beyond their reading level or understanding. The challenges described above are those encountered by other early childhood programs who provide services to low-income families, many of whom are also multilingual. While the Early Beginnings program had taken steps to communicate with ELL parents, there is a critical need to

offer professional development to its teachers to better prepare them for working effectively with families who experience some or all of the challenges mentioned above.

There were also some unexpected challenges that this program faced, one of which is the space to hold parent workshops. Since Early Beginnings is located at a public elementary school, the space they are permitted to use is limited to very specific days and times. Mrs. Smith, the administrator of the program, mentioned this was a substantial challenge in creating events for parents. Additionally, scheduling was an issue mentioned by all participants of this study. For instance, the teachers described the difficulties of scheduling home visits with parents, and parents shared the challenges of trying to find time to either visit the school for a workshop or scheduling a time for the teacher to visit their home. Lastly, childcare was an expected barrier for parents who wanted to participate in the workshops, such as Mrs. Thomas, who stated that she was uncomfortable with people she did not know watching her younger children.

Through interviews with the teachers, it was evident that informal spaces outside the formal education setting of the Early Beginnings Head Start Center, such as the home, enabled teachers to get an authentic view of their children's and the families' lives outside of school. It was through these interactions with parents and families that the teachers were able to see first-hand what the parents were doing, if anything, in their home that supported the early literacy and language learning taking place at school. This knowledge was valuable to the teachers and they used their findings during these interactions to create and plan learning strategies that parents can use to support learning in the home.

**Question Three: How are parents and families utilizing these strategies at home?**

When parents were interviewed and surveyed regarding their use of early literacy strategies in the home, many indicated they relied on the program to provide them with strategies and resources to work on at home. Survey data revealed that all or most of the early literacy strategies and activities the parents utilized in the home were learned through the parent programs of Early Beginnings. Unfortunately, the teachers did not capture parents utilizing these strategies with their children in the home, due to the structure of the home visits, so the information the researcher gathered about how parents were using the early literacy strategies they learned from the program was gathered from interview and survey data.

Parents and families indicated they are utilizing strategies learned through the Early Beginnings program in their homes. Since there is an emphasis on using the resources already present in the home, teachers are instructed to look at a parent's use of in-home materials and provide suggestions for activities that can be done to enhance literacy and language development using what is already available. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992) asserted the notion that when teachers shed their role as teacher and expert and instead use home visits to take on a new role as learners, they can begin to see that their students' homes contain rich cultural and cognitive resources they can tap into and use in their classrooms in an effort to create culturally responsive and meaningful lessons. Even though the teachers ask parents about resources they have available in the home, there was no indication to the researcher that these resources were then tied back into the classroom.

With that said, when it comes to parents and families utilizing strategies in the home, Schick's (2014) research revealed the benefits of discontinuity between home and school and reassures parents that using different resources and teaching in different ways will still have positive outcomes for the child. In addition to strategies that will enhance academic development, behavior strategies are also shared with parents, if applicable, during the home visit that can be used in the home to support the overall health and development of each child. So while there is not an effort being made to incorporate the cultural and cognitive resources available in the home into the school setting, or to observe parent-child interactions, the teachers in this program provided the parents with early literacy activities and strategy suggestions that can be used to further early literacy and language learning in the home.

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, the workshops played a critical role in educating parents regarding activities they can use with their child in the home. While the parents did not cite the specific strategies they learned in the workshops that were most useful to them, the workshop setting seemed to provide them with confidence in engaging with literacy activities with their child because they were able to observe literacy activities and practice the activities during the workshops.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were some limitations to this research study. First, there were several obstacles when interviewing the parents for this study. One of the parents spoke very little English; therefore, the workshop facilitator acted as a translator during the interview. As a result of needing a translator and potentially feeling uncomfortable in the school setting, the parent's responses were very limited. Another parent who was

interviewed for this study spoke English, but her English was limited. This caused her to respond to the interview questions with very short answers, and it was possible she did not fully understand the questions she was being asked. It would have been beneficial for both of these parents to use a friend or family relative, someone the parent is familiar with, as a translator to increase their comfort level and engage in more of a conversation rather than a formal question and answer format. Furthermore, using a focus group interview may have been helpful to achieve more of a conversation among participants and interviewer than a one-to-one interview did.

Secondly, many parents were interviewed towards the beginning of this study. It is clear to the researcher that follow-up interviews could have been beneficial to further investigate or clarify trends identified by the researcher during the data analysis process. While the administrator of the program was able to provide some clarity, it would have been beneficial to have an opportunity to follow up with parents regarding their initial responses. Also, some of the parents were interviewed at the beginning of the school year. Those parents may have had more to say if they were interviewed later in the school year after they have gotten to know the people and the program better.

Lastly, scheduling challenges, specifically the canceling and rescheduling of home visit appointments, was a significant limitation to this study. The teachers also stated that this was a challenge for them as well. Many times throughout the data collection process, a home visit was scheduled that the researcher was going to attend and then the parent canceled it, for reasons not shared with the researcher. In addition to this, while there are only two home visits per year, it would have been beneficial to the research if the researcher could have added an additional home visit per family in an

effort to capture a more nuanced picture of both parent-teacher and parent-child interactions.

### **Recommendations**

Educating and involving parents is an integral part of a successful early childhood education program. Recent research findings indicate that children learn best when they receive support for learning in their homes as well as through early childhood education programs (Crosnoe, Leventhal, Wirth, Pierce, & Pianta, 2010; NAEYC, 2016; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015a). While there has been a growing number of children enrolled in early childhood education programs, the long-term benefits of these programs has remained unchanged for children from low-income families (Puma et al., 2010). The Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), conducted in 2002, revealed students attending Head Start programs saw faster improvements in language and literacy skills when compared to their non-Head Start counterparts; however, these improvements dissipated quickly and as of third grade, there were no measurable differences in test scores between Head Start and the control children (Puma et al., 2012). As a result, early childhood education centers must effectively engage, educate, and involve parents so learning can take place in the home and development can be supported outside the school setting over the long term. There are actions that early childhood education programs, especially those serving children from low-income families many of whom are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, can take to promote parent engagement and support.

Hart and Risley (2003) discovered that children living in poverty hear fewer than a third of the words heard by children from higher-income families. Specifically, over

four years, “an average child from a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family 13 million words” (p. 9). The results of Hart and Risley’s study indicate that the way parents interact and communicate with their children can lay a critical foundation that impacts the way they process future information. With this information, teachers can work to narrow this gap in early childhood by educating parents of the significance of these research findings and working with them to establish practices in the home that will lead to more positive outcomes.

The HIPPY program is one that has been very successful working with low-income families to prepare their children for success in school. This program works to “support parents to become their children’s first teacher by giving them the tools, skills, and confidence they need to work with their children in the home” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017, para. 6). The components of this model that differ from that of Early Beginnings is the emphasis of role-play as the primary method of instruction, which allows the teacher to interact with both the parent and child, observe parent-child interactions, and provide feedback. The idea of viewing parents as leaders and educating and mentoring them is one that has made a program such as HIPPY impactful. While Early Beginnings is working to educate parents in a variety of ways, moving in the direction of educating parents to be leaders so they are able to support each other and other members of the community is a shift that would have long-term benefits for children, families, and the program as a whole.

In an effort to effectively reach all families with children enrolled in Early Beginnings, it would also be beneficial to provide professional development for teachers

and administrators who work with multilingual families. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2016) asserted that while many education programs offer teachers professional development, there is a lack of including evidence-informed strategies for creating successful partnerships with families. This is an even more significant issue when teachers are working with low-income and or ELL families. The goals of these particular professional development sessions must be to educate teachers and administrators on how the educational backgrounds of parents impact their ability to provide support in the home, assumptions regarding parents' ability and or comfort level, language needs of all families, and adaptable and useable resources for all families. PA Keys, a program that works with the Office of Child Development & Early Learning (OCDEL) to "provide statewide leadership in the development of an intergraded and coordinated system of program quality improvements and professional development supports for early childhood education (PA Keys, 2009, para. 4)", offers an abundance of professional development opportunities revolving around working effectively with ELL families and culturally responsive educational practices. Many parents of ELL students may not understand what is expected of them when it comes to parent involvement and support. There are particular cultural differences that can make a parent's role in their child's education difficult. In some cultures, families believe schooling is strictly the teacher's responsibility or the focus for families is on their child's behavior, as opposed to their academic achievement (Brewster & Railsback, 2003). It is important that educators are aware of these cultural differences regarding expectations of roles so that a parent's role, and the teacher's expectation for the parents, can be clearly

identified and explained. Professional development geared toward the issues and goals listed above, would be valuable to the educators in the Early Beginnings program.

In addition, it is also important to educate teachers so they are able to learn the educational backgrounds of parents and reach them at their comfort and ability level. An abundance of resources is provided to parents through the Early Beginnings program, including newsletters, texts, informational handouts, etc.; however, these resources are often underutilized by the parents. Furthermore, utilizing community partners such as health organizations, literacy centers, libraries, etc. can help fill in areas they may be lacking and offer support to parents in the same cultural/language background. The Early Beginnings program has used some community resources, such as bringing in a speaker from the community library to share resources with parents at a workshop; unfortunately, with such low attendance at the workshop, only a handful of parents were able to benefit from it.

On a broader level, culturally responsive teaching and providing teachers with resources where the education and comfort level of the parents are considered will ideally lead to more educational opportunities provided to children in their homes. The workshops provided to parents at Early Beginnings were informative and engaging. The facilitator of the workshop spoke Spanish and often conversed with parents in Spanish. While this facilitator was multilingual and able to communicate to parents in Spanish when they asked questions or shared experiences, the majority of the workshop was in Spanish. Using a family's preferred language during workshops and school events could increase workshop attendance and the parents' overall understanding of the topics covered (Calderón & Minaya-Rowe, 2003). Furthermore, Project FLAME (Family

Literacy Aprendiendo Mejorando Educando [Learning, Bettering, Educating]), a family literacy program created for Hispanic Americans that encourages parents to engage in literacy practices in their native language while empowering them with opportunities to learn English through ESL classes and take on roles as leaders in their child's education, is an example of a successful program for Latino families. The program not only works to improve the literacy skills and knowledge of both adults and children, but was also proven to increase the self-esteem and confidence of participants (Shanahan, Mulhern, & Rodriguez-Brown, 1995).

Workshop sessions gave parents opportunities to share family values, experiences, and activities. Throughout the entire data collection process, it was during a workshop where parents were conversing and participating the most. Teachers would benefit from observing the workshops in an effort to see the variety of ways the facilitator, who is trained to work with multilingual families, engages parents and presents them with activities and strategies that can be used to facilitate learning in the home. Teachers could then continue the learning that took place at the workshop when they conduct home visits. Since participation at the workshops was minimal and home visits are required, teachers could bring some of the information from the workshops into the home visits and present it to parents utilizing some of the more favorable learning styles at the workshops.

The Early Beginnings teachers also make assumptions about the parents' comfort level with engaging in reading and writing activities with their child. For example, parents were given the text *Have you Filled a Bucket Today* (McCloud, 2006) during the first home visit of the school year. While this was a text the children had read in class, it

was clear through interviewing and observing some parents that this is a text some parents would be unable to successfully read. Schick's (2014) research emphasized the idea that a lack of continuity between home and school practices can have positive outcomes for children, meaning that children will still benefit from early language and literacy activities that take place in the home even if different learning styles, activities and or strategies are used by the parent. Therefore, it is not necessary for parents to engage in activities with their children in the same ways as the teachers are engaging with children in the school setting. Resources given to parents or activities explained to parents must be adaptable and useable so all parents can engage in literacy experiences. It is critical parents are made aware of literacy practices they can engage in at home that do not necessarily require explicit reading and writing activities. For example, teaching a parent to engage in a "picture-walk" with their child provides an opportunity for parent and child to sit together, while discussing the pictures, illustrations, or other graphic elements in a text, and engaging in conversation about what is being seen. There are no language barriers or educational expectations present for a parent to engage in the activity described above and yet there are several benefits for the child including vocabulary acquisition, building background knowledge, engaging in conversations about text, and incorporating new words and ideas into discussions (Breiseth, 2010).

A recommendation for the Early Beginnings program for improving their home visit model would be to use each home visit as a means to build trusting and support relationships with families. Cowan et al.'s (2002) research asserted the significance of teachers using the first home visit to establish a relationship with families. Furthermore, the first home visit should provide teachers an opportunity to ask parents about their

hopes and dreams for their child as well as for both teachers and parents to share the expectations they have of one another. While the researcher observed parents being asked about their goals for their family and or their child during the home visit, it was discussed in a formal question and answer format rather than as a conversation. A discussion around the developmental milestones, the child's strengths and weaknesses, academic expectations, and goal-setting was the majority of the focus of each of the Early Beginnings home visits. While sharing the information above with parents is essential during a home visit, Cowan et al. (2002) asserted there are significant benefits to the relationship between parent and teacher if more time is spent with relationship building during the first home visit.

It would be through this relationship-building process that teachers can actually empower parents and prepare them for certain aspects of the home visit such as goal-setting. During the home visit observation, most parents were asked to create a goal for their child and or their family; and the two parents asked seemed caught off guard and hesitated to answer. If parents are given notice and have a deeper understanding of the way Early Beginnings uses goals in the child's education then parents can be prepared, educated, and empowered to participate. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2011) described that goal-setting can be a new and unfamiliar process for many families; it can feel overwhelming and often times parents may not know where to begin. "When family members develop their own goals, they are more likely to feel enthusiastic, motivated, and committed to following through" (U.S. Department of Health and Human

Services, 2011, p. 3). The Family Partnership Process<sup>10</sup> recommends staff assist family members through conversations about the family's strengths, skills, needs, interests, and challenges. Approaching goal-setting in this way could lead to significant improvement not only to the relationship between parent and teacher but also the quality of goals parents set for their child. Furthermore, by educating the parent and establishing a strong relationship, the goal-setting process would become more of a collaborative effort between parent and teacher.

Early Beginnings can benefit from exploring alternative ways to communicate better, including asking parents the methods of communications they prefer and combining information from several sources together in one handout, email, or phone call to eliminate parents being overwhelmed by the amount of information coming home. Robertson's (2009) research suggests limiting the number of handouts ELL families receive. The abundance of information can be difficult for ELL parents, as well as parents with poor literacy skills. Using technology to communicate, as opposed to a paper newsletter, may have numerous benefits for parents involved in this program.

Additionally, a program such as Early Beginnings needs good partners that are going to help them meet their objectives. Unfortunately, the current space used by this program, which are classrooms at a public elementary school, does not provide them with enough flexibility to offer workshops at other times of day that may better serve their families. With workshops being the most beneficial aspect of parent education offered by

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<sup>10</sup> The Family Partnership Process is a seven-step process for setting and reaching goals with families. It was created to be used with Head Start, Early Head Start, and Early Childhood Program Staff.

this program, Early Beginnings would benefit from having strong partners that offer flexibility in the space offered in an effort to reach and educate more families.

Lastly, there are several recommendations specific to Early Beginnings that would help to improve current practices. First, utilizing a strength-based approach to goal setting would help teachers identify existing strengths in the home/family (e.g., grandparents supporting the family, siblings learning from one another) and also encourage teachers and administrators to raise their own expectations about children living in low-income families. Second, since the teachers indicated that fathers being present was a major benefit of home visits, teachers should build on the opportunities for fathers to volunteer and create direct invitations to involve fathers. Lastly, a communication application would offer direct access between teacher and parent and provide parents with opportunities to be more aware of school activities and receive updates and other relevant information in a familiar context. Furthermore, Early Beginnings could work with the feeder school to utilize the same communication application to provide consistency for the parents/families.

Further research should be conducted in a number of areas. In terms of communicating and establishing partnerships with families, barriers such as available space, timing, and childcare continue to impede the level of parent involvement in this program. Further exploration of nontraditional methods of involving and educating parents could benefit a program that endures so many challenges when attempting to involve parents. An exploration of methods such as utilizing technology to offer virtual workshops or conferences, location of school-initiated events that are most beneficial to parents and families, and alternative methods to childcare that would make parents

comfortable to attend an event are all examples of innovative alternatives that would address many of the challenges revealed by participants of this study.

Lastly, long-term research studies could help to shed light on how schools can sustain the efforts created by early childhood programs when involving families in their child's education. The findings from the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS) revealed the need to further research the ways parent involvement and engagement in the home can continue once children begin K-12 schooling. Specifically, long-term research on using the same programmatic methods Head Start uses to engage parents in early childhood and continuing those methods into elementary school could reveal ways of carrying beneficial parent involvement practices through K-12 schooling so children and parents are not losing anything as children progress through the K-12 school system.

### **Summary**

With rigor and expectations for K-12 students increasing, as a result of the shift in standards in schools across the country, it is more important than ever that all students are provided a foundation that provides them with the skills necessary to be successful. The students attending Early Beginnings are coming from low-income families, many of whom are facing their own challenges such as language barriers and weak literacy skills. Programs such as Early Beginnings were created to assist these children and their families and help establish a strong foundation that will continue through a child's educational career. This research study investigated a variety of the parent-involvement practices utilized by the program, and recommendations were made for improving the center's current parent engagement model and practices. Though there is still progress to be made in the area of best practices for parent involvement and serious implications for

doing so, Early Beginnings is an example of a program that is taking many steps to create a comprehensive approach to create healthy long-term development for children and to meet the many unique needs of every family. Ultimately, “children learn best through their everyday experiences with the people they love and trust” (Urban Child Institute, 2011, para. 3) so the everyday opportunities and experiences children have with their families should continue to be recognized and valued as an essential part of their development.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocols**

### Administrator Interview

1. How does your program support families in understanding early childhood development in the areas of language and literacy development?
2. What family support models does your program use to assist families in early childhood development, specifically in language and literacy skills?
  - a. What standards or guidelines does your program use when facilitating home visits?
3. What specific programs or workshops do you offer to parents and families?
4. What are the different ways you encourage parents to participate in their child's education?
5. What does your preschool program do to encourage a home learning environment?
6. What methods does your program use to communicate with parents and families?
7. What are some of the challenges your program encounters when attempting to involve parents in school activities such as workshops and conferences?

## Teacher Interview Questions

1. What is the main purpose of the home visits?
2. What do you see as the benefits/challenges of conducting home visits?
3. To what extent are you seeing the practices that are presented by your program being implemented in your students' home?
4. Do the parents seem receptive to the home visits and the information about early literacy and language practices you are sharing with them? Why or why not?
5. What steps do you take to encourage parent participation in the home?
6. What early literacy and language practices do you encourage parents and families to engage/participate in in the home?
7. How do you encourage parents to work with their children on the following early language and literacy skills: narrative skills, letter knowledge, print awareness, phonological awareness, print motivation, and vocabulary development?
8. What are some of the challenges you encounter when attempting to involve parents in their child's education?

### Parent/Family Interview Questions

1. How do you utilize the language and literacy strategies presented to you by the Early Beginning's Head Start program in your home?
2. Have you attended any of the workshops offered by the Early Beginning's Head Start program? If yes, were any of the workshops you attended specific to early language and literacy development?
3. If you did attend any workshops, do you believe the workshops beneficial to you and your child? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the specific activities and/or practices that you have learned through your child's participation in the Early Beginning's Head Start program?
5. What are some of the challenges of participating in the Early Beginning's Head Start program's parent workshops and/or conferences?
6. Do you have any recommendations for improving parent workshops?
7. Do you read books with your child? If so, can you describe a story that you have read to your child recently?
8. Do have frequent conversations with your child? What do you talk about with him or her?
9. Do you practice writing with your child? Can you describe something that you do to help him or her learn how to write?
10. Do you explain or introduce new words to your child? Can you offer an example of a time when you did this?
11. Do you go over the letters of the alphabet with your child? Can you offer an example of how you do this?

12. Are there other ways that you are building your child's reading, writing, and speaking skills at home?

## Appendix B: Parent/Family Survey

1. Do you have any children enrolled in another day care center other than this particular Head Start program?

yes

no

2. How many of your children are enrolled in this particular Head Start program?

1

2

3

more than 3

3. Are there other language(s) spoken in the home other than English?

yes

no

4. Please describe your relationship to the student(s).

mother

father

grandmother/grandfather

aunt/uncle

other family member

5. Please describe your age.

20-29

30-39

40-49

50 or older

6. Please describe your race/ethnicity

- White
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Black/African American
- Latino/Hispanic
- Other

7. When you visit your child's school, do you feel welcome?

- all of the time
- most of the time
- some of the time
- none of the time

8. Are written communications from the school, such as report cards and newsletters, available in a language you understand?

- all of the time
- most of the time
- some of the time
- none of the time

9. Did you attend any workshops that focused on early language and literacy development offered by the Head Start program this school year?

- yes
- no

10. If you answered yes to #8, to what extent did you find the workshop helpful?

- very helpful
- somewhat helpful
- not helpful
- not applicable

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11. Do you read to your child at home on a regular basis (at least 3 nights a week?)

yes

no

12. To what extent do you use strategies provided by Head Start to work with your child at home?

all of the strategies I use I learned from Head Start

most of the strategies I use I learned from Head Start

none of the strategies I use I learned from Head Start

13. Do you read stories to your child at home?

yes

no

14. Do you go over the letters and sounds of the alphabet with your child?

yes

no

15. Do you work with your child on sounding out letters or words?

yes

no

16. Do you work with your child on sounding out words?

yes

no

17. Do you practice writing with your child?

yes

no

18. Do you talk about new words and word meanings with your child?

yes

no

19. Do you have frequent conversations with your child about different experiences they had during the day?

- yes
- no

20. Do you feel you are involved in your child's education?

- yes
- no

21. How would you rate your level of involvement?

- heavily involved
- somewhat involved
- not involved

22. How pleased are you with this Head Start's program effort to involve parents?

- very satisfied
- somewhat satisfied
- not satisfied

### Appendix C: Home Visit Observation Protocol

Early Literacy Skills	✓ or x	Teacher Observation based on HS Guidelines	✓ or x	Parent Observations during Home Visits	✓ or x
Narrative skills		Provides materials appropriate to the child for use while the teacher talks with the parent, explains the purpose and educational value of these materials			
Letter knowledge		Shares recent classroom activities and events			
Print awareness		Reviews recent PATHs concepts taught and encourages use of PATHs in the home			
Phonological awareness		Shares recent child observations from school; asks parent to share observations from home			
Print motivation		Reviews child goals, writes new goal(s) as needed			
Vocabulary development		Reviews in-home activities from last visit/conference			
		Plans in-home activities with parent that reflect in-home materials, family routines and child goals/IEP			