

HOME LITERACY EXPERIENCES OF  
LOW-INCOME, URBAN, MEXICAN AMERICAN  
KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS

by

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B.S.E., Northeast Missouri State University, 1986

M.A., Northeast Missouri State University, 1991

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2007

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative, ethnographic study explored home literacy environments. The following question guided the research: In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?

Sub questions helped the researcher further understand the home literacy environment:

- As acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?
- How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?
- How does the level of education of the parent effect literacy activities of the home?

The research employed qualitative methods of data collection: interviews, participant observation and field notes. Surveys were also used to help understand the home literacy activities. A total of eleven families participated in the research. After completing the survey, the families were contacted and home visits were held. During these home visits, the participant observer asked semi-structured interview questions and also observed a parent-child book reading session. The visits were completed for each family between September, 2006 and March, 2007. Translators were used as needed.

The following themes emerged: 1) *Reading with My Mom*; 2) *My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*; 3) *We Talk A Lot at My House*; 4) *We Go to the Library*; 5) *My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me*; 6) *I use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters*; 7) *My Mama Studied to be a Pre-School Teacher*. Regardless of education level mothers read to their children, used literacy in other ways, and made sure their children

went to the library. Parents also took time to talk with their children and storytelling was evident in the homes. Siblings were important to the literacy development of their kindergarten brothers and sisters by reading to them and building English oral proficiency. The education level of the mother mattered only because of the subject studied after high school.

The themes found in the research are described in detail. Discussion, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for further research were provided.

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Socorro Herrera

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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to my wonderful, kind and understanding husband, Tim,  
and to our special sons, Sam and Trey.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Children across the nation excitedly enter school each year with the desire to learn how to read, even though the literacy experiences these children bring to school may vary widely (Burgess, Hecht & Lonigan, 2002). According to Au (2002), many public school teachers are working with children whose culture is different than their own and who bring different literacy experiences to school. The majority of teachers in the United States are white, middle class, and monolingual English speakers (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students may be of a different race, ethnicity, or income level and may be English language learners (ELLs). CLD students are "...individuals or groups of individuals whose culture or language differs from that of the dominant group" (Herrera & Murry, 2005). The largest group of CLD students in the United States is Hispanic of which Mexican Americans comprise 66% (Knowledge Exchange Network, n.d.). This chapter examines CLD students in general before narrows the focus to Mexican American children. Therefore, the term CLD is first used and then "Mexican American" is used throughout the rest of this dissertation.

Research finds that literate homes have books throughout the house and children are provided many reading and writing experiences (Cunningham & Allington, 1999). Children from these literate homes may enter school with 1,000 to 1,700 hours of informal reading and writing encounters. A common activity in most literate middle-class homes in the United States is a parent reading a storybook to her child (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994). From these reading experiences, children develop an understanding about print that is often considered in the

literature to be essential to success in beginning reading (Adams, 1990; Cunningham & Allington, 1999; Pressley, 2002).

Many CLD children have only had 25 hours of informal reading and writing experiences (Adams, 1990). Arnold and Whitehurst (1994) reported that 35% of children in the United States enter kindergarten unprepared to learn, with most lacking the vocabulary and sentence structure crucial to school success as it has been prescribed by schools. These children are predominantly from low-income backgrounds. Children from low-income families typically start school behind and stay behind. Children raised in poverty are at very high risk for not learning how to read. Consistent with the hypothesis that early-shared reading affects language development, CLD children may come to school without the vocabulary teachers expect because of a lack of effective, early shared reading experiences. With 90% of middle-income families reporting that they visited the library at least once a month, only 43% of CLD families visited the library that often (Baqker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 1995).

Educators have become increasingly aware of the importance of children's home literacy environment to their school literacy performance (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). Leseman and deJong (1998) found that the effects of background factors such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status on language development and reading achievement are mediated by home literacy practices, home language interactions, and children acquiring vocabulary early. A study by Guerra (1998) found that bedtime story reading was not a common literacy practice in the Hispanic community he studied. However, Hispanic children observed adults reading and writing in other ways, such as reading and writing letters, making grocery lists, reading menus, or filling out forms (Berrera & Bauer, 2003;

Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Guerra, 1998; Huerta-Macias & Quintero, 1993; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). In order to support children in becoming successful readers, educators must maximize their use of the home literacy experiences. Building on these home literacy experiences can deeply impact children in becoming successful readers.

The United States is a very diverse country with many languages other than English spoken in homes. Understanding parents' beliefs about reading practices and the effect of these practices on their child's literacy development may also prove helpful to educators when designing future instruction (De-Bruin-Parecki, 1999). Parents rely on their own childhood literacy experiences and combine those with what they think the school expects in order to construct literacy experiences in the home (McTavish, 2007).

Paris and Cunningham (1996) state that, "The congruence between participation in literacy at home and school may contribute to the differential academic success of children from minority and/or impoverished backgrounds." Educators need to find out much more about the way literacy practices evolve within different cultures of the diverse students with whom they are working. Since Mexican American students comprise the largest group of CLD students, we must strive to understand their language and literacy backgrounds (Cassidy, Garcia, Tejeda-Delgado, Barrett, Martinez-Garcia, & Hinojosa, 2004; Rowsell, 2006; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Tabors & Snow, 2001).

This chapter provides (1) an overview of the issues, (2) statement of the problem, (3) purpose of the study, (4) significance of the study, (5) limitations of the study, (6) definition of terms, and (7) conclusion.

## Overview of the Issues

This section contains an overview of the issues related to the study. Issues include:

- (1) CLD students and their early academic success in literacy,
- (2) challenges/complexities of literacy development, (3) home language experiences as funds of knowledge, and (4) preparation for diverse student demographics and its complexities.

### *CLD Students and Early Academic Success in Literacy*

Concern about literacy has surfaced in recent years for several reasons. One such reason is the enormous change in student demographics in the United States. ELL students are the fastest growing population in public schools today (Lachat, 2004). The 1990 census reported that there were 6.3 million children from homes where languages other than English were spoken. The 2000 census reported an increase to 9.7 million children. From 1990 to 2000, the student population in the United States grew 14%, whereas the ELL student population grew 104% (Bodrova & Paynter, 2000), and from 2001 to 2002, ELL student growth was 95% (Barone, Mallette, & Xu, 2005). Over half of these students were in first through fourth grades (Teele, 2004). According to Nettles and Perna (1997), of the students enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade, 38.8% are of minority backgrounds; this includes 13.1% Hispanic students.

CLD students with limited English proficiency have been documented to be at higher risk of having reading problems (National Assessment of Educational Programs [NAEP], 1996). NAEP also reports a gap between the literacy achievement of CLD children and their grade-level peers. According to the grade four results of the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (Donahue, Voekl, Campbell, & Mazzeo,



1999), 27% of white students scored below a basic level of proficiency in reading. In contrast, 60% of Hispanic students scored at this low level.

Children from low-income families are at particular risk for reading difficulties and are more likely to be slow in the development of oral language skills, letter knowledge and phonological processing skills prior to school entry. Low-income parents commonly have limited access to appropriate books, and some have limited literacy skills themselves (Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, (2002). Many children from low-income families are not prepared for the reading instruction they will receive in first grade (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001).

The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics (1999) found that 41% of families living below the poverty level read to their preschoolers on a daily basis as compared with 61% of the families whose incomes were at or above the poverty level. Daily reading to preschoolers occurred in 39% of Hispanic families as compared with 64% of white families and 44% of African American families (Vernon-Feagan et al., 2001). As the Mexican American population continues to rise toward an expected 97 million by 2050, understanding how and under what circumstances CLD children fail to acquire literacy skills is critical for developing programs that will ensure the success of more of our children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2001).

### *Challenges/Complexities of Literacy Development*

Recently, there has been a greater emphasis on teaching academics to children in kindergarten (Paris & Cunningham, 1996). This includes teaching reading. However, Snow et al. (1998) concluded that teaching a child to read initially in a second, not yet proficient, language carried with it additional risk of reading problems. Most students

who are successful in school in the United States have enjoyed the rhyme, rhythm, melody, alliteration, vocabulary, syntax, and meaning of books during interactions with adults within an English speaking context (Stone, 1999). The more children develop language skills before they enter kindergarten, the more quickly they develop their literacy skills (Teele, 2004). Parental reports on children's book-related experiences (e.g., frequency of book reading, library use, book ownership) accounted for significant variance (even when controlled for demographic factors) and predicted end-of kindergarten status (Dickinson et al., 2002). A rich language and literacy home environment, either monolingual or bilingual, is an extremely important part of early literacy acquisition (Vernon-Feagan et al., 2001). Children learn about reading and writing before they come to school from the beliefs, values, and uses of literacy of their families and caretakers (McTavish, 2007).

As they provide students with literacy opportunities, teachers can find out what native language skills Mexican American students are bringing. Mexican American children who are learning to speak both English and Spanish are at an advantage in many areas, but may have added challenges in other areas, when learning to read. These children have been shown to develop superior phonological awareness abilities because of their experience with attending to two concurrent phonological systems (Hammer & Miccio, 2004). Phonological awareness is the ability to hear sounds in words. Mexican American students who have not had exposure to English before coming to school may have a harder time, because the phonological system of Spanish differs from that of English. Barone, Mallette, and Xu (2005) believe that students should begin with letter-

sound correspondences that are common to both languages, transferring first-language knowledge to the target language.

*Home Language Experiences as Funds of Knowledge*

Children are profoundly affected by their language experiences at home (Bus et al., 1995; Leseman & deJong, 1998; Strickland & Morrow, 2000). Daily family routines are central to all aspects of child development, yet little is known about the relationship between these family matters and children's literacy development (Arzubiaga, Rueda & Monzó, 2005; Nistler & Maiers, 2003). These routines (what families do, as well as how, when, and why they do it) can provide important information about children's roles, expectations, and experiences within specific out-of-school learning situations (Arzubiaga & Monzó, 2002). These are the experiences that children bring to school as a basis for their literacy learning.

The early language environment of young children, whether intentionally constructed by families or merely happenstance, has an important impact on children's later language and literacy development (Dickinson et al., 2002; NAEYC, 1995). Almost all young children develop many understandings of language and literacy before they enter kindergarten and first grade. Children who have limited language skills when they enter school often have less developed vocabulary skills, which have a direct effect on reading comprehension (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). Children with a strong foundation in their home language and continuing support for that language through home activities such as book reading are developing skills that later transfer to English (Burgess et al., 2002; Tabors & Snow, 2001). The National Reading Panel (2000) states that parental support of literacy can have an impact on children's literacy development. Parents who

are discouraged from speaking naturally to their children, either by mixing languages or by using one language at a time, are not likely to provide rich input to their children. Parents should be encouraged to maintain their first language at home and read to their children in that language (Teele, 2004). Home literacy activities, such as reading with parents at home during elementary school, have been related to larger vocabularies of children and more skilled reading comprehension in school (Cain, 1996).

Educators need to find out much more about the language and literacy backgrounds of the CLD students with whom they work. Assumptions are often made that low-income students have not been exposed the “right kind” of literacy (McTavish, 2007). Young children, when confronted with the task of learning to read, have literacy skills and prior knowledge to bring to the process. Educators need to know what those skills are and how to take advantage of them so that the process of literacy acquisition can be optimized for all children. Research, that seeks to understand diversity in terms of how people live, and not simply in terms of extraneous characteristics of an ethnicity, is likely to improve our understanding of how all children learn (Arzubiaga & Monzó, 2002). Researchers also need to look at the extent to which families function within a specific community or neighborhood (Arzubiaga & Monzó). There is a real need to understand the early literacy and language skills of all children so this knowledge can be used by teachers in the classroom to promote literacy development (Vernon-Feagan et al., 2001).

Reading interactions in which parents ask children direct questions or in which children talk about what they are doing may not be emphasized in many Mexican American homes. Therefore, talk about books may differ from book talk of white

middle-class families. Mexican American mothers may be more likely to view their role as primarily caretakers and nurturers, not teachers of academics (Garcia, Mendez, & Perez, 2000). Only a few studies have explored the home literacy environment of Mexican American families (i.e. Delgado-Gaitan, 1990; Teale, 1986). As Hammer and Miccio (2004) state: "...We do not have enough information to adequately understand the literacy practice of this [Mexican American] cultural group, nor their relationship to later literacy outcomes of children" (p. 317).

*Preparation for Diverse Student Demographics and Related Complexities*

"People from different cultures inhabit different roles as they leave their home, where they engage with their own cultures and cultural texts and enter school with its own culture and sets of texts" (Rowell, 2006, p. 16). Success in a second language in academic settings can depend on the teacher's understanding of students' languages and literacy skills in the first language. In a study conducted by Dickinson et al. (2002), there was no evidence that teachers built on families' social/cultural experiences to develop meaningful assignments that supported children's experiences and parents' facilitation of their children's learning. Nor was there any evidence that teachers encouraged families to seek out and use community resources in ways that contributed to their children's language and literacy learning.

Teachers should tap into students' primary language skills and encourage students not only to learn English, but also to preserve their knowledge of and proficiency in their native language (Teale, 2004). Differences in home and language experiences that may affect literacy development must be acknowledged and strategies that meet the particular needs of CLD students must be used (Barone et al., 2005; Gutierrez-Clellan, 1999;

Hedrick & Perish, 2003). Allington (2002), in a study on effective teaching, concluded that in teaching students to read and write the expertise of the teacher is more important than packaged programs or instructional materials. However, many times the professional development that is offered to teachers gives little more than a casual reference to cultural and linguistic diversity. In a study conducted by Colombo (2006), none of the training in the school district focused on teachers' ability to identify the strengths and funds of knowledge that CLD students bring to the classroom.

#### Statement of the Problem

More and more CLD children are entering U.S. schools. Mexican American students are the fastest growing student group in the public schools; the greatest percentage of these children is in early childhood programs (NCES, 2003). Many of these children are living in poverty and are coming to school with what teachers see as fewer language and literacy experiences than those of their native English speaking and middle-income peers. There are many studies that show that children of poverty and ELL students perform worse on literacy measures than their higher SES, native English speaking peers. However, the field of early literacy development of young CLD children in the United States is an extensive and complicated topic and a field of investigation that has generated little systematic research (Barrera & Bauer, 2003; Lenters, 2005; Tabors & Snow, 2001). As we continue to see the percentage of Mexican American students rise in our nation's schools, this should be a concern for every American. Studies that document the home literacy environment of Mexican American students are greatly lacking (Hammett, Van Kleek, & Huberty, 2003; Hedrick & Perish, 2003).

## Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to understand the home literacy environment of urban, low-income, Mexican American kindergartners and its impact on their literacy achievement in school. This study will answer the following question:

In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?

- As acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?
- How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?
- How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?

## Significance of the Study

Educators should consider literacy values of students. These students come into classrooms with values and ideas about reading that need to be acknowledged and to appreciate that teachers' experiences may differ from students' experiences (Rowse, 2006). Teachers should explore the language and literacy backgrounds of the CLD students that they are working with (Tabors & Snow, 2001) and incorporate the students' experiences into classroom literacy instruction. As Rowse (2006) notes, "The particular kinds of events that some families share with children may have a great deal of influence on school success" (p. 12).

By understanding the home literacy environment of young Mexican American students, teachers can make better instructional decisions for their students.

Conceptualizing the culture and language that Latino students bring to school as assets rather than deficits is possibly the best strategy to improve these students' learning experiences in school (Gonzalez, 2004; Rolón, 2005). A deeper understanding of the early literacy experiences students have had will allow teachers the opportunity to build on the home experiences.

This study's target population was classroom teachers who come from a white, middle-class background and are teaching students who are culturally and linguistically different. Qualitative research methods were employed in this study because research produces richly and relevantly detailed descriptions. Pressley (2002) believes that qualitative studies produce portraits that assist the development of theories, which then improve primary literacy instruction.

#### Limitations of the Study

Data from this study was obtained through the use of survey, semi-structured interviews observations, and audio-taped information. The population in this study was limited to Mexican American students in an urban school district in the Midwest region of the United States. Many of the Mexican American students in this district are native Spanish speakers.

Although every effort was made to draw an adequate, representative random sample for this study, at least four sampling issues might have affected the study's results: (1) The parents that chose to participate in the study may not be a true representation of all Mexican American parents. (2) The limited number of participants might have adversely affected the conclusions that could be drawn. However, the qualitative research framework allows for a more in-depth, richer description to be found.



(3) The use of interviews as a means of data collection could have been a limitation.

Krathwohl (2004) believes that the “interviewer may influence response, especially if respondent seeks to please” (p. 625). Self-expression and openness of the participants during these in-depth interviews may have been a limitation because of the relationship of the researcher and parent. Currently, the researcher is a building administrator in the school district where the students attend school. This could have influenced the parents’ answers. Parents may have told the researcher what they thought she would want to hear; instead of answering the questions based on the actual literacy events in their homes. The researcher took note of this possibility and took time to help the participating mothers feel comfortable with sharing their literacy acts. This was partly accomplished by the reassurance from the researcher that she wanted to learn from them and help connect literacy activities done at school to what their children have already experienced at home. The data triangulation of data gained from three separate interviews (two one-on-one interviews and a phone interview) and a survey helped the researcher determine the real activities of the homes. The translation of the interviews may have been a limitation; however, each translation was checked for reliability by another translator.

(4) The parents may not have been comfortable with the tape player used to record the interviews and their literacy acts. However, there was a triangulation of data to help portray the daily home literacy activities of the low-income, urban, Mexican American students.

## Definition of Terms

**Low-income**-The financial status determined by a student's qualification for either free or reduced meal prices for lunch.

**English language learner (ELL)**-A Student who is in the process of transitioning from a native language to learning English. This descriptor is used with students who are just beginning to learn English, as well as those who have already developed considerable fluency (Herrera & Murry, 2005; Lachat, 2004).

**Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD)**-Refers to those students and families who have language and cultural backgrounds that differ from the predominant experience of monolingual English speakers (George Washington University, 1996)

**Emergent literacy**-The earliest phases of literacy development-before children begin to read and write conventionally.

**Mexican American students**-Students who have one or both parents with Mexican heritage.

**Phonological awareness**-knowing that oral language has structure that is separate from meaning; attending to the sub-lexical structure of words (e.g., "egg" has one syllable and two phonemes) (Burns et al., 1999)

## Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the issues and a statement of the problem. The fastest growing student group in the United States is CLD students. However, the teaching force is mainly white, middle-class, monolingual English speakers. The home language and literacy experiences that CLD students bring to kindergarten may be different than what the teacher expects. Educators, including this researcher, may hold

preconceived assumptions about Mexican American students and their literacy experiences at home.

The chapter then outlined the purpose of the study, which was to understand the home literacy environment of low-income, urban, Mexican American students. Subsequent sections discussed the significance of the study, along with potential limitations of the research study. Definitions of key terms were also provided. Chapter 2 explores the literature concerning emergent reading skills, school expectations, and the home literacy environment of low-income, urban Mexican American kindergarten students.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of the literature explores the many areas important in the understanding of how children become literate and what teachers and schools do to foster this development. This includes 1) the complexities of learning how to read, 2) kindergarten literacy expectations, 3) schools' expectations of skills kindergartners have, 4) effective emergent literacy teaching strategies. The chapter continues by outlining more specific issues in learning how to read as a Mexican American child. Continued areas of focus were 5) effective emergent literacy teaching strategies for ELL students, 6) home influences on ELL students emergent literacy, 7) realities of Mexican American families, 8) literacy of Mexican American homes, and 9) Mexican American literacy experiences versus school expectations.

#### The Complexity of Learning How to Read

Learning to read is a very complex and multifaceted task. This learning begins with a child's initial experience with print use in the environment (Purcell-Gates, 1998). It involves learning to use a different, and in many ways a "new" language with all of the complexities that language acquisition implies. There is a process that children must go through to become fluent readers (Brown, 2003). In the United States, we assume that a child will learn to read in kindergarten or first grade. However, there are many pre-requisite skills that a child needs to become a reader. Kamberelis (1988) says that learning to read "... involves the development of phonological awareness, visual and morphosyntactic aspects of orthography, concept of word, syntax, semantics,

metalinguistic awareness of many levels of linguistic organization, the relations among these dimensions, and probably a good deal more” (p. 98).

Important factors in emergent reading skills are, (a) oral language development (e.g., Beals, DeTemple & Dickinson, 1994; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2003; Neuman, 2002; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003); (b) phonological awareness (e.g. Roskos et al., 2003; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998); (c) phonemic awareness (e.g., Beals et al., 1994; Bodrova, Leong, & Paynter, 2004; NCES, 2003a); (d) letter knowledge (e.g., Bodrova, Leong, Paynter & Semenov, 2004; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003b); (e) word recognition (e.g., Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Clay, 1991; Ehri, 1998); and (f) concepts of print (e.g., Brown, 2003; Purcell-Gates, 1998).

Oral language proficiency is one of the best pre-literacy predictors for an individual’s success in word decoding and reading comprehension (Adams, 1990; Senechal, LaFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Paratore and Jordan (2007) found that meal-time talk, book reading, and parent-child play opportunities had a positive relationship to children’s later literacy development. A child with a well-developed oral vocabulary many times will grasp reading skills more readily. For children to become skilled readers, teachers need to develop a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad and deep vocabulary, and verbal reasoning abilities to understand messages conveyed through print (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Children who are exposed to stories also gain familiarity with their structural organization (Snow et al., 1998). Hearing singing and rhymes leads to phonological awareness (Stone, 1998).

Phonological awareness is woven throughout the developmental sequence of early reading acquisition and refers to the sensitivity to and ability to manipulate the sound

structure of oral language (Anthony, Lonigan, Driscue, Phillips, & Burgess, 2003). Children who are better at detecting and manipulating syllables, rhymes, or phonemes learn to read more quickly (NCES, 2003a). As children get older their phonological sensitivity allows them to manipulate progressively smaller units of word structure (Anthony et al., 2003). Phonological awareness in English can be more challenging for ELL children than for native English speaking children because of differences between English and the native language (Baron, Mallette, & Xu, 2005). Knowing the development of phonological awareness has important implications for reading instruction.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s researchers concluded that phonemic awareness might be a critical factor in learning to read (Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003). Several studies have established a strong positive relationship between phonemic awareness and success in early reading (e.g., Blachman, 2000; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Other studies have indicated that phonemic awareness can be taught directly and has subsequent positive benefits for the reading abilities of early elementary school children. Paris and Cunningham (1996) found that measures of phonemic awareness accounted for more than half of the variance in kindergarten and first-grade children's reading achievement at the end of the year. It appears that phonemic awareness may be both a cause and a consequence of early reading development.

Letter knowledge in kindergarten is an important predictor of children's word reading skills in the first grade (Chiappe, 2002). Burns, Griffin, and Snow (1999) see this as one of the important understandings a kindergartner should have by the end of the

year. As children are exposed to written language, they learn about the alphabetic nature of the relationship between speech and print (NCES, 2003). Snow et al. (1998) contend that for children to grasp the principle of alphabetic literacy, they must acquire some degree of letter knowledge and phonological awareness. As children learn letter-sound relationships and begins to appreciate the significance of spacing between words, finger-point (or word-by word) reading becomes possible (Morris et al., 2003).

Ehri (1998) proposed four phases of word recognition development. In the *pre-alphabetic* phase, children remember how to read words by connecting visual cues in the word (e.g., the two posts at the end of the word *call*). There is no systematic letter sound processing. The next phase is the *partial alphabetic* phase. Beginners commit printed words to memory by forming connections between one or more letters in a printed word and the corresponding sounds detected in the word's pronunciation. With gains in phonemic awareness, beginning readers eventually progress to a *full alphabetic* phase in which they remember how to read specific words by forming complete connections between letters seen in the written word and phonemes detected in the word's pronunciation. The final phase is a *consolidated alphabetic* phase. The beginning reader starts to notice multi-letter sequences that are common to many words he has stored in memory. Instead of processing each letter in a new word, the student is able to use onset and rhyme patterns. Early reading achievement is highly dependent upon word decoding skills (Schwanenflugel, Neubarth-Pritchett, Blake, Hamilton, & Restrepo, 2003)

Long before formal schooling begins, many children begin to learn about concepts of print (Purcell-Gates, 1998). It is important to learn the various conventions of print such as linearity, directionality, and word boundaries. These can be fostered by

noticing every day environmental print in children's communities (McTavish, 2007). Children also need to learn print-related terms such as "word" and "letter". Beginning readers learn how to "track print" to match spoken words to written words as they finger point through a text (Brown, 2003). The simple act of finger pointing should not be taken for granted. As students develop skill in matching spoken words with print, they use their fingers to point to those parts of the text that they suspect correspond to what they are saying (Clay, 1991). Before this, they point to words at the speed of spoken words.

Knowing these emergent reading skills does not lead directly to best practice. It does not indicate either how or when to teach literacy concepts (McNaughton, Phillip, & MacDonald, 2003). Kindergarten instruction should be designed to provide practice with the sound structure of words, the recognition and production of letters, knowledge about print concepts, and familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading and writing (Snow et al., 1998). Effective literacy teachers know predictors of achievement and how and when to teach concepts based on their students' home experiences, cultures, skills, and knowledge about literacy.

In this literature review, most studies about teaching children to learn to read were conducted with white middle-class children. Effective literacy instruction builds upon the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, ways of making meaning, and prior knowledge that all children bring to the classroom. Rowsell (2006) states that, "Teachers should know the kinds of text and practices students have and perform at home, honor them, and plan around them" (p. 11). Educators can foster children's literacy development by supporting and scaffolding the languages that children bring to the classroom (Willis,



2000). More studies are needed with different cultural groups to better understand the language and home literacy practices that students bring to the classroom.

### Kindergarten Literacy Standards

Recently, there has been more emphasis on the standardization of an educational curriculum in primary grades and higher expectations for students (Bodrova & Paynter, 2000; Paris & Cunningham, 1996). The curriculum that was considered first grade curriculum has been pushed down to kindergarten. In fact, de Vise (2007) notes that, “Kindergarten has become the new first grade” (p.1). Gradually, the need to develop standards specifically for early childhood emerged. Today, states and districts are still in the process of creating and refining appropriate standards frameworks to support and guide early literacy instruction. Early literacy standards should be developmentally appropriate and reflect critical early literacy competencies and underlying cognitive skills (Bodrova & Paynter, 2000).

Young children today are expected to enter kindergarten classrooms with increasingly advanced skills. Forty-nine of the fifty states have adopted state-level standards that include standards for the kindergarten level (Bodrova et al., 2004). Thirty-six states now have standards for what children should know and be able to do before they enter kindergarten in literacy and other academic areas (Blaustien, 2005). A standard is defined as a general statement that represents the information, skills, or both, that students should understand or be able to do. Standards typically identify the knowledge students should master by the end of their K-12 school experience; therefore, they are broad yet measurable statements. A benchmark is a subcomponent of a standard. It is a statement that reflects expected understanding or skill at a specific

developmental level. It is much more specific than a standard and provides more detailed information relative to a specific grade (2004).

Bodrova et al. (2004) developed early literacy standards by following a process that included reviewing current research, theory and national and state standards documents, and establishing consistency in definitions for standards and benchmarks. Following are their standards and benchmarks for early literacy (p.7).

Standard 1: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the reading process.

Benchmarks:

- 1.1 Understands the basic concepts of written language.
- 1.2 Knows the basic conventions of reading.
- 1.3 Knows the names of the letters of the alphabet and can identify them in any context.
- 1.4 Matches speech sounds with the letters of letter combinations that represent these sounds.
- 1.5 Converts written word into spoken word.

As teachers implement these benchmarks in the classroom, it is important for them to keep in mind that literacy is a complex process involving multiple interactions between different aspects of supporting knowledge and specific accomplishments along the developmental continuum. If students are expected to master the knowledge addressed by a particular benchmark, they must be taught underlying conceptual understandings and skills that support knowledge and lead to mastery. Morris et al. (2003) have suggested a developmental sequence of early reading acquisition. In kindergarten students normally

develop (a) alphabet knowledge, (b) beginning consonant awareness, (c) concept of word in text, (d) spelling with beginning and ending consonants and (e) phoneme segmentation. In first grade, students continue with (f) word recognition skills and (g) contextual reading ability. These stages do not occur in a step-by-step fashion. The skills may be developing simultaneously with knowledge of one area helping to develop the other. Mastery of the earlier emerging skills is not necessary for achieving at least moderate levels of the subsequent skill (Anthony et al., 2003). The dominant view today is that there is a reciprocal interactive relationship between phoneme awareness and early reading skills, with gains in one area leading to gains in the other (Ehri, 1998).

According to Snow et al. (1998) and Roskos et al. (2002), two goals are paramount. First, when children leave kindergarten, they should have a solid familiarity with the structure and issues of print. They should know about the format of books and other print resources. They should be familiar with sentence-by-sentence, word-by-word, and sound-by-sound, analysis of language. They should have achieved basic literacy skills, phonemic awareness, and the ability to recognize and write most of the letters of the alphabet. Kindergarten should help children get comfortable with learning from print, since much of their future education depends on this. By the end of the year, kindergartners should have an interest in the types of language and knowledge that books can provide (Burns et al., 1999).

The second major goal of kindergarten is to establish positive attitudes, including student motivation to be literate and confidence that they are successful learners. Students should be able to make text-to-life connections and retell stories. Teachers who understand their students' backgrounds, prior knowledge, and interests can pick text that

students are more likely to be able to connect with (Noddings, 2005). With appropriate text, students should also be able to listen attentively when the teacher reads to the class (Burns et al., 1999).

### School Expectations of Incoming Kindergartners' Skills

In the past, early childhood teachers were not expected to teach literacy. The kindergarten classroom was viewed as a place where children acquired general skills (primarily social) necessary for school. Social trends and advances in research have changed that perception (Bodrova & Paynter, 2000). Schools now expect students to arrive with social and academic skills. The Illinois Early Learning Project (n.d.) states that children should come to school with skills such as the ability to carry out two and three step directions and take care of things such as toileting and hanging up coats. They should also know and recognize their own name (ACFNewsresource, 2005; Illinois Early Learning Project, n.d.; Preschoolers Today, n.d.). Knowing basic colors and shapes is also expected (ACFNewsresource, 2005; How Kids Develop, n.d.; Illinois Early Learning Project, n.d.; Preschoolers Today, n.d.) as well as knowing numbers through ten (ACFNewsresource 2005; How Kids Develop, n.d.; Preschoolers Today, n.d.). Recognizing some letters of the alphabet is important (ACFNewsresource, 2005; How Kids Develop, n.d.). Schwanenflugel et al (2003) state, "Alphabet knowledge does not guarantee that a child will learn to read successfully, but the lack of it seems to guarantee that the child will not learn successfully" (p. 5). How well kindergartners can identify letters is a strong predictor of future achievement in reading (Snow et. al, 1998).

In a survey conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Learning, over 50% of the kindergarten teachers surveyed reported "language

deficiencies” as the biggest obstacle to their students’ readiness for school. Bovaird, Stuber, Patrick, and Martinez (n.d.) reported that 43% of incoming kindergartners in the state of Kansas exhibited the communication and literacy skills needed. Vocabularies of children beginning kindergarten should be three to four thousand words (ACFNewsresource, 2002). They should also be able to speak clearly and in sentences (ACFNewsresource, 2002; Preschoolers Today, n.d.). Snow (1991) and her colleagues found a strong link between young children’s oral language competencies and later reading development skills. Children come to kindergarten without these literacy skills are falling behind from the beginning.

Early pre-literacy skills are extremely important to a child’s timely gaining of emergent literacy skills. West, Denton, and Germino-Hausken (2000) found that only 37% of children entering kindergarten have a basic familiarity with print. A recent assessment by the U.S. Department of Education of more than four thousand preschoolers nationwide found that 43% of four-year-olds were unable to consistently recognize letters in a book, count out loud to twenty, or write their names (ACFNewsresource, 2005). These realities do not support many schools’ expectations.

The more children already know about the nature and purposes of reading before kindergarten, the more teachers have to build on in their reading instruction. Research reveals that the children most at risk for reading difficulties in the primary grades are those who began school with less verbal skill, less phonological awareness, less letter knowledge, and less familiarity with the basic purposes and mechanisms of reading (Burns et al. 1999). Snow et al. (1998) found that many children who begin school with fewer experiences in and less knowledge about literacy are unable to acquire the

prerequisite knowledge and skills quickly enough to keep up with formal reading instruction in first grade. Studies show that if a child is a poor reader at the end of first grade, there is a 90% chance that he or she will be a poor reader at the end of fourth grade (Strickland, 2002).

Children who had early literacy knowledge and skills (e.g., recognized letters, had concepts of print, and recognized their name) when they entered kindergarten demonstrated higher reading proficiency both in the spring of kindergarten and first grade (NCES, 2003). Burgess et al. (2002) conducted a study with middle-class preschoolers' families. They reported that on average storybook reading was begun when children were 7.3 months old. Frequency of seeing a parent read was 2.76 (where 0 was never, 1 was once a month, 2 was once per week, 3 was several times per week, 4 was once per day, 5 was several times per day). The frequency of books read by parents was 2.19, using the same scale. Since most teachers in the United States are white and middle-class, they expect the same type of literacy to be taking place in homes as found by these researchers. The kinds of literacy CLD families practice at home may not fit this view. Therefore, the kinds of literacy practiced in classrooms may not be meaningful for some children (Rowell, 2006). Family literacy practices must be acknowledged by the teacher to avoid cultural bias, and activities must build on these experiences. However, many classroom lessons are based on the assumption that students have the white, middle-class home literacy prior experiences.

There are real differences between the literacy practices of households that impact literacy learning at school (Cairney, 2003). A book with familiar concepts to English speaking children may seem strange to Spanish speaking children. Taylor and Dorsey-

Gaines (1980) gave the following example of how writing may differ at home and school: “At home, the children wrote for themselves, and most of their productions were their own. At school...teachers wrote and children copied” (p.91). Home literacy experiences are constructed by the cultural and social contexts within which children live their lives and may not match the school’s expected literacy. Thus, the ease with which children learn from beginning literacy instruction is influenced by having the “right” experiences with literacy before formal instruction begins (Rowse, 2006).

Research has shown that children from poor neighborhoods and ELL children are particularly at risk of arriving at school with less prior knowledge in areas such as general verbal abilities, phonological awareness, concepts of print, and letter knowledge (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; NCES, 2003b). Purcell-Gates (1998) found that children who were not read to often or at all exhibited less knowledge both of literacy vocabulary and of the more complex syntax of book language. Children raised in poverty are at very high risk for later illiteracy and school failure. The National Center for Children in Poverty (2002) conducted a study which indicated that mothers and fathers who did not complete high school were less likely than parents with higher education and income levels to engage in daily shared reading, playing, and hugging. They are also less likely to maintain daily routines for their young children.

Shared reading does play a role in many families’ literacy practices, but storybook reading is not a normal practice among many Mexican American families. There are many unanswered questions concerning families from different cultural backgrounds and those who are from lower socioeconomic classes. There is still limited research on the impact of shared reading on a wide range of families across different social and cultural

groups. Further work is needed to document the importance of the home literacy practices (Cairney, 2003). Moreover, poor urban families are often more literate than is assumed, and much needs to be done to dispel the myths that surround these families and literacy practices (Rowell, 2006).

### Effective Emergent Literacy Teaching Strategies

The major prevention strategy to prevent reading difficulties in first grade is excellent instruction in kindergarten (Snow et al., 1998). Early literacy instruction often must be explicit and direct. It should be embedded in the basic early learning activities, which include reading aloud, circle time, small group activities, talk, and play. Early literacy instructional strategies should take into account unique developmental characteristics of young children that affect how they learn; substantial adult guidance is needed (Bodrova & Paynter, 2000). This section provides an overview of effective teaching strategies for emergent literacy instruction. An extensive review of the literature indicated at least three critical content categories in early literacy: oral language comprehension (e.g., Layzer, 2002; Roskos et al., 2003), print knowledge (e.g., Burns et al., 1999; Layzer, 2002; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2003; Neuman, 2002; Senechal et al. 2001; Snow et al., 1998), and phonemic and phonological awareness (e.g., Neuman, 2002; Pressley, 2002; Snow et al., 1998). Print motivation, the frequency of requests for shared reading and engagement in print-related activities, was also identified as important for literacy acquisition (e.g., Roskos et al., 2003; Snow, 1998).

“Oral language activities foster growth in receptive and expressive language and verbal reasoning” (Snow et al., 1998 p. 189). Children with literacy experiences that improve oral language skills are at less risk for delays in reading development (Waldbart



et al. 2006). Rich teacher talk can facilitate oral language expansion. Teachers can use “rare words” that children are unlikely to encounter in everyday conversations (Roskos et al., 2003). Book reading and small teacher-led groups in the classroom provide opportunities for nurturing literacy-related oral language skills (Beals et al., 1994). Teachers who extend children’s comments will hear more descriptive, mature statements. Discussing challenging content and listening and responding to what children have to say improves children’s vocabulary and discussion skills.

Reading aloud to children can allow the exploration of language and literacy. Storybook reading can stretch the imagination, provide information, and expose students to perspectives and concepts they might not otherwise encounter. However, Morrow and Temlock-Fields (2005) state, “It is the quality of the interaction that occurs during reading that results in positive effects rather than just storybook reading” (p. 88). Interactive reading can be used to develop concepts about print, increase vocabulary, build familiarity with syntax and an author’s style, enhance appreciation of text, and promote the motivation to learn to read (Snow et al., 1998). Teachers need to provide shared book experiences using both non-fiction and fiction text. Using different text types gives children the opportunity to develop different literacy skills and vocabulary (Snow et al.). When teachers point to the print as they are reading it focuses attention on basic concepts of print such as directionality and the distinction between words and pictures (Roskos et al., 2003). Using predictable books and repeated readings influences children’s understanding of concepts of print and other book concepts (Drucker, 2003; Schwanenflugel et al., 2003; Snow et al., 1998).

Reading aloud has maximum learning potential when children have opportunities to actively participate and respond (Gonzalez, 1998a; Morrow & Gambrell, 2001; Schwanenflugel et al., 2003; Snow et al., 1998). This requires teachers to use three types of scaffolding or support: (a) before-reading activities that raise interest in the book; (b) during-reading prompts and questions that keep children actively engaged with the text; and (c) after-reading questions and activities that give children an opportunity to discuss and respond to books. Teachers can echo read with a group and carefully track the print with their finger while reading aloud with expression (Brown, 2003). The concept of word in text plays a central role. As kindergartners model their teacher's pointing to the words they begin to match spoken words to printed words. They are able to use letter-sound cues as a word recognition aid or acquire sight words from their reading.

Books on tape also provide an opportunity to hear the sounds of English as well as learn basic literacy practices such as page turning, tracking left to right, and making meaningful connections between words and illustrations (Drucker, 2003). This gives children an opportunity to simultaneously hear the sounds and see the corresponding graphic representation. Students need many opportunities to both hear the spoken word and see its graphic representation (Drucker). Freeman and Freeman (2000) and Barone et al. (2002) suggest that teachers need to provide students with books and other reading materials that (a) are predictable, familiar, and interesting; (b) include high quality illustrations or other visual aids; (c) integrate content and language, and (d) provide authentic language.

Illustrations in books and pictures in environmental print logos provide contextual clues to support the written text. Classrooms can support emergent reading by having a

library center with lots of good books (Gonzalez, 1998b; Roskos et al., 2003). Having functional print (e.g., daily schedules or helper charts) and play related print (e.g., signs or menus) shows students the authentic use of text. Research has demonstrated the benefits of using environmental print in classrooms to help students gain literacy understandings (Gonzalez, 1998; Morrow, 2001; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Schwanenflugel, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). Teachers should use brand names that appear frequently in the area where children live (Gonzalez-Bueno, 2003), are authentic (not replicas), and have a use. Seeing adults engaged with the materials helps children gain more meaning from them (Schwanenflugel et al., 2003).

Systematic teaching of the alphabet (and beginning consonant letter sounds) is needed because such knowledge leads to early reading and writing attempts (Pressley, 2002). In a study conducted by Morris et al. (2003), it was found that the kindergarten teachers' emphasis on alphabet and letter-sound instruction was evident in the children's high scores on alphabet knowledge and beginning consonant awareness at mid-year. Also, despite low entry levels of children in low SES schools in New Zealand, McNaughton et al., (2003) found that after 12 months of schooling, six-year-olds' knowledge of letters were at levels within or close to the distribution of progress typical of children in the first years of school. Studies have shown that alphabet knowledge tends to precede and possibly facilitate children's attention to the beginning consonant sound in words (Morris et al., 2003). Teachers must engage children with materials and activities that promote letter identification (Roskos et al., 2003). Teachers may use direct instruction to teach letter names that have personal meaning to children. Synthetic phonics instruction, in which children are taught individual letter sounds and blending

skills, gives the most advantage (Pressley, 2002). Providing materials such as ABC books, magnetic letters, blocks, and puzzles and ABC charts also helps students learn through play.

There is an extensive research base in support of the effectiveness of providing kindergartners with instruction in phonemic and phonological awareness (e.g., Pressley, 2002; Roskos et al., 2003; Schwanenflugel, 2003; Snow et al., 1998). Providing activities where children play games can increase awareness. The manipulation of units within words has a great impact on the phonemic and phonological awareness of children (Morrow, 1998; 2001). This includes working with morphemes, syllables, or phonemes. Making words activities help children segment and blend phonemes. Word sorts and word building with onsets and rimes allow children to recognize patterns (Morrow, 2001). Research consistently demonstrates strong links between reading and phonemic awareness. Phonemic awareness is greatly aided by early reading instruction (Beals, DeTemple, & Dickinson, 1994). To improve phonological and phonemic awareness, kindergarten teachers can read, tell and sing stories, poems, and songs that involve rhyme, alliteration, and sound matching (Drucker, 2003; Roskos et al., 2003).

Reading and writing are an intertwined part of literacy. Writing promotes both letter knowledge and phonological awareness. Using invented spelling has been shown to hasten refinement of children's phonemic awareness (Snow et al., 1998). Teachers can support emergent writing in several ways. Teachers should encourage children to use emergent forms of writing such as scribbling, random letter strings, and invented spellings. Teachers can also provide a writing center and have play-related writing materials (e.g., pencils and notepads for taking orders in a restaurant play center). The

language experience approach, or variations of it, consists of writing down what children say and then leading them to appreciate that what has been written is what they said.

Teachers can also be a scribe in shared writing experiences. Authentic writing experiences in the classroom are essential (Snow et al.; Roskos et al., 2003)

The National Reading Panel (NRP) was established in 1997 to assess research-based knowledge about teaching children to read. It presented conclusions to Congress and the public in 2000. The members of the group are distinguished researchers in literacy and language research (Pressley, 2002). However, Pressley (2002) and his colleagues found that the instruction that the panel found to be effective is often missing from classrooms. There is little phonemic awareness instruction as studied by researchers and described in the NRP. When teachers provide phonemic awareness activities, they are coupled with other letter instruction. Phonics instruction is much more prevalent in classrooms, but it is not as NRP conceptualized. It is not synthetic phonics instruction; rather it emphasizes word parts. There is evidence emerging that phonemic awareness and letter-sound training together do more to promote beginning reading competence than phonemic awareness instruction alone. Pressley concluded that the reading research included in the NRP may not have given the best picture of what is important in literacy teaching.

NRP had strict guidelines on the type of research that could be included. Studies had to be either experimental or quasi-experimental in nature. Therefore, qualitative studies were not included. However, qualitative analyses of early literacy instruction have yielded many important insights about its complexities- “Qualitative studies of primary-level literacy instruction are producing portraits that assist theories about what

primary-level instruction can be at its best” (Pressley, 2002, p. 178). The use of ethnographic inquiry enables teachers to learn from their students and the communities in which their students live. It also can help teachers develop an understanding and appreciation of diverse backgrounds and lifestyles (Willis, 2000).

#### Effective Emergent Literacy Teaching Strategies for ELL Students

Several researchers have found that ELL children follow patterns and processes of language and literacy development similar to those of their native English speaking peers (e.g., Barone, 2005; Freeman & Freeman, 2000; Perez, 1998). Helpful instructional strategies for native English speaking children can also be effective for ELL children. In Cummins’ (1989) interdependence hypothesis, the native language and English share some underlying similarities. Children’s skills and strategies in the native language can be transferred into English. However, the unique social, linguistic, and academic challenges for ELL children complicate the patterns and processes of language and literacy development. Teachers need to take these challenges into consideration during literacy instruction for ELL children’s language development. ELL students not only have to learn to read, they also have to navigate two different languages as they move between home and school (Colombo, 2006). Teachers need to use differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Differentiated instruction takes into account socio-cultural and developmental factors that students bring to school; it uses standardized and authentic assessment to inform and accommodate daily instruction based upon students’ language proficiency levels as well as their academic strengths and needs (IRA, 2007).

There is much debate about ELL reading instruction-whether it is best to teach ELL reading by beginning with native-language instruction, by teaching native-language reading concurrently with English reading, or solely teaching English reading. Research findings appear to be contradictory (Lenters, 2005). Some researchers contend that reading instruction in English should be delayed until first-language reading is firmly established. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) believe that learning to speak English before learning to read English gives young children:

...[a] foundation to support subsequent learning about the alphabetic principle through an understanding of the sublexical structure of spoken English words and of the language and content of the material they are reading. The ability to hear and reflect on the sublexical structure of spoken English words, as required for learning how the alphabetic principle works, depend on oral familiarity with the words being read. (p. 324)

Learning to read for meaning depends on understanding the language and understanding the vocabulary of the text being read. Other researchers question the practicality of waiting to teach literacy to ELL students until the English language is learned or until native language literacy is obtained (Lenters, 2005). Garcia and Jensen (2007) believe that Hispanic children should have a high quality dual-language program- that having native English and Spanish speakers in the same classroom would foster ethnic and linguistic equity among the students.

One of the most important strategies a teacher can use is to establish a welcoming environment for children. Creating a nonthreatening language and print-rich classroom environment starts with a smile (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). The classroom environment

should not be totally unfamiliar to ELL children. Teachers can familiarize children with the classroom by having daily routines. In kindergarten rooms, pictures and words can be displayed to show the daily schedule. Teachers should use simple commands and use objects, pictures and gestures to accompany their talk (Barone et al., 2005). Krashen and Terrell (1983) call this Total Physical Response (TPR). Another way to help produce an inviting environment is to use a developmentally and culturally appropriate curriculum that values the sociocultural background of children's families (Quinter, 1998). In classrooms that are becoming increasingly diverse, culturally relevant teaching is an important component of literacy instruction. As Ladson-Billings notes, "Culturally relevant teaching uses the students' culture to help students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions and conceptualize knowledge" (p. 142).

Utilizing "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1994) from the Mexican American community enriches the multicultural and multilingual experiences of all children and makes the classroom a more familiar environment for Mexican American children. Teaching that uses students' funds of knowledge improves participation and heightens students' interest by using an inquiry-based method that draws upon their home and community resources (Garcilazo, Mercado, & Zentella, 2001). Social networks play a very important role in Mexican American students' learning. These networks are used both formally and informally to impact children's education. Teachers should support students' learning by helping them build bridges between what they already know and what they need to learn (Villegas & Lucas, 2007).

Seeing the culture and language that Mexican American students bring to school as assets is the first step in improving children's learning experiences. Teachers should



take advantage of the first-language background that bilingual children bring to the classroom to facilitate the journey toward literacy (Morrow, 2001; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2001). Teachers and parents must communicate and collaborate with one another to contribute to the child's literacy growth (Morrow & Schwanenflugel, 2006/07). This can be done by starting at a personal level and then moving on to a more academic level. For example, if a teacher cannot make a home visit, parents can be asked to bring in photos and environmental print in the native language (Barone et al., 2005; McTavish, 2007). Parents can also be invited to help in the classroom.

Reading aloud should be given high priority in the kindergarten classroom (Au & Carroll, 1997). It provides ELL children with comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985) of the oral language. Teachers who use comprehensible input adjust their speech to the level that ELL children can understand. Teachers need to take into consideration ELL children's understandings of the concepts discussed in books. Some are universal concepts, others are culturally bound. Text should match the cultural schemata and background knowledge of ELL students (Drucker, 2003; Galda & Cullinan, 2000). The difficulty level of written text can also be adjusted so that ELL children can comprehend the text. A text that facilitates the language and literacy development of ELL students needs to be engaging and have a good combination of predictability, familiarity, supportive illustrations, and authenticity.

In an effective read aloud for primary ELL students, the teacher would typically start with a big book and do a "picture walk" (Barone et al., 2005; Schwanenflugel et. al., 2003). A picture walk includes looking at and discussing the cover and pictures and

predicting what the text might be about. The teacher may want to use vocabulary found in the book to familiarize the students with new words. She or he may also talk about the book conventions. The book is then read with a slowed speech rate during the first reading, and then a normal rate of speech is resumed gradually during subsequent readings. A few key content words should be carefully selected and discussed. These words should have concrete meanings so that it is easy to find an image that illustrates them (Morrow, 2001; Perez & Torres-Guzman, 2002). Read alouds in the second language should focus on helping children construct meanings, not just on helping them learn the surface linguistic features. In this way, children are encouraged to make text-to-self connections. Retelling can let teachers know if a child comprehends a book. If an ELL child is at the silent or early production stage, the child can retell the story in the native language, sequence events using pictures, act it out, or use a character map or graphic organizer (Helmen, 2004; Herrell, 2000).

Researchers have found that the same effective instructional methods used with native English speakers can also foster the development of decoding and spelling for children from a wide range of language backgrounds (Strickland, 2000). When considering basic literacy skills, Chiappe et al. (2002) found that ELL and native English speaking children showed comparable performance in letter identification, decoding, and spelling in both kindergarten and first grade. According to a Chiappe et al. (2002) study, ELL children acquire basic literacy skills in English at the same rate as native English speaking children. In fact, the same underlying skills-letter knowledge, spelling, and phonological processing, were strongly related to word reading in English for all children. Researchers found that phonological awareness in Spanish was a strong

predictor of word recognition and pseudo-word decoding in English for young native speakers of Spanish (Chiappe et al.). Results from Chiappe et al. showed that ELL children demonstrated greater growth than their native English-speaking peers between kindergarten and first grade, indicating that effective instruction may help close the gap for children from linguistically diverse backgrounds. These study results suggest that systematic and explicit instruction in phonological awareness and phonics benefit children from diverse language backgrounds.

However, phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge can be more challenging for Spanish speaking Mexican American children than for native English speaking children because of differences between English and Spanish. The more that teachers know about the similarities and differences between the English and Spanish sound systems, the more they can support students. For example, the Spanish language does not have the onsets and rimes of the English language. Helman (2004) believes that students should begin with letter-sound correspondences that are common to both languages, transferring first-language knowledge to the target language. Teachers may want to use words that begin with the same letter in Spanish and in English, making sure that the letter represents the same sound in both languages (Gonzalez-Bueno, 2003). Word walls used separately in Spanish and English can support student learning. After a foundation has been built on the commonalities of the two languages, teachers need to systematically outline how the two languages differ and provide added support as needed for the parts that are different (Helman, 2004).

English and Spanish share many of the same phonemes, yet they each also contain sounds that are not recognized as distinct in the other language. A sound that is not

present in one's native language will likely be difficult to hear and, in turn, produce (Helman, 2004). The phonemes and blends that are present in English but not present in Spanish are apt to cause the most problems for Spanish speakers learning English. For example, Spanish does not have the sound of /j/ as in "joke." Native Spanish speakers may substitute the /ch/ sound, so the word may sound like "choke." Once a foundation has been established, distinct features of the second language should be brought to students' attention and taught explicitly (Helman, 2004).

Teacher knowledge about how pronunciation influences writing at the alphabetic stage of development is crucial to providing effective literacy instruction. Activities that encourage pronunciation practice in a low-stress environment may include choral reading, echo reading, sound sorting of pictures, and use of poetry and music (Helman, 2004). Students should also have plenty of opportunities to write for authentic purposes in a low-pressure classroom environment. Such opportunities might include making lists, writing a note to the principal, or writing thank you notes.

Teachers who have background knowledge about Spanish, as well as the factors that influence students' language and literacy development in English, have more tools to effectively scaffold instruction for Spanish speaking students (Helman, 2004). As teachers provide occasions for students to share their growing knowledge of English, they gain insights about the native language skills students bring to the task. All students come to school with strengths in their native language. Ideally literacy instruction builds on those strengths (IRA, 2007).

When seeking to understand the needs of the Mexican American child, previous literacy experiences must be considered. Understanding and respecting the array of

different cultures and languages represented in their classrooms helps educators adopt strategies for teaching literacy that encourage and support student achievement. Rowsell (2006) states, “ The task of looking critically at literacy can be upheld if we take account of a disparity between present practices and what students are doing in their lifeworlds” (p. 16). More research is needed to study Mexican American students’ literacy acquisition. Lenters (2005) characterizes Mexican American reading research as having breadth, but little depth. Qualitative research can provide this depth and describe ELL students’ literacy acquisition.

#### Home Influences on ELL Emergent Literacy Students

Substantial literacy development occurs before the age of six (Paris & Cunningham, 1996). Long before entering kindergarten, children use reading and writing as part of their everyday lives; the kind of literacy exposure that children receive varies widely by their families’ culture and socioeconomic status. Paratore and McCormack (2005) state, “Almost all linguistic, cultural, and social class groups use print in some ways in their home settings” (p. 138). Literacy at home is used to help children learn, more often and in more creative ways than teachers may realize (McTavish, 2007). Literacy development occurs naturally during the routine of daily living for enjoyment and necessity. Reading and writing are embedded activities tied to specific relationships and contexts (Neuman & Roskos, 1997).

It is important to consider the many differences in beliefs and practices among cultural groups and between social classes. Teachers are often unaware of the different cultural meanings attached to schooling that minority children have learned in their communities (Paris & Cunningham, 1996). Children from cultural and linguistic

minority groups who live in school communities with limited access to the resources of mainstream communities often achieve at lower levels in literacy instruction than that of other children (McNaughton et al., 2003). Teachers need to build on families' strengths rather than focus on deficits (Waldbart, 2006); assumptions that low-SES families engage in few literacy activities continue to persist with teachers (Colombo, 2006). Lapp, Flood, Moore and Nichols (2005) believe that, "It is important to remember that their literacy-related practices are not deficient. Their literacy practices at home just differ from the practices of our classroom" (p. 169). Educators need to understand the community and home influences to provide effective instruction for students that come from minority or impoverished backgrounds (Paris & Cunningham, 1996).

Family involvement in children's education has become widely recognized as an important element in effective schooling (Cairney, 2003; Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Routman, 1996; Rowsell, 2006). The home literacy environment can have an early and potentially lasting influence on literacy development (Barton, 2003, 2005; Barton, 2003; Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Dickinson, McCabe, & Anatasopoulos, 2002; Leseman & deJong, 1998; Routman, 1996). Numerous researchers (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; Leseman & deJong, 1998) have suggested that in order to understand the nature of the relationship between the home literacy environment and the development of literary and language abilities, it must be understood that home literacy practices are complex and multifaceted

Reading to children in their preschool years helps develop print and phonemic awareness and the story grammar skills that are necessary for success in reading in the primary grades. Book sharing during the preschool years has been demonstrated to facilitate children's development of receptive and expressive language abilities and early

literacy skills (Leseman & deJong, 1998; Rowsell, 2006; VanKleeck, Gillam, Hamilton, & McGarth, 1997). Thus, early picture-book experiences are reliably correlated with language development. This includes the frequency with which children are exposed to picture books and the quality of those interactions. Six factors during parent-child book reading have been found to be positively related to children's literacy development: (a) total number of words spoken by the child during the reading, (b) total number of questions answered by the child, (c) number of questions asked by the child, (d) number of warm-up, preparatory questions asked by the parent, (e) number of post-reading evaluative questions asked by the parent, and (f) the amount of positive reinforcement provided by the parent (Leseman & deJong, 1998).

Reading aloud is a positive experience that can help children approach learning to read with the expectation of pleasure and success. At the same time, children are learning about reading and language. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) found that individual differences in reading comprehension growth were linked to differences in print exposure. Reading aloud provides opportunities for children to hear fluent reading. It increases children's vocabulary-first receptively and then expressively. Reading books aloud provides children with models and ideas for their own writing and storytelling. Children with literature exposure hear a variety of structures and techniques for telling stories. This increases their repertoire of experiences that allow them to understand new experiences. Children begin to make connections including text-to-text (e.g., recognizing an author's style), text-to-self, and text-to-world. Reading aloud whets children's appetites for books, expands their interests, and helps children experience different genres. It can also help children learn how to handle books and gain many concepts of

print (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). Print exposure plays a primary role at the beginning stages of word recognition. It is strongly related to the growth of the orthographic lexicon and thus plays a more indirect role in the development of phonological processing (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998).

Investigations of naturally occurring interactions during parent-child book reading describe the types of interactions and learning that take place when parents read to their young children. Studies have demonstrated that during reading parents helped teach new words or concepts, used knowledge of their children's background to connect text to life, scaffolded the text for their children to avoid confusion, and expanded or extended the story being read (Beals et al., 1994; Burgess et al., 2002; Reese, Cox, Harte, & McAnally, 2003; Snow & Griffin, 1998). These high levels of conversation during parent-child storybook reading have been found to be positively associated with children's performance on a test of early print skills (Beals et al.). Also noted was the genuine conversational aspect of the storybook experience and the pleasure with which most families read (Strickland & Morrow, 2000). Early work in this area suggests that parents play many roles during shared storybook reading such as eliciting children's participation and making sure that the storybook reading sessions are meaningful (Strickland & Morrow).

Burgess, Hecht, and Lonigan, (2002) conducted home observations and found that most mothers engaged their children through questions and comments interspersed throughout a story. Mothers asked questions to focus their children's attention, to check comprehension, and to elicit labels for objects and descriptive attributes. The basic format for book-reading conversations consisted of the mother reading the text, making



comments, and asking the child questions about the text and its connections to his own life. Mothers, on average, inserted 34 comments and questions per session, indicating that much more was happening than a simple reading of the text (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan).

Utterances were coded as either immediate-talking which dealt solely with what they could see in the physical context-or non-immediate. Non-immediate talk allowed the parent and child to explain the behavior of characters and the meaning of words, to make connections between the story and the child's world, and to make predictions or draw inferences from the text. Non-immediate talk appears to anticipate the skills that children will require later for successful literacy and school achievement. Non-immediate talk also supports the more sophisticated skills of story comprehension and story production. Rich cognitively challenging talk, including explanatory and narrative talk and book reading at home with non-immediate talk and analytical talk, improves children's' literacy skills (Arzubiaga et al., 2002; Beals et al., 1994).

Two reviews concluded that approximately 8% of the variance in later language and literacy measures could be explained by the variation in frequency of book sharing during the toddler and preschool years; this finding held regardless of socioeconomic status (Bus et al., 1995; Scarborough & Dobrick, 1994). Some children enter kindergarten already reading. Numerous studies have shown that early readers come from homes where adults read to them regularly and where books and reading materials are readily available (e.g., Bus et al., 1995; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; DeBruin-Parecki, 1999; Teale, 2004). Questions remain, however, about the specific characteristics of interactive sessions that lead to children's success in reading. It is not only the frequency with

which a parent reads to a child that affects the child's success; what that parent does during shared reading and how he or she mediates the shared text is important as well.

It is primarily through interactive dialogue that children gain comprehension skills, increase their understandings of literacy conventions, and are encouraged to enjoy reading. Rowsell (2006) found that mothers who treated book reading as an opportunity to have a conversation with their children facilitated more language use and understanding of the text. An early start in reading is important in predicting a lifetime of literacy experience. If the student gets off to a fast start in reading acquisition (as indicated by their first-grade reading ability score) then he or she is more likely to engage in more reading activity (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998). Thus, a fast initial start at reading might well help to develop the lifetime habit of reading.

Differences in family background may account for a large share of variance in student school achievement (Cairney, 2003; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Pressley, 2002). Most parents are willing to help with their children's education; but low-literate parents may lack the skills and not have the time (due to work and family responsibilities) to support their children's efforts to gain literacy (Cairney & Munsie, 1995; Gadsen, 1995; Philliber, Spillman, & King, 1996). ELL parents who are low-literate often lack adequate reading skills in their native language and are even more limited in English. Hart and Risley (1995) studied three-year-old children in professional families and found that the children used a vocabulary as large as that of the parents in the study who were on welfare. Because of this, young children in poverty may not develop the background knowledge necessary for beginning reading instruction (Cassidy et al., 2004).

Previous research has shown that parent beliefs appear to influence the types of literacy-related activities parents provide at home, the approach they take in interactions during these activities, and the literacy outcomes of their children (Baker et al., 1994; DeBaryshe, 1995; Neuman, Hagedorn, Celano, & Daly, 1995; Sonnenschein, Brody, & Munsterman, 1996). More middle-income parents emphasize the entertainment aspects of literacy learning, whereas more low-income parents emphasize skill learning during literacy-related activities (Hammett et al., 2003). Parents should be encouraged to use and develop children's native language during literacy activities (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 1995).

It is important to note that not all low-income children lack the pre-kindergarten skills needed to be successful in school. Research on the literacy practices of diverse low-income families suggests that some low-income children, regardless of background, do have considerable experience with literacy before entering school and are able to achieve successfully (e.g., Arzubiaga et al., 2002; DeBruin-Parecki, 1999; Teale, 1986). This experience, however, may not take the form of a parent sitting down and reading a storybook to the child. For example, the more a family involves children in literacy-related religious activities, the better the children think of themselves as readers (Arzubiaga et al., 2002). Home reading variables (frequency of oral reading, number of books owned, and library membership) predict levels of language skills above and beyond economic status (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994). Beals et al. (1994) found that mothers' long-term aspirations for their children were related to how they talked to their children. Mothers who expected their children to go on to higher education spoke in longer sentences and talked more with their children than mothers whose aspiration for

their children was just high school. Research points to the importance of the family in shaping young children's social and emotional well being and readiness for school.

By examining parents' beliefs about education and their reading practices and considering the effect of home literacy practices on literacy development may also prove helpful when designing future instruction (Dickinson et al., 2002). When possible, teachers should visit the child's community or read and learn about the community through the use of books, pictures, observations, and conversations with community members. Teachers can also visit the home and meet with other family members. Parents and families should be invited to share, participate, and engage in activities with their children. Parent involvement can be encouraged in a number of ways, including (a) asking parents to share stories, songs, drawings, and experiences of their linguistic and cultural background, and (b) asking parents to serve as monitors or field trip organizers (NAEYC, 1995). Lenters (2005) reported that the issues of comprehension were addressed by forming strong home-school connections. Text was sent home in both English and the child's first language. Parents or older siblings were encouraged to share a book in both languages, listen to tapes of the book in both languages, use puppets or figurines to act out the story, and play games with the words to build vocabulary. Teachers should respect children's home language and use it as a base on which to build and extend children's learning language and literacy experiences (Neuman & Roskos, 2005).

Schools need to set the climate for strong connections with parents. There may be difficulties stemming from the cultural differences between teachers and the students they teach (Waldbart, 2006). Educators may need to put in extended effort with many

minority, low-income, and single-parent families (Barton, 2003). When parents believe their literacy beliefs and practices are respected and upheld, they become strong supporters of school practices and effective allies for their children in the negotiation of meaning between their two languages (Barton). However, in the study conducted by Dickinson, McCabe, and Anastasopoulos (2002), there was no evidence that teachers were building on families' social/cultural experiences to develop meaningful assignments that supported children's practice and parent's facilitation of their children's learning. Nor was there any evidence that teachers encouraged families to seek out and use community resources in ways that contributed to their children's language and literacy learning. The challenge for educators to prepare minority students for successful participation in the school system is dependent on the ability of the schools to incorporate the parents and the culture of the home as an integral part of the school instruction plan (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). Programs that experience the greatest success not only promote literacy in the home but also recognize the first-language literacy practices of the children's family and how the family balances their resources and constraints (Dickinson et al., 2002; Lenters, 2004).

Educators need to be very knowledgeable about the home literacy environment of the child and remember that it is a complex issue. Delgado-Gaitan (1996) found in one study that questioning strategies taught to Mexican American parents for use in storybook reading were counterproductive. With the passage of time, parents became increasingly comfortable reading with their children, and the complexity of their discussions grew. Parents were able to pose to their children the four different types of questions that had been taught to them. However, the particular questioning strategies limited the project's

outcomes, primarily because parents were not used to working with school-type strategies, and the questions excluded parents' cultural knowledge. Parents could have incorporated their own process and framework for storybook interaction with the children. This might have allowed the parents to build on their family stories, thereby transforming storybook reading from an activity into a literacy experience that had a real life application (Barrera & Bauer, 2003). Educators must have knowledge of the cultures and families that they are working with to best teach their children.

Future researchers need to be mindful of the home influence on literacy skills. In young children who are not yet reading, researchers look at reading-readiness skills such as oral language, phonological sensitivity, letter-name knowledge, and word decoding. These are important skills in the children's development of more complex literacy skills and eventual success in school. Studies examining the nature of the relationships between the home activities and development in language and literacy have been primarily correlational in nature. Researchers have noted the need for more research that begins to unravel the complex relations between the home and language and literacy outcomes (Burgess et al., 2002). The importance of parents as a child's first teachers has long been acknowledged. However, the topic of family literacy is not receiving attention in reading research, but literacy researchers agree that it should (e.g. Burgess et al., 2002; Cassidy et al., 2004).

Interventions designed to increase children's academic performance by manipulating home literacy practices are unlikely to succeed unless the forms of behavior they target are feasible within the multiple aspects of family life (DeBaryshe, 1995; Leseman & deJong, 1998). This includes the attitudes of the community toward literacy

as well as the educational attitudes and resources of the family. In some circumstances, what teachers see as beneficial parental involvement tasks can, in fact, be intrusive and disruptive (Paratore & McCormack, 2005). Parents may already have a set routine for literacy practices. Listening to parents is a critical step in understanding what might or might not work, when attempting to develop a collaborative relationship with a particular family. Therefore, research designed to understand why parents provide the literacy activities they do and to identify the best way to read to and interact with children in order to maximize a certain skill is needed (Burgess et al., 2002).

The relationship between early literacy experiences and the development of literacy and language abilities for Mexican American families also needs to be explored. Observational studies of literacy development reveal its relation to naturally occurring patterns of interaction thereby identifying potentially beneficial settings (e.g., book reading). Studies that describe the quality of interactions and help identify the types of interactions, within these settings that are most likely to foster development are needed (Beals et al., 1994).

Research is also needed that explores how culture and economic status may be related to parents' styles of interacting during book sharing. As Arzubiaga et al. (2002) note, "Research which addresses diversity in terms of how people live, and not simply in terms of an extraneous characteristic of only some ethnicities is likely to improve our understanding of how all children learn" (p.10). Educators often hold untrue assumptions about family literacy situations (Willis, 2000). Schools need to know which types of interactions yield the greatest learning at home as well as and how to build on a students' home literacy activities. The findings from McTavish's (2007) study points to the need

for teachers to look carefully at what their children's individual families do to promote literacy .

### Realities of Mexican American Families

Research has shown that Mexican American parents care very much about their children's education and want to be involved (e.g., Lopez, 2001; Willis, 2000). The word "educación" (education) in traditional Mexican American families is more comprehensive than the generally accepted American usage. The term considers that the educational process is about more than getting good grades in schools. It is used to describe how people behave politely, how they are willing to act collectively with others, how they support and respect everyone, and how they defer to authority (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Some Mexican American parents believe that they are primarily responsible for children's attendance, punctuality, manners, and hygiene, and that their attention to curriculum-related matters would suggest disrespect toward the teacher (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Paratore & McCormack, 2005). "Educación" is part of Mexican American culture, and children are held to this expectation by family members (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Mexican American parents often have full trust in schools, which includes believing that teachers know the best teaching strategies to use and treat their children fairly (Ada, 1993). Many parents themselves have had very little schooling; 49.7 % of Mexican immigrants in the United States had a high school diploma in 2001 (Yaden, Tam, Madrigal, Brassell, Altamirani, & Armendariz, 2001). However, Mexican American parents placed a high value on formal schooling for their children and consistently made this value apparent to their children by demanding consistent school attendance, homework completion, good behavior in school, and academic progress



(Monzó & Rueda, 2001). All parents in this study also believed that their children would benefit from the educational system in the United States and often compared it to the system in their home countries. However, many teachers do not see this parent support and view CLD students as having deficits rather than coming to school with a variety of strengths (Colombo, 2006).

Mexican American students are the fastest growing student group in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. In 1972, 6% of students in the United States were Hispanic. In 2000, 16.6% of the student population was Hispanic (NCES, 2003b). In 2005, one in five children eight years old or younger in the United States was Hispanic (Garcia & Jensen, 2007). According to NCES (2003b), in 2001 the family characteristics for Mexican American students were as follows: 60.6% had a parent with a high school education or higher, 64.4% lived in a two-parent household, 28.2% were living below the poverty level, and 33.5% were categorized as "near poor" living at 100% to 199% of the poverty level. Of the Hispanic students, 70.9% spoke a language other than English at home. With this growing population, it is vital that educators learn and understand the realities of Mexican American families.

The less visible cultural practices that underlie interactions in the family and in the school are important for educators of Mexican American students to understand. Parental authority is an important value in the culture. Parents instill in their children a profound respect for teachers and for school (Quinter, 1998). In Mexican American families, children may be assisted with tasks by their parents or older siblings much longer than other children. Therefore, educators need to be sensitive to Mexican American children's unique needs in the acquisition of literacy skills, which may include

direct instruction or assistance (Gonzalez, 1998b). Family unity and interdependence are highly valued (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Siblings close in age are involved in a unique reciprocity in which both siblings have opportunities to develop literacy skills. Older siblings become links to school-type literacies and materials (McTavish, 2007). They often play “school”. In many Mexican American communities, friends and community members are “family.” Many children live with extended family (Quinter, 1998). Mexican Americans are generally family centered and believe that they should spend as much time as they can with their young children (Gonzalez, 1998a). The children have been socialized in the family to listen attentively and respectfully to adults. They are typically keen observers (Gonzalez, 1998a).

Mexican American families use language in complex ways. Pease-Alvarez (2003) found that many Mexican American parents would like their children to maintain their Spanish skills. Regardless of whether Spanish, English, or both languages are spoken in the home, oral language use is a strength of families. The use of Spanish and English in literacy is linked to different domains of the lives of Mexican American families (DeLaPiedra, & Romo, 2003). For example, the religious domain primarily uses Spanish. Talking with children is important to families. Home interactions and communication are rich and full. Parents and extended family talk and sing to children from birth. Oral and written literacy has a strong cultural and historic tradition, even in Mexican American families where the parents have little formal schooling (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Teachers should engage Mexican American students in casual talk as much as possible (Garcia & Jensen, 2007).

As referenced earlier, almost 50% of Mexican American parents do not have a high school diploma. The amount of education Mexican American parents have varies widely. Therefore, families and their behaviors relative to supporting their children in their educational endeavors are enormously diverse (Arzubiaga et al., 2002). In some Mexican American families, parents may not be familiar with all the academic work that their children bring home, but they believe a supportive, caring home environment is very important. Parents of children in the primary grades may spend two hours or more doing homework with their children. Unfortunately, parents may not understand what teachers expect any more than the children do because of the language or content.

There is substantial variation within the Mexican American population in reading achievement. Such variability, combined with our understanding of the relationship between family factors and literacy, suggests that home-related experiences need further examination. Research is needed to inform educators about the specific practices of Mexican American homes (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). No one can truly understand the home literacy practices from afar.

#### Literacy of Mexican American Homes

Most of the research on home literacy of has focused on homes and classrooms in a suburban, middle-class environment (Orellana & Hernandez, 2003). Home literacy activities provide an opportunity for parents to be their child's best teacher in their natural social environment. Young Mexican American children develop values about literacy through their interactions with adults in the home (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Literacy can take different forms, ranging from emotional support for their children's desire to pursue schooling to storybook reading between parents and children. Some families have little

knowledge of the educational system and are not aware of the importance of having books in the home to help children become successful readers at school. Further, they do not have access to instrumental knowledge regarding the types of literacy activities most valued in schools. Some families are not aware of having a public library within walking distance of their home and have never been shown how to check out books. Other parents may be undocumented and cannot obtain library cards; they avoid situations in which they fear their legal status could be revealed (Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

Literacy usage varies in Mexican American homes; some form of reading takes place in most homes (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Common literacy activities include rich oral dialogue with children, interpreting and filling out forms, reading and writing letters to relatives in Mexico, and reading labels and signs in the community during daily activities (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Reading material in both English and Spanish is often found in the form of letters, newspapers, magazines, flyers, advertisements, and school material. In addition to daily correspondence, literacy in Mexican American homes may include reading a bible, magazines, history books, poetry and *fotonovelas* (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). As Latino children take part in home and community activities and negotiate print to perform daily tasks, such as ordering from menus and reading labels and signs, they have many opportunities to see the importance of becoming literate. Many times, someone in the family translates the text from the menus, labels and signs from English to Spanish to increase understanding for others.

The fact, then, that literacy does exist in the home environment of families should be recognized as a positive factor in the children's literacy development (Heurta-Macias & Quintero, 1993). Teachers need to see the home and school as co-teachers of literacy

(McTavish, 2007). Many existing classroom practices underestimate and constrain what Mexican American children are able to demonstrate academically. Schools should investigate and tap into the “hidden” home and community resources of their students for better literacy instruction. Building on students’ background knowledge and experiences as well as their strengths has been shown to be an effective teaching strategy (Gonzalez, 2004; NCREL, 1994). As previously discussed, parent-child book reading is a leading indicator of reading success in school. However, Nistler and Maiers (2003) found that storybook reading is not a normal practice for most Mexican American families. In fact, Berrera and Bauer (2003) stated, “Storybook reading is increasingly viewed as a cultural practice that is not universal across human communities” (p. 264). Reading favorite stories does take place in some Mexican American homes; however, as students advance in grade level, leisure reading decreases in both languages. Parents feel less confident about the critical reading skills their children are learning, and these skills increase in difficulty in the upper grades (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Teale (1987) investigated the availability and variety of books in the homes of families-half of which were bilingual Spanish-English. Almost 65% of the books were storybooks. The rest included expository books, concept books (labeling, counting, alphabet), books of rhymes, and religious books. Some of the books were in English, others were in Spanish and others were in both languages.

Although the white middle-class act of storybook reading may not take place, there is a rich diversity of literacy practices within families that should be acknowledged and utilized (Cairney, 2003). The functional nature of literacy in the home context is distinct from the decontextualized literacy of the classroom. So different are the uses of

literacy in home and school contexts that children may not recognize how the book-reading and writing activities of the school relate to the functional types of home and community literacy activities in which they engage (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Home literacy activities consume a good deal of time and effort for students and parents. Many household activities center around schooling, from the daily routine of taking children to school and making sure homework is completed to discussing school activities and listening to children's stories about their experiences, their teachers, and their classmates (Monzó & Rueda).

Oral language is an important part of developing emergent literacy skills. Storytelling is a popular oral tradition in Mexican American families (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Researchers found that children's oral traditions led to a higher frequency of oral monologues in their text re-enactments, more so in Spanish than in English (Barrera & Bauer, 2003). Parent-child discussions about future career goals are common as well (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). Television also is a tool for hearing language (both English and Spanish). Spanish speaking adults favor Spanish-language programs. As children become more proficient in English, they may begin to request their favorite programs in English. (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

Mexican immigrants usually have an extended social network, which plays an important part of their literacy practices. There are "mediators of literacy" who have the literacy skills needed to make meaning from an event (DeLaPiedra & Romó, 2003). This includes not only reading and writing, but also interpreting the event. This social network is helpful in dealing with institutions such as the post office, schools, and city

services where literacy practices involve a new language and different ways of doing things.

There have been relatively few studies that have provided a detailed description of literacy practices within a wide range of families. Literacy is not a single unitary skill; rather, it is a complex social practice, which takes many forms, each with specific purposes and specific contexts in which it is used (Cairney, 2003). Richly detailed qualitative analyses may ultimately provide the most tangible, personal, and powerful means of demonstrating the effects of family literacy programs as well as the processes and dynamics of instruction that contribute to them (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998; Nistler & Maiers, 2003). Daily family routines are central to all aspects of child development, yet little is known about the relationship between these family matters and specific aspects of children's literacy development (Arzubiaga et al., 2002). Family literacy activities of Mexican American families need to be further examined (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990).

#### Mexican American Literacy Experiences versus School Expectations

Studies of Mexican American families demonstrate that many strongly value formal education and schooling, identifying these as the main avenues for their children's social and economic mobility (Goldenberg & Gallimore, 1995; Monzó & Rueda, 2001). However, too often schools do not fully explore or value diverse family backgrounds (Field & Aebersold, 2003). Villegas and Lucas (2007) state:

Teachers need to know something about their students' family makeup, immigration history, favorite activities, concerns and strengths. Teachers should also be aware of their student's perceptions of the value of school knowledge,

their experiences with the different subject matters in their everyday settings, and their prior knowledge of and experience with specific topics in the curriculum (p. 30).

Many times there is a mismatch between school expectations and home literacy experiences (Waldbart, 2006).

Mexican American students bring varied experiences to school. The understandings of literacy, cultural practices around literacy, everyday context for literacy, motivations for using literacy, access to print, and other factors are far from universal. It is important to recognize that Mexican American and/or ELL students may come to school with background knowledge, discourse conventions, and experiences with and understandings of the functions of print and literacy that may differ from those normally expected in a mainstream majority-student classroom (Nistler & Maiers, 2003). DeLaPiedra and Romó (2003) found that “literacy practices as collective activities were congruent with the shared values and cultural practices found in Mexican households, and in the Mexican immigrant community and in the literacy events the mother recalled in Mexico” (p. 54). Teachers should appreciate that Mexican American children may for the first time experience a setting with language that is different from their familiar home language when entering kindergarten (McGee & Morrow, 2005).

Bus et al. (2003) hypothesized that the contributions of the home and the inter-relationship between home and school should be taken into account when one is examining the roots of literacy. Research studies of children who learned to read before the age of six and investigations of emergent literacy uniformly conclude that parental beliefs, aspirations, and actions critically affect children’s literacy growth (Field &



Aebersold, 2003; Routman, 1996). The match between participation in literacy activities at home and school may contribute to the differential academic success of children from minority and/or impoverished backgrounds (Paris & Cunningham, 1996). Mason and Schumm (2003) studied Hispanic ELL children and concluded: “Those who already have exposure to reading and literacy at home have an easier time becoming literate in English than those who do not” (p. 358). A strong literacy foundation in a child’s native language is the base for later literacy in English.

Growing evidence suggests that many children do poorly in school mainly because their cultural frame of reference is so different than that of the school (Lachat, 2004). Success within our educational system requires the cultural capital to know which types of reading behaviors are valued and rewarded. Mexican American immigrant families generally do not have this cultural capital and need access to this instrumental knowledge (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). The types and forms of literacy practiced in homes can be incongruent with those that children encounter in school. Although shared storybook reading has been identified as the most important activity in preparing children for school success, homes where children do not engage in this activity are not devoid of literacy (Nistler & Maiers, 2003). Delgado-Gaitan (2002) found that many Mexican American families do not partake in storybook reading. Children from these homes engaged in nonconventional forms of literacy, forms that go unrecognized at school. For instance, children demonstrated a keen awareness of how to get around in their community by using billboards and buildings as markers.

Another literacy-building activity is oral storytelling. This is a tradition in many Mexican American families and children engage in many oral activities. They share

stories with their parents about what went on at school and share jokes during dinner (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). This activity is many times underutilized in schools. Children and families struggle to reconcile the differences between familiar sociocultural patterns of functioning in their homes and school (Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999). The children show great enthusiasm for types of nonconventional literacy activities in their homes. But in the classroom lessons observed by Monzó and Rueda (2001), these literacy skills were not embraced. Teachers did not tap into the resources that children brought with them to school. The forms of literacy used in the community were rarely acknowledged within school contexts and thus could not serve as bridges between community and school literacies (Monzó & Rueda, 2001). In Mexican American communities, there are social networks in which people share their knowledge. Once found and utilized, these can become a valuable resource for schools.

It is incumbent upon educators to pay close attention to the different cultural codes (particular actions, gestures, and linguistic signs and symbols) upon which Mexican American children and families operate (Gonzalez, 1998a). What educators know about Mexican American students does not always include the family life- how children learn the language and culture that they bring to school. Misperceptions and generalizations about Mexican American families being illiterate are made. Assumptions are made about the low literacy levels in the family or low parental involvement in children's homework. Monzó and Rueda (2001) illustrated how one child utilizing his classmates as learning resources (a common activity among the Mexican families studied) was reprimanded for walking around the classroom. The teacher did not

understand that the child was demonstrating his engagement with the task by seeking knowledge and verification from his social network of peers (Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

Teacher assumptions about the students' home environment can affect the relationship between home and school. Often, the assumption that children don't live in literacy-rich homes sets the teacher-parent relationship in a dominate-subordinate role. Attempting to build connections with Mexican American parents on this premise ignores the fruitful social interactions in the family (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). When Delgado-Gaitan studied the Family Literacy Project, she concluded that the sharing of family stories, a cultural strength of the home, ought to be incorporated into the Project and the school's curriculum along with commercial children's literature (Berrera & Bauer, 2003).

Home visits provide an opportunity for educators and Mexican American parents to get to know each other and talk informally about the student's interests and needs. This may be a departure from traditional school-home visits (Gonzalez, 2004). Instead of the teacher visiting to explain how parents should do things to help their child in school, the teacher is learning about families and how they live their everyday lives. With this information, teachers can better plan lessons to build on the child's experiences and strengths from the home. Home visits may help in a couple more ways. First, problems can be anticipated before they flare up in the classroom because parents and teachers agree on their respective expectations in advance. Second, if and when problems do arise, teachers can resolve issues that are difficult to handle through phone or written communications (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). When teachers do not know what happens in Mexican American family life, they are inclined to believe that parents do not care about

education, which in turn influences teachers' attitudes about student achievement (Delgado-Gaitan).

Learning how literacy exists in Mexican American households is important for educators (Gonzalez, 2004; McGee & Morrow, 2005). With knowledge about the children's everyday home life, teachers can incorporate the culture in the curriculum and build a stronger foundation for their students' academic success (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Gonzalez, 2004). When early childhood educators acknowledge and respect children's home language and culture, ties between the family and programs are strengthened (NAEYC, 1995). The daily family practices in which children participate may affect (a) their access to school-based literacy activities; (b) their notions of engagement and the organization of literacy practices; (c) their appreciation of and interest in reading; and (d) their idea of what counts as meaningful literacy (Arzubiaga, MacGillvray, & Rueda, 2002). The way parents share time with their children at home sheds light on ways for planning language and literacy lessons in the classroom and enhances communication with parents (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

One area that elementary schools typically expect parent involvement is helping with homework. In a study conducted by Monzó and Rueda (2001), some parents seemed unaware of the importance of returning homework assignments. From the parent perspective, homework was a home activity to be monitored by the parent. Completion of the assignment was important, whereas returning the assignment was less important, given that the assignment involved kindergarten activities that the parent could help the child complete. Parents helped their children with homework by using a Spanish-English dictionary to determine the meaning of words. During the first year of an English-only

class, homework (2-3 worksheets) took three or four hours to complete (Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

Educators and Mexican American parents need to dialogue to identify ways they can reach out to one another (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). To involve Mexican American parents in schools, schools must do more than send correspondences home in English and Spanish. The issue is more than language. It has to do with the attitude of the school toward the Mexican American community. Schools must be willing to reach out in culturally appropriate ways to make an effort to include Mexican American students in special academic enhancement programs supporting their achievement, and to integrate cultural contributions in the school curriculum (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2005). Parent involvement includes both participation in school activities and the family's role in the home. Parent involvement may look different than the white middle-class culture's ideals; teachers must be sensitive to cultural differences and activities must complement CLD family values (Morrow & Temlock-Fields). These non-traditional activities are more apt to be co-designed by parents and teachers and involve parents as active participants. By recognizing and developing pride in parents' identity, schools let parents know they can provide valuable contributions. Students benefit as their parents' resourcefulness is taken into account (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004).

To maintain high-quality schools, positive, ongoing relations with students' families and community must be built (Garcia & Jensen, 2007). Successful teachers exchange ideas (rather than dictate information to parents) about the ways in which they can work together to support children's school success (Paratore & McCormack, 2005). During one school district's quest to improve relationships between the teachers and the

CLD families, they implemented the Parent Partnership for Achieving Literacy (PAL) program (Colombo, 2006). It employed a dual approach to increase the overlap of school, home, and community influences. Teachers took part in professional development to enhance their cultural awareness and improve their knowledge of the strengths and needs of the children and families. At the same time, PAL workshops, meetings, and informational mailings helped CLD families understand the expectations of mainstream teachers and schools. Bilingual parent coordinators were hired. They explored the needs of the families involved and continually reshaped and refined the services that PAL offered to families. For example, homework help was increased from two to four nights a week per parents' requests. ESL and computer classes were also provided because of parent requests. Many districts are not this proactive and teachers must learn on their own how to best develop a relationship with each family.

There are several cultural considerations teachers should know when teaching reading. Some of these considerations are as follows: (a) Mexican American children may have a different set of experiences and may not understand text that other students do; (b) the Mexican American child's definition of literacy may also be different; and (c) the home literacy of Mexican American may differ from that of their peers, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic (Field & Aebersold, 2003). Unless studies examine closely the language interactions taking place at home and in school, as well as in the broader social context, conclusions about the success or failure of Mexican American children will be narrow and incomplete (Ayden et al., 2003).

Existing studies more often than not give us a static view of bilingual children, as seen through a monolingual lens. Berrera and Bauer (2003) studied young children who spoke both English and Spanish. The following are their observations:

The linguistic and cultural factors that influence the lives of these children are often under explored, thereby limiting understanding of these children on their own terms. We cannot state strongly enough that a great need exists to explore the intersection between bilingualism and storybook reading (p. 266).

There is insufficient data to understand what young Mexican American children do or do not gain from storybook reading at home. Research tells us that it is imperative that educators understand and build on the home environment of students. However, many researchers did not collect or analyze data from real-life interactions in actual settings of Mexican American homes (Ayden et al., 2003). There are few qualitative studies in this literature review that described literacy uses in the young Mexican American child's home. Understanding how literacy events occur within the home can assist teachers in matching school literacies with home literacies (McTavish, 2007).

More studies are needed that observe Mexican American students and their parents participating in literacy activities in a natural setting. Paratore and McCormack (2005) stated, "The key for teachers is to find out how parents and children use literacy in the context of their daily lives and then to engage in practices that join these family literacies with school literacies" (p. 138). This study will answer the question, "In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?"





## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology used to conduct this study. It includes: (1) questions to be answered by the study, (2) a description of a qualitative research approach, (3) data collection methods, (4) the research design, (5) a description of the setting and participants, (6) means of data analysis, (7) a description of trustworthiness, and (8) a discussion of the protection of human subjects.

#### Questions to Be Answered by the Study

This study strived to answer the following question and sub-questions.

**In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?**

- As acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?
- How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?
- How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?

For the purposes of this study, literacy activities were defined as any activities that promoted reading and writing as a communicative tool or for enjoyment. It also encompassed activities that lay the foundation for emergent reading and writing (i.e., oral language development). Examples of these activities were parent-child book reading, writing grocery lists, and playing school. Low-income was defined as the student's

qualification for free or reduced lunch status at school. The families in the study all resided in a mid-sized city in the mid-western United States; thus families were considered “urban.” Mexican American kindergartners are students whose families are of Mexican heritage and were born in Mexico or the United States.

### A Qualitative Research Approach

This study strove to answer the previously stated questions through the use of ethnographic qualitative methods. Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

A qualitative approach was used so that students and families were observed in their natural setting — the participants’ homes or school. This allowed for a richer description and deeper understanding to be developed through descriptive data and observable activities (Bogdan & Biklin, 2003; Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004). Qualitative research demands that the methods used are explicit and detailed to provide as much information as possible. Reading researchers have relied on these descriptive qualitative methods to explore subtle, but key relationships (Shanahan, 2000). Seidman (2006, p.23) states, “One difference between quantitative and qualitative research is that in in-depth interviewing we recognize and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer.” The maximization of a qualitative approach to the research yielded a description of the home literacy activities of the Mexican American families who took part in the study.

A consideration in the study was the relationship between the researcher and the families. The researcher is a middle class, white woman principal at the elementary school where the students attended. As a researcher, one must recognize that the information gathered from an interview is in part a function of the interviewee and interviewer interaction (Seidman, 2006). This relationship between the researcher and participant could have resulted in making the participants hesitant to honestly answer interview questions; however, recognizing this situation beforehand led to the careful consideration of using a qualitative approach.

Thus, this was the reason for using an ethnographic research study with data triangulation. The ethnographic design allowed for the study of the behaviors of a culture-sharing group (Creswell, 1998; NCREL, n.d.). This ethnographic method involved a detailed description and interpretation of the role of culture in influencing literacy behaviors and led to studying these shared patterns of behavior (Creswell, 1998; Krathwohl, 2004; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Delgado-Gaitan (1990) stated that, “The most characteristic part of ethnography is that it discerns cultural patterning in the behavior observed” (p. 29). Ethnographic fieldwork required that the researcher learn the local culture and take a non-judgmental stance (Gonzalez, 2004). In the role of principal, assumptions were previously formed about the literacy activities of Mexican American families. As the study progressed, participants seemed to become more comfortable with the idea that the researcher wanted to learn from them and there was no right or wrong answers. An in-depth study was needed to enhance understanding of Mexican American kindergarten students’ literacy activities at home and test previous assumptions. The results of this study were expected to support a better-informed administrator and lay the

foundation for leading teachers toward improved literacy instructional practices. This researcher hoped to learn from the families and understand what literacy practices occur in their homes.

The purpose of this study was then to publish the findings to inform other educators who are working with Mexican American children. Schools must build on the literacy experiences that CLD students bring. Many educators today are in schools with students from a different ethnic group or culture than their own. Assumptions frequently are made about the literacy practices of the home without real understanding of the home environment. Educators must learn about the funds of knowledge (Moll, 1994) that a student comes to school with and build on those during the school day. This study provides a picture of the home literacy environment of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students.

#### Data Collection Methods

Data was collected through the following means: (a) surveys, (b) partially structured interviews; (c) observations/audiotapes and (d) field notes.

#### *Surveys*

The first phase of ethnographic fieldwork typically begins with a survey (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Well developed surveys collect information on a number of variables either necessary for descriptive statistics or found in the literature to be important to the study. The Home Survey (see Appendix A) was developed to assess family characteristics and to begin to explore the home literacy environment. The need for this survey was determined through an extensive literature review. The Survey targeted what was not clear in the current research. More information was needed to describe the

literacy practices of Mexican American homes. From this survey, general literacy practices of families were determined and family demographics were ascertained. This allowed for purposive sampling. Families who met criteria were included in the study; these participants reflected the targeted population.

### *Interviews*

Interviewing can be an invaluable tool for understanding the ways people live in and construct their everyday lives and worlds (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Krathwohl (2004) believes that interviews are useful in “exploring, probing and searching to determine what is especially significant about a person or situation” (p. 286). Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) believe that interviews can be a very important data-gathering technique. The interviews with the families were done on a one-on-one format. A partially-structured interview format (Krathwohl, 2004) was used. This allowed the researcher to first put the families at ease and then address the literacy activities by adding or modifying questions as needed. During the interview, the researcher ensured that the individual understood the questions. Appendix C provides the interview questions for the first interview and Appendix D includes an example of the second round of interview questions. Appendix E contains one set of questions used in a phone follow-up interview. Each set of questions for the phone interview varied depending on the clarification of information needed. The families who chose to participate in an interview were offered a Spanish/English bilingual children’s book as reciprocity (Creswell, 1998) for their time. All of the interviews were conducted with the mother of the child. Fathers were present on two occasions. If the mother’s native language was Spanish, the

interview was held with the aid of a qualified interpreter. This was the case with seven mothers.

### *Observations/Audiotapes*

The household visits actually began before the entrance into the home. The researcher noticed the neighborhood, front yard, and outside of the house. This gave clues to possible funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, 2004). It was evident that one family in particular spent a lot of time on the front porch by the furniture and bottles found there. Two other families had numerous children's toys on the front lawn. Field notes were taken. Once inside the home, the researcher asked permission to use an audio recorder to tape the interview. Seidman (2006) believes that tape recorders should be used when interviewing. In his experience, the participants soon forget the device. The original data was on the tape recorder, and if something was not clear, the researcher went back and listened to the original. With the audio recording, the researcher had the tool to transcribe the spoken words into exact text to study. During the time inside the home, the researcher continued asking partially-structured questions. Questions for the interviews were structured based on the information received from the Home Survey and the preceding interview. The mother was asked to read a story to her child while the audio recorder continued to record. The researcher also took field notes at this time.

### *Field Notes*

As noted in the previous section, field notes were taken before entering the home and then again while the mother was reading to the child. The researcher recorded what was not apparent on the audio recording. This included the seating arrangement of the mother and child while she was reading. The researcher recorded field notes of the home

environment as soon as she left the premises. This included the pictures on the walls, books seen on shelves, TVs and electronic equipment and video tapes and DVDs.

According to Krathwohl (1998), “field notes and logs are the observer’s records of what has been observed and descriptions of the individuals, the setting and what happened” (p. 266). Field notes were used in this study to provide an informal record of the families’ literacy practices. The researcher used field notes to gather and analyze data. To ensure the preciseness of the field notes, the researcher recorded them as soon as possible after the observations were made.

### Research Design

The utilization of a qualitative approach to the research yielded a description of the home literacy activities of Mexican American families. This research was conducted in several steps. First, a survey was used to begin to understand literacy uses as well as to identify family characteristics that met the study criteria. There were eleven families that fully participated in the research. There are no set number of participants in a qualitative study. Seidman (2006, p. 55) believes that there are two criteria to know how many is enough, “Are there sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in?” The second criterion researchers need to meet to know that there are enough participants is when there is a saturation of information. There was a point in the study where the interviewer begins to hear the same information. Nothing new was added.

Seidman (2006) was reluctant to establish a number of how many participants are enough. He wrote, “The method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied to a

sample of participants who all experience similar social conditions gives enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p.55).

After the initial survey was completed, interviews and home visits were conducted. A follow-up phone interview after both of the face-to-face interviews were completed was used as an opportunity to obtain more information. The purpose of these interviews were to understand the experiences of other people and the meaning they made of their experiences. The researcher then considered what was discussed at the interview and constructed new questions for the next interview from this information. After all the interviews took place, the data was analyzed, coded and categorized and themes were developed. This study’s research process is described in detail below.

### *Surveys*

The researcher used a survey in part to determine the families that would be open and forthcoming in an interview. This Home Survey was first piloted with parents from another school with similar demographics in the same school district. The survey was given to all of the kindergarten students to take home and have their parents fill out. The kindergartners were promised a reward for returning the survey. The parents were also asked in a cover letter to fill out a response sheet (see Appendix B) with the survey. The response sheet asked four questions. They are as follows:

- 1) What questions were difficult to understand?
- 2) Is there any wording that would make the questions easier to understand?
- 3) Are there other questions that I should ask to better understand the home literacy environment of Hispanic kindergartners?
- 4) Other



Fifteen of the Home Surveys and response sheets were returned from the families in the pilot school; eight of the surveys returned met the demographic criteria. Since there was a small response, another group was targeted to pilot the survey. The same survey and response sheet was sent home with first grade students attending summer school at the targeted school. This yielded input from an additional eighteen parents, with eleven of these meeting the study's criteria. The responses of eight of these surveys were then translated into English. Any input regarding the comprehensibility of the survey was noted and appropriate changes were made to the original survey. However, the parents suggested few changes and thought the survey was very easy to understand and complete.

Since the school year had ended, the researcher sent the Home Survey to the kindergarten (soon to be first grade) parents who met the study criteria through the mail. A cover letter asked the parents to fill out the survey and return it to the researcher in the self-addressed, stamped envelope that was included. No surveys were returned. The researcher then waited and focused on the next year's kindergarten class.

The Home Surveys were given to parents to fill out at the "Welcome to School Night" held for kindergarten students on August 8, 2006, the Thursday before school began on Monday. Additional surveys were sent home with the students after school began if the parents had not attended the "Welcome to School Night." This convenience sampling (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004) was used at the beginning of the study. A total of thirty Home Surveys were returned.

The Home Survey was used to begin gathering a description of family characteristics and to make families more comfortable with having an educator visit their

home to document literacy activities. Those families who met the criteria of having a first or second generation Mexican American kindergarten student who qualified for free or reduced lunch were included in the study. The students' lunch status was determined by examining the school lunch records. Thirteen families were initially selected to be part of the study. However, one of the families moved back to Mexico before an interview could take place. The remaining 12 families were then asked to participate in a partially-structured interview. At this time, it was found that the mother in one of the families was originally from Honduras. Since the study targeted first or second generation Mexican American students, the family was not included in the remainder of the study. There were eleven families who participated fully in the study.

### *Interviews*

Interviewing someone who spoke a different language was a challenge of this study. When interviewing participants whose first language was not that of the interviewer, the extent to which the language used by both the participants and the interviewer affected the progress of the interview was recognized. The thinking of both the parties was intertwined with the language they are using. Seidman (2006) believes that there is not one right way to respond to these situations, except to recognize the importance of language and culture to thought. With that awareness, both interviewer and participants experimented with ways of talking to each other that most authentically reflected their thinking.

An interpreter was provided for the mothers who indicated that they would be more comfortable speaking in Spanish. Seven interviews were held with the assistance of the interpreter. One of the participants who did not want to have an interpreter present

thought she could adequately convey her responses in English. The interviewer felt that an interpreter would have helped the mother communicate her responses more accurately and effectively. The other three interviews were conducted in English with adequate understanding from both the interviewer and participant during the interview. There were two interpreters used for assisting with the interviews. Both were employed as ESL aides at the targeted school. To ensure accuracy for this study, both interpreters completed the “Interpreter Training” provided by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (2005). The training was generalized and adapted for this study.

The initial interview was conducted as an opportunity for the researcher to learn more about the family and the literacy environment of the home. The interviews allowed for depth of responses and captured nonverbal responses that revealed feelings. During the interview, the researcher restated and rephrased questions as needed to ensure that the individual understood the questions. Seven of these interviews were held in the families’ homes. Four of the interviews were held at the elementary school at the request of the mother. At the end of each interview a Spanish/English book was given as a token of reciprocity. The mothers were asked if a follow-up interview could be completed and if the act of the mother reading to the child could be observed. All of the mothers agreed to this.

All of the interviews were audio taped. The researcher then transcribed the interviews later the same day. Field notes also were typed and included with the transcriptions. The information gained from the interview helped the researcher write new interview questions. These questions guided the information gleaned from each

individual mother which would provide the study with more in-depth picture of the literacy practices in her home.

A second interview then followed. Seven of these interviews were held in families' homes. One of the parents who had the first interview in the home requested an interview at school while she was picking up her kindergartner. Another parent asked for the interview to take place in her home rather than at the school where the first interview had been conducted. The rest of the interviews took place in the same locations as the first interviews.

The second interview was a partially-structured interview based on the questions written after the first interview. As the mother began to answer the questions, the researcher added different questions as needed to get a better picture of the literacy activities that were occurring in the home. The mothers also elaborated on some of the questions, giving additional information. These open-ended questions established the literacy areas to be explored, but allowed the mother to take any direction she wanted. The interviewer was careful not to presume an answer.

Also during this time, each mother was asked if she would read a book to her child while the researcher recorded it and took notes. The seven mothers who had their kindergarten child present at the interview agreed to do this. A choice of Spanish/English books was offered to the families. They picked one of the books or read the book that was given to them at the first interview. Four mothers chose to read in Spanish and three mothers read in English. The researcher recorded the interaction and field notes were taken. The families were then given another Spanish/English book as reciprocity.

All of the second-round interviews were also audio taped. The researcher again transcribed the interviews later the same day. Field notes were also typed and included with the transcriptions. The researcher then began to analyze the data from the interviews and determined that a few areas needed more understanding. Therefore, the researcher or the interpreter called the mothers and conducted a phone interview. The phone interview was held using a semi-structured format. Open-ended questions were used, but the interviewers did not stray from the written questions or order as one would in a partially-structured interview. The interpreters phoned the seven mothers who preferred Spanish and recorded the answers to the questions. The researcher called the other four mothers and used the same process.

### *Coding*

It was difficult to separate the process of gathering and analyzing data. This researcher could not help but to work with the interview information as it came in. However, the in-depth analysis of the interviews was done when all the interviews were completed. The qualitative data was collected, coded, and analyzed to describe the level and nature of the home literacy activities. “Coding is a systematic way in which to condense extensive data sets into smaller analyzable units through the creation of categories and concepts derived from the data” (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, Liao, 2004, p. 137). There are three different levels of coding: open, axial, and selective. Open coding involves breaking down, comparing, and categorizing the data. Axial coding puts the data back together by making connections between the categories identified through open coding. Selective coding involves selecting the core category and relating it to other categories while confirming and explaining these relationships (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

The researcher used the research questions as a guide to code the data. Using these as a guide, all information from the different interviews was analyzed. This included extracting all of the different mothers' information concerning parent-child interactions and putting it together in one file. Next, all information relevant to the role of the siblings was found and compiled. Then, the same process was used to uncover information about the mothers' education levels and the connections to literacy events. These three areas helped analyze the data for the overall research question.

### Setting and Participants

The population for this study was low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students and their families. Mexican American students who are considered first or second generation living in the United States were chosen for the study. "First generation" is used to refer to the generation that immigrated (Arzubiaga et al., 2002). This term includes all parents and children who were born in Mexico. The children who were born in the United States after their parents immigrated are considered "second generation" (Arzubiaga et al., 2002). All participants were considered low-income by their qualification of free or reduced price status for lunch. All families who participated had a kindergarten child attending the same elementary school.

This study was conducted in a mid-western U. S. city. The urban community in which the participants reside has been long established as a Mexican American community. The community population is mainly low-income. The students all attend Eagle Elementary School (a pseudonym); within Eagle Elementary's boundaries, there are two apartment complexes, older rental houses and several single-family houses. Many of the older houses have been divided into different apartments. A few students'

families own their home, but most rent. The school is approximately 67% Mexican American. There are varying degrees of English proficiency within the student population.

#### Means of data analysis

Analysis of interviews, observations, and field notes consisted of reading and rereading transcriptions and identifying conceptual patterns. The following steps were taken to do this. First, each individual family's information gathered from the survey and interviews that addressed one of the research questions was placed in a file. Then, the information from all of the families that helped explore the question was compiled. The data was reviewed and initial codes were established. The first analysis was completed on the parent-child literacy interactions. The information concerning role of the siblings and the education level of the parent was then explored using the same process.

This helped the researcher understand the literacy activities of the home and explore the possible connecting threads and patterns between the families. The researcher read and reread the information and found connecting threads and patterns among the information. When these connections were made, they became the themes found in the study. This same process was used for each of the questions and led to a description of the home literacy practices. This thick, detailed description was verification of the time spent in the field and added to the value of the study (Creswell, 1998). The researcher then interpreted the findings to give a rich, thick description of the low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students' home literacy environment.

The final product of the study was a holistic portrait of the low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students' home literacy environment that incorporated both the emic (insiders') perspective (Creswell, 1998; Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2004) and the etic perspective. An etic perspective is an "outsider" point of view (Krathwohl, 2004). Researchers use etic perspective to refer to the extrinsic ideas and categories that are meaningful to them (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). In this study, the researcher used the etic perspective to begin coding data and to begin developing the emic understanding. These codes provided the foundation for the beginning of the data analysis. Coding helped make links between different parts of the data. As the researcher began to see themes that didn't fit the categories, new categories were created with the emic perspective.

#### Trustworthiness

Although qualitative studies do not address issues of reliability and validity in the same manner as do quantitative studies, the trustworthiness of this study was addressed in the design. Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) detailed the trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (p. 1144). These four criteria parallel the quantitative criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity, respectively (Krathwohl, 2004). Credibility and transferability refer to the believable nature of the study and the study's ability to be utilized in another setting. It was the researcher's responsibility to provide a thick, detailed description of the study so that readers may apply the findings to their own situations (Trujillo, 1999). Dependability addressed the logic of the research process. The three different interviews added dependability to the research. After the initial interview, there was a passage of time



which leads to confidence in authenticity (Seidman, 2006). Confirmability verified that all data sources could be traced back to original sources (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). The researcher gave a careful account of how the data was obtained and analyzed. The research design and data triangulation of the study supported trustworthiness.

“Triangulation refers to the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings” (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p. 1142). This research study employed data triangulation, which entailed gathering data through several sampling strategies. Data was gathered in the context of different times and situations with a variety of people. The use of a survey, two one-on-one interviews, a phone interview, observations, recordings, and field notes provided many glimpses into the literacy activities of each Mexican American family. This data triangulation allowed for establishing factual accuracy and gave a richness and complexity to the study (Krathwohl, 1998; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Approval for the study was granted by the doctoral supervisory committee. Appropriate materials then were sent to the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Research Involving Human Subjects. The researcher completed the IRB Training Modules. The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects reviewed the proposal and granted full approval. The appropriate steps were then taken to obtain permission from the school district to conduct the study. Permission was granted and data collection then began.

## Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodology used in this ethnographic study. It included: (1) questions to be answered by the study, (2) a description of a qualitative research approach, (3) data collection methods, (4) the research design, (5) a description of the setting and participants, (6) means of data analysis, (7) a description of trustworthiness, and (8) a discussion of the protection of human subjects. Qualitative methodology laid the foundation for the design and analysis of the study. Data triangulation was made possible through the data collected from returned survey information, partially-structured interviews, phone interviews, home observations, and field notes. This study provided a rich, holistic picture of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students' home literacy practices.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

This chapter details data collected during the seven-month study of families' literacy acts. Answers were sought for the following research question and sub-questions:

**In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?**

- As acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?
- How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?
- How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?

In this study, literacy acts were investigated in eleven homes by surveys, observations, field notes, interviews, and phone interviews. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the family characteristics.

Table 1

*Family Characteristics*

Kindergarten child's name	Siblings' names and ages	Highest level of education mother completed and country where schooling occurred
Andrés	Marcos-4 months	3 years post high school; Mexico
Arturo	Manuel-9	12 <sup>th</sup> ; K-9 <sup>th</sup> U.S.; 10 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> Mexico
Diana	Kassandra-9	12 <sup>th</sup> ; Mexico
Edgar	Alicia-21 months	College Degree; Mexico
Edith	Norma-1	12 <sup>th</sup> ; K-4 <sup>th</sup> Mexico; 5 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> U.S.
Edwin	José-12	12 <sup>th</sup> ; Mexico
Hector	Marisol-11 Max-14 Jesse-16 (living in Mexico)	3 years post high school; Mexico
Jimmy	Jessica-3 Natalie-1	9 <sup>th</sup> ; K-2 <sup>nd</sup> Mexico; 3 <sup>rd</sup> -9 <sup>th</sup> U.S.
Liliana	Roberto-7 Aylin-15 Erica-17 Maria-19	5 <sup>th</sup> ; Mexico
Valencia	Iliana-7 Ashley-1	11 <sup>th</sup> ; K-5 <sup>th</sup> Mexico; 6 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup> U.S.
Veronica	Erica-8 Luis-13	5 <sup>th</sup> ; Mexico

Because of the qualitative nature of the study, the data is presented by giving examples of responses and observations.

### Qualitative analysis

As a reminder, Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as:

An inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

The survey, interview, and observation data was collected, coded, and analyzed to determine the level and nature of the home literacy activities. “Coding is a systematic way in which to condense extensive data sets into smaller analyzable units through the creation of categories and concepts derived from the data” (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, Liao, 2004, p. 137). The three different levels of coding: open, axial, and selective were used. Open coding involved breaking down, comparing, and categorizing the information into themes. Through axial coding, the researcher put the data back together by making connections between the themes identified during open coding. Selective coding involved selecting the core themes and relating them to other themes by confirming and explaining these relationships (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

During the coding process, the following themes emerged: 1) *Reading with My Mom*; 2) *My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*; 3) *We Talk a Lot at My House*; 4) *We Go to the Library*; 5) *My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me*; 6) *I Use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters*; 7) *My Mom’s Education Level Doesn’t Matter Much*.

This chapter describes these themes in detail to explore the research question, “In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?”

Themes in Qualitative Research Findings for Sub-Question One-As Acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?

This section includes findings surrounding literacy acts with parent-child interactions. Four themes emerged from the data to describe these interactions:

a) Reading with My Mom; b) My mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too; c) We Talk A lot at My House; and d) We Go to the Library.

#### *Reading with My Mom*

This research was inconsistent with earlier research that found that storybook reading was not a normal practice for most Mexican American families (i.e., Berrera & Bauer, 2003; Nistler & Maier, 2003). Information gained from the Home Survey showed that all eleven families had children’s books in the home. In all but one of the families who participated in the study, mothers read to their children. Of the mothers who read to their children, the number of days a week varied from one or two to reading seven days a week. The interaction between the child and parent during the book reading also looked different in the different homes.

#### *Andrés’ Home*

Andrés brought home books in Spanish from school but the rest of the books that they had were in English. His mother reported that he now seems to enjoy reading more English books than Spanish books. Before they read a book, they looked at the pictures and then made up their own story—what they thought was going to happen, picture by

picture. Then they sat down and read the book. Andrés' mother made sure he understood the book by talking to him in Spanish about it. When asked about how she reads to Andrés in English when she is just learning English herself, she replied, "When I have doubts about the pronunciation of a word, I'll write it down and ask my neighbor how to pronounce it and what it means." In the book reading observed, Andrés showed his enjoyment by laughing and smiling throughout. He and his mom looked comfortable reading together. After every page, his mom asked a question. She pointed to the words and pictures as they read.

#### *Arturo's Home*

At Arturo's home, they read a book every weekday night before bed. His mom and older brother, Manuel, took turns reading pages. Arturo sat on his mom's lap and Manuel held the book beside them. Mom reported that the boys asked questions about word meanings and about concepts. Arturo preferred to be read to in Spanish, but Manuel preferred English; so she read in both languages. During the book reading observation, if Manuel read a word incorrectly, she would point to it and help him sound it out. There were no additional questions asked or discussion about the book.

#### *Diana's Home*

Diana loved to be read to and always asked somebody to read to her. Her parents read to her in Spanish. Diana asked questions while they were reading, especially if there was a word she didn't know. Her mother said she used to change the words sometimes so Diana would better comprehend the text. But when Diana learned how to read, she told her mom, "It doesn't say that." Her parents set up a special time for Diana and her

sister to read each day. Diana read signs such as “McDonalds” or “stop” and also picked out words on other signs or billboards as they drove places.

When the book reading was observed, Diana wanted to read the Spanish version herself (which she did). Diana began reading and her mother pointed out pictures; they talked and laughed about them. Mom also corrected the pronunciation of two words during the reading. At the end her mom told her, “Bueno!” Her mom reported that Diana only let her read “harder” books to her.

#### *Edgar’s Home*

Edgar’s mother shared that she thought parents do not read to their kids because they are not educated and they don’t understand the importance of it. She said that when she reads to Edgar she looked for books with just a few words on the page: “If I get a lot of reading its boring. So a few words and then look at these. I read the letters, the text. And after that I say, ‘Edgar, which one is the girl?’” She said that she mainly read to him in English. When asked why she replied, “I, maybe because we speak more Spanish and he’s going to learn my words. He has to learn English—write and read and everything. And so it’s going to be easy for him to learn Spanish, because we speak Spanish.”

#### *Edith’s Home*

Edith was read to in both English and Spanish by her mother: “I read to her in both Spanish and English because I want her to know both languages. I want her to grow up like me [bilingual].” Edith’s mom said that when she reads to Edith in English, she asks her questions in English; when she reads in Spanish, she asks questions in Spanish. Her mother reported that Edith’s father used to read to her just in Spanish, but he was trying to learn English, so he practiced with Edith and read to her in English. In the book



reading observed, Edith sat on her mother's lap while her mother read the text at a fairly slow pace. There was no discussion of the text or pictures.

#### *Edwin's Home*

Edwin's mother said that she enjoys reading to him. However, she shared that she doesn't like reading to him in English because she stumbles over the words. When the book was in English, they focused on the pictures and she made up the story as they proceeded through the book. In Spanish, she focused more on the words and how the text was written. She asked Edwin what he liked about the story when they were finished reading.

#### *Hector's Home*

Hector's mother read to him exclusively in Spanish. When she read, she said she doesn't pay any attention to the pictures, but reported that Hector does. He asked questions about what is going on if he didn't understand. When asked why she read to Hector, she replied, "So he won't struggle when he goes to first grade."

#### *Jimmy's Home*

Jimmy's mother was told that she should read to her children when she was in the hospital after giving birth to Jimmy: "They said it would help develop his mind." When she read to her children, she asked questions about the book. She began with the cover before they started. In the book reading observed, she read a page and then showed the pictures. She then began reading upside down and let the children see the pictures the whole time (the siblings were sitting on the floor, she was on the couch). Throughout the book she asked questions. Her reading was slow paced. At one point, she didn't know how to pronounce the word "strangers." She commented, "My reading is bad."

### *Valencia's Home*

Valencia's mother relayed that she read to her children in English because, "Most of the books we have at home are English." Mom reported that when reading to her girls, they often asked questions such as, "What does this mean?" or "Why did this happen?" After their questions were answered, she then continued reading. At the end of the story the girls asked additional questions such as, "Why did they do this when they could have done that?"

### *Veronica's Home*

Veronica's mother said she reads to her children in Spanish. During the reading observed, Veronica asked questions and looked at the pictures. Her mom asked a question after she had read the first page. Mom then commented about a page during reading and commented about the book in general at the end. She smiled at Veronica throughout the reading.

### *Summary of Reading with My Mom*

The above excerpts were chosen to illustrate the theme of *Reading with My Mom*. In all but one of the homes in the study, storybook reading occurred with the mother. Many times it was not only the kindergartner being read to, but the other siblings as well. This theme illustrates the inconsistency between the findings of this study and previous research (i.e., Cassidy et al., 2004; Guerra, 1998; Hammett et al., 2003).

When Andrés' mom talked about their book reading routine, she gave such a detailed description of their storybook reading habits, that one could tell that it was an everyday occurrence. The reading process observed was very natural. This was also the case with Arturo's mother. The process that she had described in an earlier interview was

exactly what was observed in their home during the book reading; just as Mom had said, the older brother sat on one side rubbing his mom's arm while they read. Diana and Veronica were reported to always ask their mothers to read to them. Diana had a whole shelf of book in the lower shelf of the entertainment center in the family room. Both girls were reported to love being read to. Hector's mother felt like she spends more time reading to him than her other children because he is the baby of the family.

There was a comfortable feeling during reading in the majority of the homes. The participant observation of the target homes indicated that parent-child reading time was a regular event in 92% of the homes studied. Edith was one who displayed the very comfortable feeling of being in her mother's lap while being read to. She listened intently to her mom's reading. In Jimmy's home, he and his little sister got blankets and pillows when his mom asked if they wanted to listen to a book. When Mom was asked about this practice, she reported that sometimes they did that and sometimes they sat on the couch with her. This illustrated that reading is a common occurrence in this home; the logistics of how it occurred varied.

Spanish was the chosen language of reading by the mothers in 70% of the homes. In the homes of Edwin, Diana and Hector, mother read exclusively in Spanish. This indicated that the mothers are much more literate in their native language and thus much more comfortable reading in Spanish to their own children. Veronica was another whose mom reads to her in Spanish. Edith, Arturo, and Andrés have a combination of Spanish and English reading. Jimmy, Valencia, and Edgar are read to almost exclusively in English. It is interesting to note that the reasons the mothers read to them in English are different. Jimmy and Valencia's mothers received a majority of their schooling in the

United States and thus are more comfortable reading English rather than in Spanish. Edgar's mother was educated in Mexico and is a much more fluent Spanish reader, but she believes that he needs to hear the English reading.

In Jimmy's home, the mother's reading to the children seemed somewhat awkward. Jimmy's mother commented that her "reading is bad," which reinforced the fact that she only reads for her children and not for her own enjoyment. She thinks that it is important to read to her children, even if she does not enjoy it.

*My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*

This section summarizes the literacy acts of the eleven mothers who participated in this study. Every mother in the research reported using a grocery list as one of the literacy acts that took place in her home. Nine of the eleven mothers interacted with their children while writing the list, while two wrote the list when the children were not around. Recipes were also a favorite thing to read in nine of the homes. Every mother surveyed marked "reading magazines" as a literacy act that occurred in the home, and ten mothers marked that magazines could be found in their homes. Only three of the mothers said that they sit down and read books, but ten mothers would find time to enjoy a magazine. Literacy was used daily to meet the needs of the families and for enjoyment. Following is a table summarizing the responses of the Home Survey filled out by parents indicating the reading materials found in their homes.

Table 2

*Reading materials found in homes*

<i>Survey no.</i>	<i>Fiction</i>	<i>News-paper</i>	<i>Computer/Internet</i>	<i>Non-Fiction</i>	<i>Bible</i>	<i>Children's</i>	<i>Magazines</i>	<i>Encyclopedia</i>
<i>1</i>		<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>2</i>		<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	
<i>3</i>						<i>X</i>		
<i>4</i>		<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	
<i>5</i>	<i>X</i>				<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>		
<i>6</i>			<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	
<i>7</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>8</i>					<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	
<i>9</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>
<i>10</i>	<i>X</i>			<i>X</i>		<i>X</i>		<i>X</i>
<i>11</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>		<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>X</i>	
<i>Total</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>4</i>

### *Andres' Home*

Daily literacy in Andrés' home included making a grocery list, writing letters, and reading non-fiction books. As a general routine, before they went to the grocery store, Andrés and his mother made a list. She said she tells him what they need and he writes it down. If he didn't know how to write the word, then his mother wrote it down for him or told him the letters he needed to write. Mom reported that Andrés is starting to identify "Names of stuff, like when we go to the grocery store." He also knows restaurants such as McDonalds and Burger King. Another form of literacy used in the household is writing letters: "...he also writes letters to his aunt and stuff; so if he doesn't know something I'll help him by telling him the letter." After the letter is written in Spanish, they talk about what they wrote in English. Andrés' mom said she reads a lot of books concerning child development and parenting. She has also been reading about asthma, since both of her kids have trouble with asthma. Andres' mom reads in Spanish when reading for her own purpose.

### *Arturo's House*

There are several different literacy acts that Arturo's mom participated in. "I sit where you're at [the loveseat] and they're at the table. Maybe they're doing their drawings at the table and I'm just sitting here reading and they come up to me. 'What are you reading?' O.K. Then they go back over there." Arturo's mom said she likes to read magazines about life experiences that people have. For example, she read an article about a girl who is in jail because of a drug bust at a friend's house: "Sometimes, I read that to my kids and I'm like see that's what happens. I never try to shut my kids' eyes to reality. I want to be a little bit open. Not too open." Arturo reportedly picks up a

magazine when he sees his mom reading one and looks through it; he likes to smell the perfumes. Mom also occasionally picks up a bilingual newspaper, *Dos Mundos*. She said that sometimes when reading it, she murmurs “Awww.” This draws the boys’ attention and they want to know what she is reading about. She reads to them the Spanish version of the article.

In addition to reading newspapers and magazines, Arturo’s mom shared other thoughts about and uses of literacy. She thought it was important to buy a set of encyclopedias for the boys: “We never had encyclopedias at home that I could use. Usually it was like bad weather...my dad would take too long to take me to the library. I said I need a set of encyclopedias for the boys.” Arturo’s mom also read and summarized English mail for her parents, which the children saw her do. She also said that her children also see her using writing as a way to express her feelings: “Sometimes when I’m sad or something I take their notebooks and start writing. Whatever gets out. That’s what I do.”

#### *Edgar’s Home*

Edgar’s mom commented that she like to read books like the *DaVinci Code* and “books that help you increase your personal feelings.” She also reported that she writes letters and e-mails people. She talked about when she was in her last year of the university; Edgar was one year old and sat on her lap while she typed assignments on the computer.

#### *Edith’s Home*

When Edith’s mom was asked about her reading and writing activities throughout the day, she stopped and thought about it. She finally replied, “Well, I do the grocery

list.” Edith said that she sees her mom make the list and she makes a list, too. Mom said that she likes to read a lot of magazines and says she reads the newspaper “sometimes.” Most of the reading that she does is in English. Edith was reported to see her mom read a magazine and want to read one, too.

#### *Edwin’s Home*

Edwin’s mom reported that she enjoys reading Spanish language magazines for entertainment. Edwin sees her reading the magazines. She also frequently reads recipes.

#### *Hector’s Home*

Hector’s mom said she made a grocery list about every other day; the list was written in Spanish. Most of the time Hector was with her while she made the list. Hector asked things such as, “What are we going to buy?” Mom reported, “He’s remembering this and that from the list.” When asked about Hector making his own list, Mom replied, “No, not really; he’s always asking me for help. He doesn’t try to write his own list yet or anything like that.”

#### *Jimmy’s Home*

Jimmy’s mother reported, “My son asked, ‘What are you reading?’ while I was working on my GED. I said, ‘I’m going to school like you are.’ He looked at me all weird like how can you go to school?” This studying was done in English. When asked about other times she used literacy in her daily life, Jimmy’s mom replied that she didn’t really do any other reading or writing. When asked if her work hours prevented her from doing this, she replied, “No.”

#### *Liliana’s Home*



Liliana's mother reads and writes exclusively in Spanish. When talking to her about her use of reading and writing, she commented, "Make a shopping list and that's about it." Liliana was there when she made the list: "She tries to copy what I'm writing; she tries to do the same things. Whatever paper she can get her hands on, she'll try to copy numbers, letters."

#### *Valencia's Home*

There are other ways that Valencia and her sister use literacy with their mother. "Sometimes, when I'm cooking, they're right there with me. I have like letter magnets (on the refrigerator)...they'll ask me 'how do you spell this?' or they tell me, 'I know how to spell this,' and they'll spell it." Valencia and her sister also wrote notes: "They'll tell me, 'I want to write a letter to my mom.'"

#### *Veronica's Home*

Veronica's mother reported that she has a lot of "kitchen books." Veronica saw her mom reading recipes. Mom also made a grocery list for shopping once a week and said that Veronica is there with her to "help her and everything." In addition, Veronica's mom also had a favorite book of poems that was also on a CD. She listened to it around the house. All of these literacy activities were in Spanish.

#### *Summary of My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*

In learning about the literacy occurring in the homes, many questions were asked of parents. The Home Survey was used to begin to broach the subject by asking about the kinds of literature in the homes. More questions helped to solidify the understanding of literacy uses in the homes. Many parents felt like the only reading they did was with

their children. However, when pressed to explain their daily literacy use, they began to tell of different ways they read and write throughout the day.

Grocery lists were a main source of reading and writing that the mothers did not even initially consider as literacy. However, this was the one common usage for reading and writing in all the homes. Andrés and his mom make the list together. Edith's excerpt was chosen because it illustrated that a grocery list was a second thought as far as considering it to be a use of literacy. Hector observed his mom making the list and then remembers what they wrote down when they get to the store. This connects writing to real life and gives a purpose for writing. Liliana's home was the only home where the mother did not read to her child. However, Liliana saw her mom write a grocery list each week. Valencia's mother did not discuss specifically the children's observation of her using a grocery list, however, literacy was used daily in the kitchen while she was preparing dinner. Veronica was involved in making the grocery list in her household.

Many of the excerpts were included to show that the majority of the mothers used reading and writing for enjoyment. Another common use of literacy by the mothers included reading magazines. Arturo's mom went into detail when telling about the magazine article that she just had read. It was apparent that magazine reading was very important in her life. Edith's mom read magazines and realized that her daughter wanted to do things like she does. Veronica and Edwin's excerpts were included to show that the children saw their mothers enjoying literacy. Veronica's mom not only read her favorite book, but also listened to it. Therefore, Veronica was exposed to hearing the language and cadence of poetry.

Mothers showed their children that reading is used to gain information. This was demonstrated by Andrés' mom reading the books on asthma and by Edgar's mom reading "self help" books. When Arturo's mom read the newspaper, she shared with the boys about what was written in the paper. Although Jimmy's mom did not finish her GED, there was a period of time when the children saw her reading and studying for it. Jimmy's perception that it was "weird" was included to show that this was a different kind of literacy than he was normally used to seeing his mom use. Up to that point, Jimmy had only experienced literacy as a mother reading to her children. His mother's studying afforded Jimmy the opportunity to see literacy used for a different reason – not just something adults do to entertain children, but to learn things themselves.

*We Talk a Lot at My House*

Building oral language is key in developing literacy skills. The families in this study, as in other Mexican American families, appeared to be very child-orientated. Children were listened to and included in conversations. Many times these conversations were about what happened at school during the day. Every parent told about the daily occurrence of talking to her kindergartner about the day at school. The literature reviewed suggesting that less educated, lower-income parents do not talk to their child (i.e., Denton & West, 2002; NCES, 2003) about school, or other matters, did not hold true in this study.

Another way oral language is developed is through story-telling. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) reports that storytelling is a common event in Hispanic families. Within this research, eight families reported that they told stories; one mother specifically said she did not tell stories. The remaining two parents did not reveal their storytelling practice.

In the families who told stories, many times they were told or influenced by the grandfathers.

#### *Andrés' Home*

The daily routine at Andrés' home included him eating lunch and then talking about what they did at school that morning. His mom also reported that she looks through his planner and notes. She'll ask him, "What did you do at school?" Then she tries to: "go with what they did." For example, if Andrés told her that they had worked on learning a certain letter that day, they sat down and practiced writing that letter.

#### *Arturo's Home*

Arturo's mom said that the boys' grandfather (her father) was the one who mainly told the stories. However, she relayed this tidbit about herself: "Sometimes they ask me something like 'what does *grounding* mean?' And I told them, 'Well, I got grounded *once*. I tell them the story and they're like, 'uh ah.' It's true." She also related how she knew certain things because of her experiences living with her grandparents in Mexico and told the children about her time there.

#### *Edgar's Home*

Edgar's mom reported the following: "I cook with my sister...everyday I ask him, 'Edgar how was school? What did you do at school?' And he asks me, 'How was your work?' After that, let me see your notebook and sign it."

#### *Edith's Home*

Edith's mom said, "Yeah, my dad, he would when I was little, he would always tell me different stories about bunnies and stuff like that. He does that to Edith, he likes me to do that to her."

### *Hector's Home*

In Hector's home, his dad does not get home until later because of work. But Mom said of the children, "They come home, they sit down, they eat. And then they talk about how was school. I ask to see the planners and notes; that's the time they show notes."

### *Jimmy's Home*

Jimmy's mom said she tries to ask him every day how school was: "If I ask him, he'll be like, 'Mommy we did this.' Sometimes he's excited about it. I'll ask him. He'll be telling me and telling me. The day they had pizza...uh, he will tell me, go to my mom's house and tell everybody."

### *Veronica's Home*

"She is always telling me what is going on at school. What letter they're working on, what number they're working on," Veronica's mom reported. When asked if Veronica talked about the Animated Literacy character that the class was working on, her mom reported that Veronica would tell her the character, sing the song, and do the action.

Veronica's mom said that if she told stories they were ones handed down from her parents: "Like when I was young, my mom would never read to me, but she would tell stories that she would hear or things that she would have seen, things that she would have memorized."

### *Summary of We Talk a Lot at My House*

Oral language development is an important piece in developing literacy skills. In all the families' excerpts in this section, the parents talked with their children. This included what the child did at school that day. In Andrés' home, the mother expanded on

what he did at school that day. Excerpts for Hector, Jimmy, and Veronica also showed that they communicated daily about school. Their parents all knew the letter the kindergartners were working on and all of the activities that went with it (such as the song and the action).

Story-telling was also prevalent in the homes. Grandparents seemed to be an important part of keeping this tradition alive. Edith's home illustrated this with her mom telling about Edith's grandfather and the stories he would tell her. Mom also remarked that the grandfather wanted to keep storytelling a part of Edith's life. Arturo and Veronica's moms grew up with listening to stories and told their children stories.

#### *We Go to the Library*

In the community where these families live, there is a public library located for most within walking distance. It is right next door to the elementary school and is the library that the students go to for library skills classes and to check out books during school. Thus, the children are familiar with the library. It was found that eight out of the eleven families who participated in the study used the library outside of school time. The four mothers with less than a high school diploma did not take their children to the library. However, in two of these families, the dads took their children to the library. One of the mothers with more than a high school diploma did not take her children to the library.

#### *Andrés' Home*

Andrés' mother reported that they went to the library a couple times each week and picked out easy reading books. She continued by saying that on Wednesdays they usually attended Story Time. There was a Spanish Story Time on Thursdays, but they

preferred to attend the English Story Time. Mom said that they went home and later read the book from that week's Story Time in Spanish or they talked about it later in Spanish to make sure the story was understood.

#### *Arturo's Home*

Arturo's family went to the library about once a week. His mom said, "We check out books. Sometimes they want to watch a movie. We check that out. Then we have to turn them back and get some more."

#### *Diana's Home*

"They check out books and videos and then play on the computer," said Diana's mom. Diana and her sister went to the library about two times a week. Diana was reported to spend about an hour on the computer at the library each week.

#### *Edgar's Home*

Edgar's aunt is the library aide for the school he attends. Mom said, "She [the aunt] likes to go to the library a lot, too. 'Edgar, do you want to go, too?' O.K. O.K. they go." Edgar has a library card of his own and they go about once a week.

#### *Edith's Home*

Edith's mom talked about their library use: "Every day we go to the library. Well, not every day, but we go and get books...I would say we go and get books three to four days a week. Edith likes to go to the library, because she has her library card. So she likes to get books herself." Edith said, "I even went to school there!" Her mom explained that Edith was talking about the library activities that she did. Edith continued, "One day I made a girl." Her mom replied, "Mrs. Potato Head, remember?" When asked if they attend Story Time each week, Mom replied, "I wouldn't say every week. You

know, I would say sometimes. Like the weather right now. At summertime we do a lot.” They attend the English Story Time.

Edith’s mom said that she had showed Edith how to use the computer at the library, but she really didn’t seem that interested in it. However, Edith seemed to have a different perspective on the issue. When asked how long she used the computer when they went to the library, she responded, “Four minutes! Because my dad was saying, ‘Come back here.’”

#### *Liliana’s Home*

Liliana’s mom said that she didn’t have a library card, but that her husband took the children to the library about once a week. While at the library, they checked out a book or a movie. They don’t stay for Story Time or crafts.

#### *Veronica’s Home*

Veronica’s dad reportedly takes the girls to the library almost every day. Her big brother, Luis, can be found there almost every day after school. The children “mainly check out children’s videos. Sometimes they check out books.”

#### *Summary of We Go to the Library*

With the library in close proximity to most of these families’ homes, it is used frequently. However, the actual utilization of the library varied from home to home. Andrés and Edith’s families take advantage of the Story Time that is held each week. Edith’s attendance is more sporadic, but she has positive experiences and really enjoys it. Diana loves to play on the computer at the library and Edith has exposure to the computer in the library. The other children check out books and videos. The video collection seemed to be an important draw for the families. The families all seemed comfortable



using the library. Two of the mothers who did not take their children to the library had husbands who accompanied their children.

*Themes in Qualitative Research Findings for Sub-Question Two-How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?*

This section details the importance of siblings to the literacy development of the kindergarten students in this research. Two themes were uncovered surrounding this question during the study: a) My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me and b) I use English and Spanish with my Brothers and Sisters.

*My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me*

Siblings were a part of the literacy acts in the households that were visited. Whether the siblings were older or younger, they were very important in shaping literacy activities in the home. The siblings were involved in many different ways. In all but one of the seven homes visited with older siblings, the older siblings read to their kindergarten brother or sister. Most of the reading was done primarily in English. This seems to be due to the older siblings' comfort level in reading English rather than Spanish. Although many of the siblings had been taught to read in Spanish by their mothers or in early school experiences, they have been mainly educated in U.S. schools and thus are more comfortable reading English. Mothers did not expect their children who were just two or three years older than the kindergartner to read in Spanish.

Two of the mothers reported specifically that they wished their older children would read to the kindergartner in Spanish so he or she would understand the book better. These were the families with much older siblings. Both mothers reported that the older teenagers could read in Spanish. However, in one of the families, the children had

attended school exclusively in the United States and only knew how to read Spanish from their mother teaching them. They are not very fluent Spanish readers. The other family had older siblings who had begun their schooling in Mexico, but they have been in the United States for eight years and are now more comfortable reading in English.

#### *Arturo's Home*

Arturo said that he sees his third-grade brother, Manuel, read magazines such as *Ranger Rick*. Manuel reads these to him “whenever he feels like it,” his mom stated. However, when it was time to read with their mother each evening, the routine was for Manuel to read a page of the book and then Mom to read a page. Since Manuel only knows how to read in English, this reading time was exclusively done in English. Manuel was on one side and Arturo was on the other side of Mom.

#### *Diana's Home*

Diana's fourth-grade sister, Cassandra, reads to her each day. In fact, Mom said that, “She'll read to her more than one a day, because Diana is always, ‘read, read, read.’ They play together lots and they'll play school.” Cassandra reads to Diana in both Spanish and English. However, her parents have asked her to read to her more in English so Diana can learn more English. The mother reported, “Cassandra reads to her [Diana] in both languages. But we've told her she needs to start reading to her in English so she can learn more.” The parents feel like they can read to their daughter in Spanish, but they believe that she needs to hear English reading. Cassandra reads to Diana about 50 percent of the time in English and 50 percent of the time in Spanish. Diana prefers to be read to in Spanish.

### *Hector's Home*

The family sat down and read the Bible every evening; each older sibling reads a passage aloud in Spanish. The siblings can read in Spanish, but not very well. They prefer to read to Hector in English. Marisol or Max read storybooks to Hector about three times a week. Hector's mom said that she sees her children being very interested in school.

### *Jimmy's Home*

Jimmy has a three-year-old and a one-year-old sister. In this household, it was the three-year-old sister, Jessica, who influenced the amount of parent-child reading that took place. Mom said, "She loves people to read to her." Jessica always asks adults to read to her. Mom continued, "When I read to my daughter, I make him [Jimmy] come." Mom read to Jessica and made Jimmy come and sit with them, since he doesn't seem to like to be read to (as reported by his mother). This gave him the opportunity to hear reading when it may not have otherwise occurred. Mom said that Jessica pretended to read and Jimmy listened to her many times. This "reading" occurs in English.

### *Liliana's Home*

Liliana is the youngest of five. Her teenage sisters take care of her and her second-grade brother while their parents are at work. The girls read to Liliana once or twice a week. Their mother said that they spend 5-10 minutes each time reading to her. Their mom asked them to read in Spanish, but she reported that, "They really don't want to; much more of the time is in English."

### *Valencia's Home*

Every night Valencia's sister, Iliana, reads to her. Mom said, "I'm like you guys need to go to sleep. And she's like, 'Every night I read to her.' And I'm like, O.K." Since Valencia doesn't know how to read in Spanish, this reading occurs exclusively in English. The mother also told of a night when she thought Valencia was already asleep and Iliana couldn't read to her. "She opened her eye and said, 'I'm not asleep.'"

### *Veronica's Home*

Veronica's mother stated, "Erica has a reading log that she needs to do every day. So she will read to Veronica and record it each day." This mother went on to say that her 13-year-old son, Luis, reads to Veronica about twice a week without being asked. He also answers his little sisters' questions about the reading. Both siblings read to Veronica in English, as they are both more comfortable reading in English.

### *Summary of My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me*

Seven of the kindergartners included in the study had older sisters and brothers. This played a big part in the literacy used in the homes each day. Specifically noted was their reading to the younger sibling. This occurred in all but one of the homes. Edwin's mom reported that she asked his older brother to read to him; the older brother said he would but never did.

The influence older siblings had on younger siblings' literacy development cannot be underestimated. Arturo's home was highlighted because he not only heard his brother read to him with mom in the evenings, but he also witnessed Manuel reading magazines. Diana's home was included to illustrate how reading in English is an important role of a big sister. The parents felt that they could not help Edith with reading in English. The

older sibling took that responsibility. Hector's home was included because he heard not only storybook reading from his siblings, but also a daily oral reading of the Bible.

The school influenced these older siblings reading to their kindergarten brother or sister. Valencia and Veronica's mothers reported that the older sisters read to them because they needed to fill out a reading log each evening. However, it seemed to be the family structure that encouraged older siblings to read to younger ones. The older girls could read to themselves and record it on the log. They didn't have to read aloud to someone else. The younger siblings didn't seem to care whether the older brothers or sisters were reading because they had to or because they wanted to. The kindergartners (with the exception of Jimmy) loved being read to.

Jimmy's scenario was included in this section because although his sister, Jessica, is younger, she really influenced the amount of storybook reading that took place in the home. Since she always asked to be read to, Jimmy also heard the literature. Jimmy did not ask to be read to on his own. Jessica also pretended to read books to Jimmy, which demonstrated to him the enjoyment of reading.

#### *I Use English and Spanish with my Brothers and Sisters*

This theme emerged as mothers described the daily routine in their homes. In the Home Survey, six parents indicated that only Spanish was spoken in the home, one said that English only was spoken, and four stated that both languages were used. The use of Spanish and English between siblings was very interesting. Of the seven homes with older siblings, six of these spoke much more English between the siblings than between the child and parent. In the seventh home, the siblings spoke to each other almost

always in English; however, the father also talked to his children exclusively in English, as Spanish was his second language.

The use of English was not only apparent during spoken communication, but also during reading. English was used even more in reading. During the course of the study, mothers were asked to estimate the percentage of time they both spoke and read to their kindergartner in English and in Spanish, and the percentage of time the older children both spoke and read to their younger siblings in English and in Spanish.

#### *Arturo's Home*

Arturo's mom recalled her and her sisters' use of English when they were younger: "My dad had a rule in the house, speak Spanish at home. Out of the door you can speak all the English you want. He didn't want us to lose our Spanish. But between my sisters and I, we'd talk all the English we wanted in our room. But in front of my mom and dad the rule was Spanish."

Today, even though she and Arturo's dad spoke to him mainly in Spanish, Arturo and his brother speak to each other in Spanish about 60% of the time. Mom reads to the boys, Manuel preferred to be read to in English; Arturo preferred to be read to in Spanish.

#### *Diana's Home*

Diana's parents speak to her solely in Spanish; Diana's older sister, Kassandra, speaks to her about 75% of the time in Spanish. Diana was reported to get frustrated when Kassandra spoke to her in English. One of the literacy activities that Kassandra and Diana do together is play school. When Kassandra was asked what they did when they played school, her response was, "Oh, I teach her words that she doesn't know in English. And she asks me, how do you say 'chair' in English? Then she repeats it back."

### *Hector's Home*

Hector's mom spoke to him in Spanish only. But his siblings used Spanish and English equally. However, when it came to reading it was almost always in English. "The other two [older siblings] are able to read in Spanish, but they can't read it very well. So they prefer to read to him in English," their mom reported.

### *Liliana's Home*

Liliana's mom relayed that she spoke to her children in Spanish about 90% of the time. However, the siblings use English and Spanish equally with Liliana. Mom mentioned that her older girls read to Liliana in both languages, but most of the time the reading was in English. "They [older sisters] read to her in both languages. Liliana understands both Spanish and English, and they combine the two languages throughout the day", mom added. When asked whether she would rather Liliana be read to in English or Spanish, mother replied, "...both languages because it's the best for her." The older sisters speak to each other almost exclusively in English.

### *Valencia's Home*

Valencia's mom noted: "...they've been speaking English since they were little. They talk to me in English but I tell them to talk to me in Spanish." Valencia's mom reported that she speaks to the children 75% of the time in English. Valencia's dad speaks to her only in English, as Spanish is his second language. The girls speak together in English all of the time. Iliana only knows how to read in English and, therefore, reads in English to Valencia.

### *Veronica's Home*

Veronica's mother said she always speaks and reads to her children in Spanish. However, Erica reads to Veronica only in English. Veronica's mother said, "She will learn both languages. I've heard that they get confused sometimes but I don't think Veronica will because she understands English very well. I don't think that will confuse her." Veronica didn't seem to care whether she was being read to in English or in Spanish. Her mother reported that she would like Veronica to be read to in both English and Spanish. Veronica and her brother and sister spoke in English together about 80% of the time, as reported by the mother.

### *Summary of I Use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters*

In every home included in the research, the siblings spoke more in English than their parents did with the kindergarten sibling. The older siblings' reading to the kindergartners was done much more of the time in English than in Spanish. Arturo's excerpt was included to show how the use of English in the household had changed from generation to generation. Diana's excerpt showed how her sister, Cassandra, was vital in helping her understand English. In Hector and Veronica's homes, English was only spoken by their siblings. They also heard reading in Spanish from their mothers and reading in English from their brothers and sisters. However, it is important to note, as demonstrated in Valencia's home, that English can be the dominate language. One cannot assume that primarily Spanish is spoken in a Mexican American kindergartner's home.



*Themes in Qualitative Research Findings for Sub-Question Three-How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?*

This section describes the effect of mothers' education level on the literacy activities practiced in the homes. One theme emerged from the data: My Mom's Education Level Doesn't Matter Much.

*My Mom's Education Level Doesn't Matter Much*

With the possible exception of taking their children to the library, the education level of the mother did not seem to play a part in the literacy environment of the households. However, in one household there was a difference. Many more school related literacy acts were noted. This was in Andrés' home. Andrés' mother had graduated from high school and was in her third year studying to be a pre-school teacher when she and her husband decided to move to the United States.

*Andrés' Home*

On the walls in Andrés' family room were certificates that he had earned at school. These included Student of the Month, Terrific Kid, and All Green (the award for outstanding behavior). Also hung on the wall was a school project. Andrés had a child-sized table in the family room as well. There were paper and pencils on the table.

Andrés reportedly was sent to preschool so he would learn English; since his parents don't know English very well, they wanted him to pick it up. His mom said she is learning English with him. She reported that she knows some words in English and tried to teach Andrés these words.

Andrés' mom told of a game they played. They took letters of the alphabet and taped them on the wall. Andrés' mom told him what letter to get or said a word and then he

collected the letters and made the word. For example, Andrés' mom told him that they were going to write a letter to his baby brother and tell him that they love him. They wrote down "Yo Quiero" on a piece of paper. Andrés looked for those letters on the walls, brought them back, and wrote "Yo Quiero."

During the week, the family had basically the same routine. Andrés ate when he got home from morning kindergarten. After he ate, they sat down and talked about what he did at school. Mom said, "I'll ask him what did you do at school?" Mom then looked through his planner and notes. She said she expanded on what they did at school that day. If they learned a certain letter, she built on that and they sat down and practiced writing that letter. They then read the books Andrés brings home from the library. On Fridays and the weekend, his dad will read to him also. Andrés' dad works until about 4:30 p.m.

The books Andrés brought home from the school library were all in Spanish. But the books that they have at home are all in English. Mom said she knew some words and that her husband knew a few more. They try to translate as they're reading. When they've read in English, Andrés may not have understood what was being said, so they explain it to him in Spanish.

Mom spoke about the following routine when reading books to Andrés. Before they read a book, they look at the pictures and then they make up their own story – what they think is going to happen, picture by picture. Mom talks about the title and the cover picture. Then they read the book. When reading, Andrés' mom took into consideration both the pictures and the words. She also pointed to the words and pictures while she was reading. She always made a connection with the word and the picture so Andrés

could see how they were related. She reads, then asks a question, and Andrés responds. If she reads to him in Spanish, she talks about it in English. If she reads to him in English, she then talks to him about it in Spanish. In this participant's book reading observation, Andrés enjoyed being read to. He laughed at appropriate places as the book was being read to him.

Andrés' mom said she was focused on the kindergarten sight words that the teacher sent home because she wants to ensure that Andrés is ready for first grade. Mom said she focuses on two or three words everyday. She has him write the words by sounding them out. They try to stretch it out together. He writes down the letters of the sounds that he hears to make the word. Andrés was in a kindergarten reading group at school that read first-grade materials.

*Summary of My Mom's Education Level Doesn't Matter Much*

When looking for themes to answer the research sub-question, "How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?" there were no glaring patterns between the education level of the mother and the literacy activities of the homes. However, Andrés' home is an example of how parent education can affect the literacy of the home. The level of education may not matter as much as what the parent had studied. The study also shows that families' educational experiences cannot be generalized according to ethnicity, income level or place of residence.

*Themes in Qualitative Research Findings for the Main Research Question-In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?*

There is research which generalizes that many low-income children have few literacy experiences before they enter school (i.e., Adams, 1990). Such was not the case in this study. The literacy uses varied from home to home, but students in all the homes took part in daily literacy activities. The theme of *Reading with Mom* was determined by the response of the parents and field notes that were taken. Within this theme the amount of times a week reading took place and the different ways parents read with their child were uncovered.

The amount of talk during storybook reading varied greatly. Five mothers asked questions throughout the story, while three incorporated no discussion of the text – the book was read straight through. Four mothers pointed at the pictures and made comments about the reading at each page or so. The mothers who asked questions throughout the text also asked questions at the end of the book. The level of mothers' education and/or sibling interaction did not correlate with the amount of talk that occurred during a book reading session.

*My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too* explained the use of literacy among the mothers. There was only one parent whose only reported use of literacy was to write a grocery list. The rest of the mothers did this, but they also used literacy in other ways. This is important to note, because children observed this literacy use. In the many conversations held, mothers stated that their children emulate what they do.

According to the literature review, building oral language is a strong predictor of success in reading (i.e., Teele, 2004; Vernon-Feagan et al., 2001). Regardless of the level of education, the mothers talked to their children about school. Every parent in the study talked to her kindergarten child about what happened at school that day. The

kindergarten children in the study were active participants in the conversations. Thus, *We Talk a Lot at My House* emerged as the next theme, which also included other topics such as storytelling. This study demonstrated the intergenerational use of storytelling in three of the families. The use of storytelling, although used in eight of the homes, was not as prevalent in this study as the literature review would lead one to believe.

*We Go to the Library* was found to be a commonality among the families. The proximity of the library to the school and community may have been a big reason for the library use. The elementary school that the students attend does not have its own library. Students use the public library for “library skills” time and “check out” time. Thus, they are comfortable at the library. The two mothers with a fifth grade education did not take their children to the library, but their husbands did. There were only two families that did not go to the library at all; education level did not seem to be a factor in this decision, as one mother dropped out of school in tenth grade and one mother had a post high school education.

Kindergarten students with were read to by their older siblings, thus, *My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me* emerged. This didn’t seem to be an imposition on the older siblings, as they seemed to enjoy the activity. Another area that siblings impacted was the use of English spoken in the homes. *I use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters* described the language in which siblings communicated. In every case, older siblings caused the use of English in the home to increase.

*My Mom’s Education Level Doesn’t Matter Much* explored the effect of the mothers’ education levels on the literacy activities occurring in the homes. It was noted that the level of education did not seem to have a direct impact on the activities.

However, one family was highlighted because the literacy practiced with the child in her home did seem to be “school literacies”. She would build on the activities completed at the school. The mother’s education level did not seem to be as important as what the mother studied.

### *Conclusion*

Educators ought to learn as much as possible about the cultures of students that they serve. However, the next step is to get to know the individual families to understand how literacy is used in their homes. This will help teachers utilize the students’ “funds of knowledge” and provide better educational opportunities for the students. This qualitative research study uncovered the following themes when answering the research question and sub-questions: 1) *Reading with My Mom*; 2) *My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*; 3) *We Talk a Lot at My House*; 4) *We Go to the Library*; 5) *My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me*; 6) *I Use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters*; 7) *My Mom’s Education Level Doesn’t Matter Much*. The next chapter will address what teachers and schools can do to provide high quality, meaningful, educational experiences for kindergarten students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION, SIGNIFICANCE, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Introduction*

“Sometimes teachers think because us parent’s are hispanic we don’t know english well read [sic] it. Sometime’s some parent’s don’t know how to read in Spanish even thoug where [sic] hispanics.” This was written by a parent answering a question on the response sheet for the Home Survey. The purpose of this study was to examine home literacy uses of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students and provide this picture to educators who may not have knowledge of the culture of the children that they teach. Individuals use literacy throughout their day; however, many of the families who participated in the research did not think that what they did in their day-to-day lives counted as literacy. But literacy was used in various ways. The general literacy activities were investigated, and special attention was devoted to characteristics such as well parent-child interactions, sibling interactions, and mothers’ level of education. Information from surveys, interviews, field notes, and phone interviews was coded and categorized and then brought together to give a holistic picture of the literacy events in the homes.

The seven-month qualitative study was guided by the following research question and sub-questions.

**In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?**

- As acts of literacy take place in the home, what types of parent-child interactions are occurring?

- How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?
- How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?

Many of the themes uncovered overlapped and helped answer more than one of the sub-questions. The information gained from the sub-questions helped produce a holistic picture to address the main research question. This chapter includes: (1) discussion, (2) significance and implications, and (3) recommendations.

*Discussion of Sub Questions and the Main Research Question*

This section will discuss the themes which emerged from each sub-question and the main research question in the research.

*Sub-Question One-As acts of literacy take place in the home,  
what type of parent-child interactions are occurring?*

By examining parent-child interactions, the theme *Reading with My Mom* was discovered. With regard to parent-child literacy interaction, it was found that all but one mother read to her child each week. This theme contrasts with current literature (i.e., Berrera & Bauer, 2003; Nistler & Maier, 2003) that states that storybook reading is not a normal practice in Hispanic households. This research also contrasts the earlier research that found that parents who are economically disadvantaged and who have limited English proficiency rarely read to their young children (i.e., Cassidy et al., 2004; Gadsen, 1995).

The number of times that mothers read to their children varied from two to three times per week to multiple times a day. This variance was checked against factors such as the mothers' educational level, number of other siblings in the home, and amount of



time living in the United States. No discernable connection was found to explain why the amount of time spent reading between families varied. Mothers with less education sometimes read more than mothers with more education. Tied to this was the work schedule of the parent. Work schedules were also investigated, but no theme emerged to relate this to the number of times a child was read to during a week. For example, since the children were enrolled in a half-day kindergarten program, mothers who worked the 3:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. shift had time with their children before they went to work and were able to read with them. The mother who worked until 2:00 a.m. also reported that she regularly read to her children.

The number and ages of siblings did not seem to affect the amount of time either. If there were siblings close to the same age or younger in the home, they listened to their mother read, along with the kindergarten sibling. Sometimes, however, the reading took place during the younger siblings' naptime; the mothers liked giving individual attention to the kindergarten when possible. Older siblings took the responsibility of also reading to their kindergarten brother or sister. This did not displace the times the mother read to the child; it added more times the child was read to.

Researchers Nistler and Maiers (2003) have found that there are a number of factors affecting the frequency and kinds of literacy acts found in homes. They listed the number of hours parents spend at work, immigrants' ties to their native country, and the number of children in the household as factors that all played a significant role in how literacy was used. The literature review also revealed that it is not only the frequency with which a parent reads to a child but also what the parent does during the shared reading that affects the child's reading success; (Leseman & DeJong, 1998; Morrow &

Temlock-Fields, 2005; Pressley, 2002; Teele, 2004). Parents help build comprehension by (a) doing a “picture walk” before reading, (b) asking children to predict what will happen in the story, (c) asking open-ended questions throughout the text, and (d) having a child retell the story at the end (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2005). This discussion before, during and after storybook reading varied from household to household in this study.

As supported by the literature review (e.g., Burgess et al., 2002; Cox et al., 2003; Dickinson et al., 2002; Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2005; Strickland & Morrow, 2000), some of the mothers engaged their children through questions and comments throughout the story. However, three of the mothers did not ask questions or make comments either during the reading or at the end of the story. These mothers all read the book straight through and then smiled at the children when they were done with the book. The number and kinds of discussions were checked against factors such the amount of time living in the United States and the mothers’ educational level. However, no discernable connection was made found to explain why the amount of talk and kinds of discussions varied.

As codes were being developed, it was thought there might be a connection between the amount of time the mothers had been in the United States and the whether talk about the text was occurring before, during, and/or after the book reading. Transcripts and field notes were read and coded to check for the length of the mothers’ residency in the United States and the level of talk during book reading. The three mothers who had been in the United States for the least amount of time all talked to their children before, during and/or after book reading. The mother who had been in the United States for eight years did not read to her child, so the connection was not

applicable. The mother who resided in the United States for ten years talked to her children during the reading session. There were three mothers who had been in the United States for 13 years. Two of these mothers did not talk and, instead, read the book straight through. The mother with 14 years of residency did talk during the reading, while the two mothers with the most time living in the United States (17 and 20 years, respectively) did not talk to their children about the text at all.

The researcher also examined whether there was any influence from the country, (Mexico or the United States) where the mothers' schooling had occurred. Of the seven mothers who had all of their formal education (regardless of level completed) in Mexico, five talked to their child during book reading. The sixth mother was the mother who does not read to her children. The final mother in this category did not engage her child in conversation while reading the book. The mothers who started school in Mexico but continued on in the United States were closely examined. Two of these mothers dropped out of school before graduation. The mother who dropped out the earliest did the most commenting and questioning while reading to her children. The one who finished high school in the United States did the least talking during reading. However, other mothers who finished high school (regardless of location) did ask questions and talk about the book, as did the mother who only finished fifth grade. Thus, no characteristic was linked to the amount and type of talk that occurred during mother-child reading.

The next theme uncovered was, *My Mom Reads and Writes Other Things, Too*. The information that was gathered from the parents led to this theme; however, these literacy practices seemed to be harder for the mothers to express. Most of the mothers did not think about the ways they used reading and writing in their daily lives. The

mothers were asked in many different ways about what their possible literacy acts might be. After being asked repeatedly, they began to tell of their activities. But they did not seem to think that the question was important, and the thought they were conveying seemed to be, “If she wants to find out about reading and writing with my kindergarten child, why is she asking about me?” The same thoughts seemed to emerge when the researcher asked about the mothers’ literacy uses growing up. But this question helped to determine whether the mothers’ current literacy practices were shaped by their previous educational experiences.

Children in this study observed reading and writing in their daily lives. All of the mothers used grocery lists at least weekly. Nine of the eleven children watched the list being made. Many times, the children accompanied their mothers to the store and saw the lists being used. This seemed to be a major opportunity for the child to see writing as a tool. Children also observed recipes and cookbooks being read when mothers prepared meals and mothers reading magazines for enjoyment.

Delgado-Gaitan (1990) and Monzó and Rueda (2001) found that reading magazines, poetry, and newspapers was a common practice with Mexican Americans. This also held true in this study. One of the mothers talked about her favorite poetry book. She read the book and also had it on a CD to listen to when she was in the kitchen. A bilingual newspaper was read in six of the homes. All of the parents who purchased the bilingual paper preferred to read the Spanish version of the articles. One parent in particular often read a story in the Spanish language newspaper and made a comment. This drew her boys’ attention as they wanted to know what she was reading about. This research concurred with the literature review, which indicated that showed

that Mexican American families had many literacy activities in their homes (i.e., Arzubiaga et al., 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Monzó & Rueda, 2001).

As building oral language is an important part in becoming literate (Christie & Richgels, 2003; Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2003; Neuman, 2002), the theme of *We Talk a Lot at My House* emerged. This was inconsistent with earlier research that reported low-income families do not talk about school (i.e., Cassidy et al, 2004; Philliber et al., 1996). One of the topics that was discussed daily was school. The kindergartners told their parents about the Animated Literacy character (Stone, 1996) that was studied in their classroom. They sang the song and did the action that accompanied it for their parents. Even with younger children in the home, the mothers still made the effort to spend time individually with their kindergartner. Activities were also planned based on their children's desires for fun after school and on the weekends. This led to more conversations about these experiences.

For all families in the study, the parent-child interactions that occurred were not just in English or just in Spanish. Seven of the eleven mothers spoke and read mainly in Spanish. The two mothers who immigrated to the United States when they were in second and sixth grades preferred to read in English. Two of the mothers felt equally comfortable reading in English and in Spanish. These two routinely read in both languages to their children. Regardless of the language used during parent-child interactions, the children have experienced many literacy acts.

Another important part of building oral language for the children was the storytelling that took place. Storytelling was included within this the theme of *We Talk a Lot at My House* because it builds oral language and gave the children a framework for

how stories work (whether they are read or told). In this study, storytelling was driven by the grandparents, who either told the stories themselves or encouraged the mothers to tell the stories. However, with the influence of TV and computers, one parent talked about her children not liking reading, “In this time of life everybody’s watching TV or playing with computers. They just don’t want to open a book with pages. They might be bored.” This leads to the possible conclusion that as electronic media are becoming more prevalent in children’s daily lives, storytelling, and book reading has decreased. This is an area in which more research is needed.

An activity that was common in the households in the study was going to the library. *We Go to the Library* may have emerged as a theme with the families because of the location of the public library. This theme contrasted earlier research which found that some Mexican American families were not aware of a library near their homes (Monzó & Rueda, 2002). The library’s proximity to the homes made it assessable to all the families. However, one of the three families who did not use the library lived a further distance away. This is the same library that students use during the school day; thus students are already comfortable being in the building, which made it another draw for use after school.

The ways the parents interacted with their children in the library varied. Eight parents went to check out books and videos for their children. Four went and sat with their children while they played games on the computer. The library offered Story Time each week. The Story Time consisted of a library staff member reading a book and then providing follow-up activities for the children. There were both English and Spanish Story Times. Two parents took their children to Story Time and interacted with them

during the activities. This variance in how the library was utilized was checked against the variables found in the sub-questions. No connections were made to explain why library use varied.

*Sub-Question Two-How does the role of siblings impact the literacy activities that occur in the home?*

Examined in this research was the role siblings played in the way literacy was used in the home. The role of the siblings was mentioned briefly in the discussion of Sub-Question One above. In the households visited, there was a very strong sense of family, as supported by the literature review (i.e., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004). Siblings often played a large role of the development of their brothers and sisters in all areas. *My Sisters and Brothers Read to Me* was a theme that emerged in families with older siblings. All but one older sibling regularly read to their younger siblings. Due to time limitations, this reading was not observed; therefore, the amount of talking and questioning that occurred was not noted. The data concerning the siblings' interactions was gathered from the mothers' interviews. Since many of the parents did not include discussion during the book reading process, it is likely that the siblings did not discuss the book or asking questions during the reading either. This is an area that needs further research.

Most of the older siblings had been educated in the United States for much of their school careers and were much more comfortable reading in English rather than in Spanish. All of the older siblings read a larger percentage of time in English than in Spanish to their younger brothers and sisters. It is interesting to note that three of the four parents with older children capable of reading in Spanish wanted them read to the

younger siblings in Spanish so the younger children could; yet most of the time the reading by siblings was done in English.

Older brothers and sisters were asked by their parents to read to their kindergarten sibling, sometimes they would read without being asked. One parent said that her kindergartner got everybody's attention because he was the baby: "The baby, they do more things with him. They pay more attention to him. And everybody else pays attention to him." This research supports the literature review, which finds that Mexican American older siblings frequently help younger ones and that there is a strong sense of family unity (i.e., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Gonzalez, 1998b).

Siblings used a lot more English than their parents did with the kindergartners. This included using more English both when speaking and when reading. Such findings led to the theme, *I Use English and Spanish with My Brothers and Sisters*. In this study, all of the older siblings were fluent speakers of both Spanish and English. In classes at school, they used mainly English. With many of their friends, they used both Spanish and English. At home, it was found that siblings spoke to each other more often in English than in Spanish, even if the parents predominately spoke to their children in Spanish. Siblings took a major role in teaching their kindergarten brother or sister English. In every case, siblings spoke to each other more in English than their parents spoke to them in English.

When the older siblings read to their younger brother or sister, it was almost always in English. In five out of the seven families with older siblings, the siblings read to the kindergartner only in English. The sixth family's older children read 90% of the time in English, as estimated by the mother. Again, this seems to be influenced by the



fact that most of these children's education had taken place in the United States. They received their reading instruction in English. The only older sibling who read about half the time in English and half the time in Spanish was educated Pre-K through third grade in a bilingual program.

*Sub-Question Three-How does the level of education of the parent affect literacy activities of the home?*

The level of mothers' education and its impact on literacy acts in the home was explained. Within this sub-question, the data showing where the education took place (United States or Mexico) was also considered. It seemed as if a theme might emerge connecting mothers with less education and possession of books in the home, but this did not hold true. One parent with a fifth-grade education estimated that they had about 100 children's books in the home, the most of any home in the study, while a high school graduate had six, the least number of books in the home.

It also initially appeared that mothers with less education took their children to the library less often. However, there was not enough data to support this connection. It is true that the two mothers with a fifth-grade education did not take their children to the library. However, both of their husbands took the children to the library. For at least one of the families, the mother's work schedule was the reason. Therefore, it could not be concluded that the level of education of the mother was the reason why children visited or did not visit the library. Moreover, one of the parents with education greater than high school did not take her children to the library. She reported that they read the library books that the children brought home from school. They also had a computer with internet access in their home. The remaining families used the library.

The level of the mother's education was explored, but no emerging themes were found. This is inconsistent with many other research studies which showed that mothers with less education spoke less often to their children about school (i.e., Denton & West, 2002; NCES, 2003), had fewer books in the household (Dickinson et al., 2002), read to their children less often (Cassidy et al., 2004) and went to the library less often (Baqker et al., 1995). However, in one home (Andrés'), literacy activities looked different than those in the other homes. This seemed to be because of the subject the mother had studied and not because of the number of years of formal education completed.

The literacy activities noted in Andrés home led to the theme, *My Mom's education level doesn't matter much*. Andrés' mother had completed three years of college in Mexico to become a preschool teacher. Many of the activities in the school were mirrored in the home. For example, before reading a book, she and Andrés would look at the pictures and talk about what the story might be about. At school, this strategy is called a "picture walk"; she used "school literacy" in her home. Morrow and Temlock-Fields (2005) found that picture walks are one way parents can help their children build the necessary background knowledge before reading a text. The education of Andrés' mom was evident in other ways as well. Throughout the day, she infused literacy into everyday activities, such as sounding out words to write and reading labels at the grocery store.

Other parents tried to follow the teacher's guidance and used some of the literacy strategies that were used at school. This was evident as parents talked about the notes from school that were sent home telling about reading strategies to use with the children. Several parents mentioned trying to use the strategies. In one case, however, this was

detrimental to the child. Previous studies also noted this occurrence (i.e., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Paratore & McCormack, 2005). The teacher had mentioned that the child was a little behind on recognizing letters, numbers, and shapes. The mother (with a fifth-grade education) told the father this. The father then bought flashcards and a whiteboard to use to practice the skills. The father was following what he thought the teacher wanted him to do. But this practice used the time when the father previously had spent reading with the child. This focus on skill development concurs with research which found that low-income parents or parents with a lower level of English proficiency used time with their children doing skills-based literacy activities rather than emphasizing reading for enjoyment (Cassidy et al., 2004; Hammett et al., 2003). Mexican American parents have respect for schools and teachers (Quinter, 1998); they try to do what the teacher asks.

*Main Research Question-In what ways do literacy activities manifest themselves in homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students?*

The three research sub-questions helped answer the main research question. Several themes were found to explain the literacy activities that were used in the home. Even though all the families met the same criteria to be included in the study, there was a lot of variation concerning literacy usage.

This tells educators that they must not only take the time to learn about the Mexican American culture in general, but also get to know their individual students and families. Classroom teachers cannot assume that the same type of literacy acts are occurring in a family just because of the child's Mexican heritage. There are commonalities among the families; however, how the literacy is carried out looks different in each of the homes. For example, a classroom teacher may assume that a

Mexican American child is being read to at home. But the teacher should get to know the family to gain a deeper understanding of the number of times a week the reading occurs and if talk is happening before, during and/or after the reading.

Teachers also should be aware of other literacy acts taking place in homes. For example, in this research all the families used a grocery list. The children many times saw their mothers reading magazines or newspapers. Recipes were used and followed. Teachers can expand on these types of home literacy acts and build from the children's "funds of knowledge" in the classroom. The students' learning can be expanded on when teachers learn about the everyday lives of their students (Gonzalez, 2004).

Home visits may be an avenue for educators to learn about the literacy acts of the home and better understand the Mexican American student's life outside of school. Teachers may come to the classroom with assumptions about students. They can check their assumptions during a home visit (such as determining whether and how storybook reading is taking place). In the current research, all the families were very forthcoming with information to better explain their literacy uses during home visits. Seeing how literacy is used within the home can help teachers connect school literacy with home literacy uses (McTavish, 2007). Home visits can also help build positive relationships between the family and teacher.

An educator may consider making home visits. Home visits accommodate parents' work schedules and eliminate transportation issues. Extended family is important in many Mexican American families and a home visit allows educators to talk with these people important to the family also. Teachers can learn about the family's language, literacy levels and literacy access. The educator can also discover the

economic stressors on a family. The parents may come away with the feeling that the teacher is truly concerned about their child's success and values the family's participation in the educational process (Herrera & Murry, 2005). The current research was consistent with the findings of Herrera and Murry (2005) and allowed the researcher the opportunity to understand the literacy use in families' lives. The parents were very welcoming and forthcoming with information that would help an educator better understand their daily lives.

Current research has revealed that a strong oral language base is a predictor of becoming a successful reader (Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2003; Neuman, 2002; Paratore & Jordan, 2007; Roskos, et al., 2003). Oral language use with children was a strength in all Mexican American families in this research. The families all communicated with their children about the day at school. One mother reported that her kindergarten son would ask her about her day a work, after she asked him about his day. This line of child questioning came from the mother modeling the question each day. Another predominate builder of oral language found in this study, as well as in other studies (i.e., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Rowsell, 2006), was storytelling, however, the assumption cannot be made that all Mexican American children have stories told to them. Once again, the teacher ought to get to know the families to truly understand the literacy practices of the home.

Researching the families' literacy uses included also finding out about their library usage. This study showed that the majority of the families used the public library. This finding contrasts those of Monzó and Rueda (2001), who found that some families were not aware of having a public library near their homes and had never been shown how to check out books. This study may be unique in the fact that the families lived in

close proximity to the library and the children were familiar with it because of their use of the library during the school day. Library usage may have been different if the library had not been within walking distance or a short car ride of the homes. Students also were probably more comfortable with this public library since they used it during school hours. A caution is also made about making assumptions about the child's use of the library once the family is there. In this study, the library was used for checking out books and videos and playing on the computer as well as attending Story Time and participating in activities. A more in-depth study could target families' uses of the library.

In this study, part of learning about the families' literacy uses was finding out about the siblings and their impact in the families. The data from this research showed that older siblings frequently read to the kindergartner and it was usually in English. A teacher may want to delve deeper into his or her students' lives and find out about the kind of talk that happens during this storybook reading. An effective teacher finds out whether there are older and/or younger siblings in the home and how they influence the literacy acts that occur.

Even for predominately Spanish speaking kindergartners, the older brothers and sisters spent most of the time speaking to them in English. Older siblings were many times the only ones who spoke English to the younger brother or sister. The teacher should be aware of this. Older siblings can be encouraged to make sure their younger siblings understand the English that is being spoken or read to them.

Many times classroom teachers will assume that their low-income, Mexican American parents are not well educated (McTavish, 2007). This research challenged that assumption. In this research; there was a wide variance in the education level of the

parent. It was also found that parents with less formal education sometimes provided more enriching literacy activities than parents with more formal education. This finding demonstrates again that the importance of teachers getting to know and building relationships with their students' families. Parents, such as Andrés' mother, may have had educational experiences that significantly influence the way literacy activities are approached in the home.

### Significance and Implications of the Study

This section discusses both the theoretical significance and the practical significance of the study.

#### *Theoretical Significance*

This research helped paint a picture of the literacy that occurred in eleven homes of Mexican American kindergartners. McTavish (2007) reported that assumptions continue to persist that low-income families or families living in low-income neighborhoods engage in few literacy activities. This research showed that a variety of literacy activities did occur in low-income, urban, Mexican American families' homes. This supports earlier research, such as Arzubiaga et al.(2002), McTavish (2007), and Rowsell (2006), that found that the assumption that few literacy activities occur in the home does not apply to all low-income children. Some children, regardless of family income level or where they live, have considerable experience with literacy even before entering school. However, Hausken (2000) found that only 37% of children entering kindergarten in the state of Kansas have a basic familiarity with print. In this study, it was noted that all of the homes had literacy activities occurring, thus the children were building a familiarity with print. The literacy strategies parents used to help their child

may differ, however, from the strategies used in the classroom. Just as Waldbart et al. (2006) found, literacy strategies that teachers use need to bridge home and school literacy practices to help children become emergent readers.

#### *Parent-child interactions*

One form of literacy practiced in all but one of the homes was storybook reading. This finding contrasts with those of other research (i.e., Cairney, 2003; Cassidy et al., 2004; Nistler & Maiers, 2003) that found storybook reading was not a normal practice for most Mexican American families. Mothers read to their children at least once or twice a week and many read every day or even multiple times per day. Another variable was the amount of talk that occurred during the storybook reading. There appeared to be specific storybook reading behaviors and practices that enhanced children's reading skills and comprehension. It is not only the frequency with which a parent reads to a child that affects the child's success; what that parent does during shared reading and how he or she mediates the shared text is important as well (Leseman & DeJong, 1998; Strickland & Morrow, 2000; Teele, 2004). It is primarily through interactive dialogue that children gain comprehension skills, increase their understandings of literacy conventions, and are encouraged to enjoy reading (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2005). The quality of the storybook reading experiences differed for each child in this research.

The variance in the mothers' storybook reading practices could not be linked to factors such as mothers' education levels (or the country in which the mother was educated) or sibling influences. Some of the mothers read the book straight through with no discussion of pictures or text. Some mothers asked questions about the book before the reading began. Some mothers also asked questions or interjected comments



throughout the text. The questions concerned what had just happened or what might happen next. Mothers posed both recall and higher order thinking questions. The storybook reading in this research supported earlier research that suggested that parents play many roles (such as eliciting children's participation and making sure the book is meaningful) during reading time (e.g., Strickland & Morrow, 2000).

There were other literacy activities found in these eleven homes. Common literacy activities many times were related to food. A grocery list was made in every house at least weekly. The kindergartners saw this and may have participated in making it or shopping for the items. Mothers also frequently read recipes. This reaffirms the research that showed that regardless of the sociocultural group children are a part of, they see reading and writing as part of their everyday lives (i.e., Paratore & McCormack, 2005; Rowsell, 2006; Willis, 2000). Many children also saw their mothers reading magazines or newspapers. Only two of the mothers read books to themselves on a normal basis in this research; the deterrent to this activity seemed to be lack of time. The reading and writing used for both enjoyment and necessity that the children saw occurred naturally during the routine of daily living, just as other studies have shown (i.e., Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1980).

Oral language acquisition is an important part of literacy acquisition. Monzó and Rueda (2001) found that common literacy activities in Mexican American homes included a rich oral dialogue with children, and Delgado-Gaitan (2004) reported that storytelling is a popular tradition. This study supported the finding that oral language is very important in Mexican American families. Children came home from school and talked about their day. Just as other research (i.e., Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Gonzales,

1998a) has found, this research found that Mexican Americans are family centered and the parents spend as much time as they can with their children. The children took an active, participatory role in family conversations. Storytelling did occur in the families within this study; however, it did not occur in all the homes. The grandfathers seemed to play a major role in this tradition. This finding again was not linked to mothers' education level or age or number of siblings.

### *Siblings*

Siblings played a major role in the literacy activities of Mexican American kindergartners included in this research. Just as Delgado-Gaitan (2004) reported, family unity is a strong value and interdependence among family members is highly valued in Mexican American families. Many of the mothers in the current research reported that their families were "united" and were very close. This included both the core family unit as well as extended family members.

Delgado-Gaitan (2004) also believed that siblings provided a literacy environment and opportunities for their younger brothers and sisters. This was very apparent in this research. Older siblings were found to routinely read to their younger siblings. The older siblings were influenced by school expectations and experiences when reading to their kindergarten sibling. This research thus supported Monzó and Rueda's (2001) study of children with older siblings attending United States schools. The older siblings practiced other types of 'school literacy' with their brothers and sisters, thus, helping the younger siblings achieve success in school literacy tasks. McTavish (2007) found that siblings close in age were involved in situations in which both siblings had opportunities to learn. In this research, the older siblings became the link between school-type literacies and

materials and the home. This link between school literacy and activities in the home occurred when the brothers and sisters played school. This type of play happened frequently in the homes visited. Whether it included reading to the younger child or doing flashcards with the kindergartner, the older siblings practiced what they had seen modeled at school. As McTavish (2007) found, this helped not only the younger sibling, but the older as well. The older siblings had a chance to develop reading fluency and higher comprehension skills as they played with their little brother or sister.

An interesting theme that was found in this research was the use of English with the siblings. As reported earlier, all of the siblings spoke more English with each other than their parents did with them. The use of English in reading was even more pronounced. This seemed somewhat controversial with the mothers. As supported by earlier research (e.g., Pease-Alvarez, 2003), Mexican American parents liked for their children to maintain their Spanish skills. In the current research, mothers wanted their older children to read in Spanish to the kindergartner; however, this did not happen often, as most of the time the reading by siblings was done in English. The mothers reported that the older children were much more comfortable reading in English than in Spanish. One family did specifically ask that the fourth-grader sister read to the kindergartner in English. The parents felt that they could read in Spanish but could not read well enough in English and wanted their kindergartner to be exposed to more reading in English.

In Mexican American families, children may be assisted with tasks by their parents or older siblings much longer than other children (Gonzales, 1998b). This seemed to hold true in this study. Especially if the kindergartner was the youngest child, more attention was given to help him or her with daily needs than another child might

receive. This was also found to be true during literacy activities. Mothers did not expect the kindergartners to use their literacy skills to make a grocery list with them (rather than just observe) because they felt as though the children were too little. The importance of this is addressed in the “Practical Significance” section.

### *Education Levels*

As reported by Arzubiaga et al. (2002), almost 50% of Mexican American immigrants do not have a high school diploma. This study found that seven of the eleven, or 64% of the mothers did have a diploma. Only one of those mothers graduated from a United States’ school; the rest earned their diploma in Mexico. When the education level of the mother was correlated with the literacy activities occurring in the homes in this study, no direct link was found. Earlier research (e.g., Monzó & Rueda, 2001) found that some families were not aware of having a public library within walking distance of their home. Such was not the case in this study. All parents were aware of the library and most visited it. But the education level of the mothers was not linked to library use. Families with mothers who had a fifth-grade education used the library, while some families with mothers who had more than a high school diploma did not.

The correlation of the number of books in the home and education level of the mother did not yield a significant relationship in this research either. Homes with mothers without a diploma had as many or more books than homes of more educated mothers. A home in which the mother had only a fifth-grade education had the most books of all the families. As far as reading these books to the children, the education level did not correspond to the number of times a week the reading occurred. This contrasts with the National Center for Children in Poverty’s (2002) study that found that

mothers who did not complete high school were less likely than parents with higher education levels to engage in daily shared reading.

Regardless of the mothers' education level, the children enjoyed being read to. Hammett et al. (2003) found that middle-income parents emphasized the entertainment aspects of literacy learning, whereas more low-income parents emphasized skill learning during literacy-related activities. Some of the mothers in the current study asked questions or made comments during reading times that drew smiles to the faces of their children. Others read straight through the book, but the experience was enjoyed by both the mothers and the children. There was one case in which the teacher mentioned that the child needed some extra help to learn her letters and time was diverted from storybook reading to that specific skill; however, that was only one case and could not be categorized as a theme among the families who participated.

#### *Practical Significance*

This study was conducted in the hope that practicing classroom teachers would learn from the findings and be able to educate their Mexican American students more effectively. Educators should understand the realities of Mexican American families, as these realities influence students' experiences and how students' best learn. For example, as quoted in the "Discussion" section, "The baby, they do more things with him. They pay more attention to him. And everybody else pays attention to him." This illustrated that younger siblings in Mexican American families may be assisted in tasks by older family members more than in an African American or Caucasian household. Thus, kindergarten teachers may need to give extra assistance to youngest-in-the-family

Mexican American students for daily classroom tasks. This includes both the 'housekeeping' tasks as well as with the literacy learning activities.

Many educators, including this researcher, hold preconceived assumptions about urban, low income Mexican American families. In the position of principal of the elementary school where the Mexican American families in the research attended, this educator assumed that lower literate parents did not have many books in the home and did not use literacy daily. This was not the case found in this research. Teachers might want to know about their students' family makeup, immigration history, favorite activities, literacy activities, prior knowledge, concerns, and strengths (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Armed with this knowledge, a teacher will be ready to better meet the literacy learning needs of the students. There are several things that classroom teachers can do to better help their students become proficient readers and writers. However, it can be challenging for teachers to make positive instructional decisions using the information that is gathered about families. Villegas and Lucas (2007) believed that, "They must have sociocultural consciousness (the awareness that a person's world view is not universal) and hold affirming views toward diversity" (p. 30). This researcher grew professionally and learned much about using the literacy experiences from home that Mexican American kindergarten students bring to school.

#### *What Can Classroom Teachers Do?*

This study's purpose is to not only inform educators about the literacy occurring in Mexican American kindergartners' homes, but hopefully to also help develop a sociocultural consciousness and influence positive views toward diversity. Teachers can build on the strengths and skills that students bring to classrooms. All students come to

school with strengths in their home language. Ideally, literacy instruction builds on those strengths (IRA, 2001). In today's schools, many teachers are educating children who come from a different cultural background than their own (Au, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Maximizing "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1994) from the families enriches the school educational experiences for all children and makes the classroom a more familiar environment for students. Using students' funds of knowledge improves student participation and understandings of activities in the classroom. This section addresses the funds of knowledge of Mexican American students and the learning activities that can build on these to increase learning.

Teachers should recognize the multitude of literacy experiences that students bring with them. The home literacy can be celebrated and built upon. As found in this research and in McTavish (2007), home literacy was used constructively, more often and in more ways, to help children learn, than educators may realize. Schools and parents must communicate and collaborate with one another to contribute to children's literacy growth (Morrow, 2006/07). Teachers need to consider the importance of the home and the family as the foundation of literacy development. Effective teachers expand on literacy activities found in students' homes. For example, storybook reading that is done by either a parent or sibling can be noted and built upon. The teacher should have knowledge of the other kinds of literacy activities used, such as writing grocery lists or reading magazines and newspapers; literacy activities in the classroom should be based on this knowledge and experience of the students. Teachers can also build on the positive oral language experiences that a student has had (whether in English or in Spanish). The knowledge that the students are familiar with and use the library after school hours can

help a teacher prepare effective literacy experiences. The students will then begin to realize that teachers care about who they are and want to be involved in their becoming independent readers and writers.

Several topics are expanded on in the next sections to give teachers ideas and strategies to better support low-income, urban, Mexican American students in their quest to become literate. These topics are as follows: (a) Building oral language, (b) big book reading, (c) Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Club, (d) home/school communication, (e) food for thought, and (f) library use.

*Building oral language.*

Research has shown that oral language development is a very important piece of learning how to read (i.e., Lonigan & Whitehurst, 2003; Neuman, 2002; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). One of the strengths of Mexican American families in this research was the use of oral language. Teachers might consider building on this. When students arrive at school in the morning teachers can talk about the students' literacy acts in the home (Rowse, 2006). Students should be encouraged to talk with their teacher and classmates about the events of the preceding day. The student may want to speak in English or in Spanish, and they should be encouraged to use either.

Storytelling that occurs in the homes can also be built upon to reinforce story structure familiarity. Storytelling can help early readers understand concepts such as cause and effect, sequencing, conflict/resolution, plot development, characters, and main idea. Rowse (2006) found that parents who were storytellers made real-world connections and built their children's vocabulary. These children also had a good understanding of story structures. Teachers can tell stories and use this as a catalyst for



developing reading concepts. Whether the stories are oral or written stories, there are similar components. For example, both kinds have a plot development, characters, settings, and sequential order of events. A teacher can develop many of the reading skills needed through the storytelling activities. An effective way to do this would be to tell a story and then read it aloud from a book. This would be especially beneficial for ELL students to hear a story in two different ways.

*Big book reading.*

It was found that all but one of the Mexican American kindergarten students in the study participated in some sort of parent-child book reading. The difference came in the number of times per week books were read and in the discussion of the text and pictures. Many of the mothers reported that they did not ask their children questions when reading to them, but the children asked questions. With this information, there are several things that a classroom teacher can build upon. By understanding that shared reading helps children learn vocabulary, concepts of print, and syntax and that shared reading gives children motivation to read, the teacher can continue to provide the shared book reading. In a classroom setting, this can take the form of using a “big book”. This is a book large enough for all the students in the class to see. Since the kindergarten teacher cannot emulate exactly the mothers’ comfortable reading with the child right next to her or on her lap, a big book is the next best thing.

The teacher may continue the book reading that occurs at home by reading several times a day in the classroom. When selecting a book, the teacher ought to consider providing the children with opportunities to hear both fiction and non-fiction text. Specifically for Mexican American children, the teacher should frequently choose a book

with characters that look like the students and have experiences that the students are familiar with. Using big books can help students gain concepts and literacy skills when carefully taught. For example, the use of predictable text allows students the opportunity to hear the rhythm of language. For Mexican American children, the teacher can choose a book that is based on a Mexican folk tale or has words and phrases in Spanish. All books also must have engaging pictures that expand the meaning of the text.

Before beginning to read a book, the teacher should to pique the students' interest and motivate them to find out more about the book by building on their prior knowledge. One way of doing this is to have the class do a 'picture walk'. This includes looking at the cover and pictures. The teacher and class can discuss what is in the pictures and what the book could possibly be about. This might take the form of a 'think aloud,' in which the teacher uses spoken words to discuss what he or she is thinking. This helps build students' background knowledge for the book by helping them understand new vocabulary and concepts that they may not be familiar with. The teacher and students can predict what they think will happen in the text. If done first by looking at the front cover and then again after looking at some of the pictures in the book, the predictions may change. This heightens students' curiosity about the book and increases motivation. The teacher can decide ahead of time which literacy skills he or she wants to emphasize during the particular book reading.

During the reading, the teacher should stop and discuss what is happening in the book or pose questions that are relevant to the book. This discussion can stem either from the text that has just been read or from the pictures. The teacher can guide students to check their own understanding by teaching them to stop when there is a word or

concept that they don't understand and question what the meaning might be. In class, this takes the form of a discussion; this helps clarify the students' understanding of vocabulary and concepts that may be new to them. Any misconceptions and misunderstandings of the text can be cleared up through this discussion. It also helps the teacher assess whether the students comprehend the story. If students do not seem to understand the text, the teacher can scaffold his or her discussion to include more explanations of what is occurring in the book. Once students are in the habit of asking questions at school about a book, they will continue to do so at home.

After the reading, the discussion can continue. The teacher may choose to ask comprehension questions. These might include higher order thinking questions. The students can be taught to ask themselves, or whoever is reading to them, the "wh" questions – who, what, when, where, and why. If a student can answer these questions, then he or she understands the main characters, plot, setting, and outcome or problem/solution of the story. The discussion may not just be all teacher questioning; rather, it should be a chance for children to talk to their teacher and peers about a book. In kindergarten (as well as other grades if the students have not had the experience), the teacher ought to spend time modeling how students are to do this. Another way to help students understand the literacy concepts is to have them retell the story. This should be an effective tool for Mexican American students to use as they are often exposed to storytelling, as well as a multitude of other oral language opportunities in their homes, as found in this research. Students retelling of a story is good way for the teacher to assess comprehension of the story; when a child is able to retell a story, he or she has internalized it and understands the main idea and important details.

By discussing the books and utilizing students' funds of knowledge, teachers can teach students how to make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections (Pardo, 2004). The book must be carefully chosen by considering the Mexican American child's life and literacy experiences to allow for these connections. This expands the students' understanding and application of the vocabulary, concepts of print, main idea or plot, and syntax found in the book. Such connections also increase students' motivation to read. Students will understand that reading provides them with entertainment and information; they will want to learn how to read. This research showed that even though most mothers were reading to their children, there was a variance in the discussion and questioning occurring during this time. In the classroom, the teacher can use as role models the students whose literacy experiences at home include doing picture walks and discussing the text as role models. He or she can teach the other children how to do this so they, too, can better comprehend the text.

*Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Club.*

Siblings in the study provided a literacy environment for their kindergarten sisters or brothers at home. Since it was found in the research that older siblings play a major role in the literacy activities, especially book reading, that happens in many of the homes, educators can build upon it. Colombo (2006) found that siblings close in age are involved in a unique reciprocity in which both siblings have opportunities to learn. Just as this current research found, the older sibling became the link between school-type literacy and materials. Many siblings attend the same elementary school as their kindergarten brother or sister. The school can offer a Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Club that meets once a month after school. During this time, older siblings can be taught

how to enhance the reading that they are already doing. For instance, the students will be taught several read-aloud strategies. The purpose of the training is to help siblings become more skillful and frequent storybook readers.

The first reading strategy to introduce is how to take a 'picture walk' with a book. During the session, older siblings could see a picture walk being modeled and then have the chance to practice doing it with a partner. This includes looking at the front cover and predicting what the book will be about and then doing the same for the rest of the pages. They will get to take the book home and practice with their younger sibling.

The next strategy that the students can be taught to use with their siblings is predicting. This would have been covered somewhat in the picture walk, but this also includes reading and seeing whether the prediction was correct. They will predict at the beginning of the book and also at appropriate points throughout. The students will learn how to talk about their predictions and why they were correct or incorrect.

Just as the kindergartner will learn about questioning and predicting, so will the older sibling. This begins with predicting at the beginning of a book and ends with asking about the main idea or plot of the story. Showing the older students how to ask questions at the appropriate times will increase the interest of the younger siblings. It will also challenge the younger siblings to think more deeply about the text and to ask higher order thinking questions.

The last area to work on with the older siblings is increasing their own fluency. This includes their intonation and rate of reading. The students will read books that are at a lower level than their instructional level in order to practice and improve their fluency. A strategy to use is to have the students tape record themselves reading so they can hear

how they actually sound reading. They will also practice reading to each other. This will make the reading experience more enjoyable in the home.

Since one of the findings of this research was that most of the older siblings read to their younger sibling in English and mothers wanted them to read in Spanish, students may need to become more comfortable reading in Spanish. Spanish reading classes could take place in the rest of the sessions. They would use the above strategies, but do so in Spanish and, hopefully, increase their comfort level with reading in Spanish. This would not only help the kindergarten students but also give the older siblings a valuable skill.

This Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Club could be a valuable tool in helping the older students learn the skills that would bring more meaning to their younger brother or sister while they read to them. Both older and younger siblings would enjoy the book reading even more than they do currently. As an extra bonus, the Big Brother/Big Sister Reading Club would also increase the older students' reading ability.

*Home/school communication.*

“¿Como puede uno ayudar a los hijos leer en ingles si las padres no sabemos mucho ingles?” (How can one help a child learn to read English if the parents do not know much English?). This was a quote taken from a Home Survey that supports the view that parents want their children to be successful in school and become literate. Mexican American parents are very much involved in their children's education; but they may not know the best way to help their child learn how to read and write in English.

Relationships and communication between the home and school are vital for a student's success. Communication should occur between the parent and teacher. Parent/teacher relationships are formed with relative ease when both parties share a

common culture, language, and background. Relationships that must bridge cultures and languages, however, require more effort to create and sustain (Colombo, 2006). Many times, teachers may view students and families through a white, middle-class perspective and see deficits rather than strengths and opportunities. Teachers ought to realize that Mexican American home literacy practices are not deficient. Their literacy practices at home may just differ from the practices of the classroom as Lapp et al. (2005) found. Teachers ought to continue to build on the students' literacy experiences and strengths that students bring with them to school.

Classroom teachers should be very careful in their communication with parents. If a teacher wants a parent to help develop a child's literacy skills in a certain way, then it is the teacher's responsibility to encourage parents by providing information about how they can help at home (Morrow & Temlock-Fields, 2005). In the current research, it was found that parents tried very hard to do what the teacher asked. For example, a mother spoke about a teacher who told her that her daughter was a "little behind" and needed some help at home. So her husband bought a whiteboard and dry erase markers so the daughter could practice. This was a great idea; however, the mother elaborated saying that her husband no longer reads to their little girl any more because he is spending the time instead with the whiteboard and is teaching her isolated letters and sounds. Teachers need to be very careful in what they are asking parents to do and make sure parents understand, instead of assuming that both the teacher and parents are envisioning the same thing.

Parents in the study also used the tools the school had given for reading strategies. One parent reported, "One day I receive a letter from you and you want me to tell him

about the front and back; why to get a book like this.” This illustrates that parents are trying to do what the school personnel are telling them. The school needs to understand the home literacy practices and not infringe or stifle the good things that are already happening. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) noted in her research that the strategies that parents had been asked to use, made their reading seem stiff and unnatural. Educators ought to consider the parents’ comfort level with implementing new strategies.

All information that the teacher sends home should be in both English and the native language. However, there is more to communication than this. Careful consideration ought to be given to the students’ home literacy background. An open line of communication enables the parents to be able to say that they may not be comfortable with using a particular strategy. Parents should be encouraged to give input and share their thoughts on educating their child. Communication is a key factor in building caring relationships, which in turn help children excel.

A bilingual newsletter is an effective tool for enhancing communication, if used correctly. A weekly newsletter can give details about the activities that week and planned classroom activities for the next week. It can ask parents for input and advertise for parent help if needed. The purpose of a monthly newsletter is to share with parents the details of classroom themes and to elicit from them information about how the classroom themes and activities at school connect to children’s experiences outside of school (Paratore & McCormack, 2005). A newsletter that is designed to both inform and elicit information from parents helps build a partnership between the teacher and parents.

Another tool to use is a home literacy portfolio. In the portfolio, parents save samples of their child’s literacy activities, written work (e.g., drawings, stories, and



letters) and also include any observations noted. The home literacy portfolio can provide an opportunity for parents to share and explain their home literacy practices with teachers and for teachers to share and explain school literacy practices with parents (Paratore & McCormack, 2005). Parent records of children's uses of literacy in the home may provide teachers with useful information about how children are developing as readers and writers. Emphasis can be placed on the importance of including samples of children's written work as well as parents' own written observations.

Portfolios might be shared at a parent/teacher conference. Parents share the portfolios by describing each portfolio entry and the circumstances in which the child composed or completed it. Teachers then can present a portfolio of children's literacy practices in the classroom. Together, parents and teachers discuss the ways in which the children's uses of literacy at home and at school connect, and they explore actions they each might take to strengthen the connections in each setting. Paratore and McCormack (2005) found that the use of home-school portfolios may have two especially important outcomes: (1) teachers and parents achieve a deeper understanding of children's literacy abilities and practices; and (2) learning opportunities at home and at school increase as both parents and teachers stress making connections between home and school literacy activities.

*Food for thought.*

It was found that a source of literacy in all of the homes in the study focused on the shopping for or preparing of food. To expand students' literacy learning around these areas that are taking place already in the home, teachers can use thematic teaching. This is vitally important in the very beginning of the year, as it promotes the connection

between literacy use at home and at school. Students can see activities at school connecting to what is happening at home.

A Kitchen/Food Center can be part of the classroom. The children should have access to paper and pencils so they can make their own grocery lists. The teacher can brainstorm with the children about grocery words that their mothers put on their lists at home. A chart with the words and corresponding pictures may also be hung in the Kitchen/Food Center area. Students can pretend to go to the store and they can also “read” recipes and make dishes for their friends.

A kitchen/food word wall could display words that the kindergartners already knew how to “read.” This would include items that their mothers may buy at the store, such as ‘Doritos’ or ‘Coke’. These words ought to be on the actual wrappers that students bring in, and then the authentic text can be stapled to the word wall. This helps children see the connection between their daily lives both in and out of school. Grocery ads can be available so students can use a familiar kind of text and have another avenue for seeing a word in print. Students then realize that they are already ‘reading’ by recognizing familiar words.

Recipes are a great way of building on home literacy while still in school. Making something from a recipe helps not only with reading skills, but listening and sequencing skills as well (which support reading comprehension). This activity also incorporates math, which outside of school is woven throughout parts of the students’ day. The teacher could start with a simple recipe and involve the whole class in the hands-on activity. The recipe is read through several times and then again, step-by-step, as the food is being prepared.

A school trip to the grocery store is an activity that can expand the connection between home and school literacy. The students can take a grocery list they have written and find the products. This gives teachers a chance to use authentic literacy and get the students more excited about literacy use.

*Library use.*

This research showed that the library was used by most of the participants. However, it may not have been utilized to its full potential. A public library has a lot to offer families. At least one of the mothers revealed that she did not have a library card. It may be daunting to apply for a card if a parent has had limited experiences with a library, is a recent immigrant to the United States, or has less than a high school diploma. In many libraries, the form that has to be completed asks for things like a social security number and a copy of a driver's license. Mexican American parents may not have these things. The school can work with the library to revise the information needed. This research study also supports that libraries build on children's home literacy activities. A librarian ought to be cognizant of Mexican American children's needs and provide opportunities for the families to understand and enjoy what the library has to offer.

Librarians should carefully select and purchase for the school library books that appeal to students and families (McTavish, 2007). Teachers can be liaisons between the families and libraries by suggesting books that families would enjoy. The library also can use a book mobile in the summer and go to the neighborhoods each week. This could include not just checking out books, but providing a fun activity for the children. This might be a first step in making mothers comfortable in coming to the library. The bookmobile could also target mothers' interests and carry cookbooks, magazines and

other materials for adults. The school can invite the library staff to a school function (such as a Family Night) so they can personally talk to people and sign them up for library cards. The staff can also tell parents of upcoming events and ask what kind of things they would like to see the library offer. Again, communication is a key to building relationships, which increase student achievement.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

This was a study of the home literacy environments of low-income, urban Mexican American families with kindergarten students. Several areas in this study emerged as possible future research studies. These studies could enrich the current literature and help inform educators how to better meet the needs of students. The recommendations for further research are as follows: 1) use a larger sample size with an outside researcher; 2) target families according to the length of time spent in the United States; 3) observe siblings literacy activities with each other; 4) study the effect of school literacy nights on the families' use of literacy with their children; and 5) conduct research on the use of the library, storytelling and electronic devices with families.

As principal of the elementary school where the students attend, doing the same kind of study with an outside researcher would be informative. There is always the possibility that the participants' personal relationships with the researcher influenced their responses to the survey and interview questions (although the use of data triangulation guarded against this). To gain even more of an emic perspective, a study could be conducted that increased the number of families and involved more time spent in the homes. A longer study would better track the literacy activities of families.

It would also be very interesting to narrow the focus of the research even more to target families according to how long they have lived in the United States. The length of time a family has lived in the United States may also affect the language they speak. Research that compares the literacy activities of mono-Spanish speaking Mexican-American families with those of families with varying degrees of English would help educators more fully understand students' home experiences. There was no literature found during the literature review that conducted comparative research such as this. Teachers ought to understand that all Mexican American families do not practice the same literacy activities in their homes.

In this study, siblings were found to be an integral part of the literacy that occurs in the home in this study. It was found that older brothers and sisters read often to their younger siblings often. However, because of time constraints, this was not actually observed; the information was gained through parent interviews. In-depth observations and interviews with siblings of their literacy activities in the home would help portray a more accurate picture of the overall literacy acts in the home. More in-depth research on the type of reading that occurs between older siblings and a younger sibling would be very valuable to the understanding of home literacy.

Part of many schools' calendars is a Family Literacy Night. On these nights, teachers talk to parents about the importance of reading and show them different literacy activities that the parents can do in their home. An informative study could be to find out (a) whether the literacy activities then did take place in the home, (b) the parent's thoughts about the activities, and (c) the impact the activities had on the student's reading achievement in school. As part of this study, the researcher would first determine the

approach used by the school. For example, the school might employ a partnership model with the parents, or it might use a transgression model, where the school disseminated information to the parents and expected the home to conform to the literacy behaviors set by the school. Comparative research based on the school approach could be used to investigate the literacy activities used by families as a result of attending the Family Literacy Night.

Other informing research can be conducted on the use of the library, storytelling and the use of electronic devices. This research noted the use of the library for the majority of the families. However, since the way the library was used varied greatly, a more in-depth study would give educators a better picture of how families use the public library and the reasons why the families use a library in the certain way. Grandparents seemed to be the influencing factor in keeping storytelling traditions alive. A more in-depth study of storytelling would provide a better picture of grandparents' role in this literacy activity. Electronic media may have not only effected storytelling, but also changed the way many people use literacy today. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children are exposed to different types of media. The children in this research were no different; it seems that possibly other influences such as TV and the computer are replacing storytelling and/or reading. This change might be because of the children listening to stories on media devices, or it might be simply because of the time spent with these devices. The children's use of computers, TV, and video games emerged as the interviews progressed. Research on how the use of electronic devices affects literacy learning would also be very helpful to educators. With this knowledge, educators could write lesson plans to target children used to using a computer or watching TV shows.

## Final Thoughts

This study yielded insights about the literacy used in the homes of low-income, urban, Mexican American kindergarten students and their families. All students come to school with strengths in their home language. Ideally, literacy instruction builds on those strengths. As a cultural outsider, this researcher learned much about the literacy acts in daily lives of the families. Literacy acts that a middle-class, native English speaking white woman would not normally think of doing were brought to the forefront. For example, the mother who often wrote down a word and then went downstairs to ask a neighbor for the pronunciation and meaning was truly amazing. People outside of the culture many times do not realize the perseverance of these families in helping their children become literate.

The families need to be celebrated for all the literacy that is occurring in their homes. We need to find out what is happening in our students' homes, celebrate those activities, and build literacy lessons around those experiences in our schools. Instruction that benefits all students takes into account sociocultural and developmental factors that students bring to school (IRA, 2007). Our families need to know that they are their children's first and most important teachers. Again, we must develop positive communication between the home and the school. As more and more Mexican American families enter our schools, we must take the time to understand their family activities and values.

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## Appendix A

### Home Survey for Kindergarten Parents

August 10, 2006

Please help us better understand your home environment and the literacy activities that take place.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Children's names and ages \_\_\_\_\_

What kinds of reading materials are commonly found in your home? (please check all that apply)

\_\_\_\_\_ fiction books          \_\_\_\_\_ non-fiction books          \_\_\_\_\_ magazines

\_\_\_\_\_ newspapers          \_\_\_\_\_ the Bible          \_\_\_\_\_ encyclopedias

\_\_\_\_\_ computer/internet          \_\_\_\_\_ children's books

\_\_\_\_\_ other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

Did you enjoy reading or being read to as a child?    \_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

Do you read books to your child?    \_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

Do you tell stories to your child?    \_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

Do you like to read as an adult?    \_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

When you were going to school were there a lot of books in your home?

\_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

Where were you born?    \_\_\_\_\_United States    \_\_\_\_\_Mexico    \_\_\_\_\_Other

If not born in the United States, how long have you been in the country? \_\_\_\_\_

What language is spoken in your home? (please check all that apply)

\_\_\_\_\_English    \_\_\_\_\_Spanish    \_\_\_\_\_other \_\_\_\_\_

Would you be comfortable with Mrs. Stowe or a teacher coming to your home to learn more about the reading and writing practices in your culture?    \_\_\_\_\_yes    \_\_\_\_\_no

THANK YOU!

Cuestionario de Casa para los padres de Kinder  
agosto, 2006

Ayúdenos por favor entender mejor su ambiente familiar y las actividades de lectura y capacidad de escribir que suceden en su casa.

Su Nombre \_\_\_\_\_

Los nombres y edades de sus hijos \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

¿Gozó usted leer o ser leído cuando era un niño? \_\_\_\_\_ sí \_\_\_\_\_ no

¿Cuándo usted iba a las escuela tuvieron mucho libros en casa? \_\_\_\_\_ sí \_\_\_\_\_ no

¿Dónde nació usted? \_\_\_\_\_ Los Estado Unidos \_\_\_\_\_ Mexico \_\_\_\_\_ otro

¿Se no nació en los estado unidos, cuánto tiempo has estado en este país?

¿Que idioma usa ustedes en casa? (por favor cheque todo que aplica)

\_\_\_\_\_ ingles \_\_\_\_\_ español \_\_\_\_\_ otro \_\_\_\_\_

¿Aprecia usted leer? \_\_\_\_\_ sí \_\_\_\_\_ no

¿Que clase de materias de lectura tiene usted en su casa? (por favor cheque todo que aplica)

\_\_\_\_\_ libros de ficción \_\_\_\_\_ libros de no ficción \_\_\_\_\_ revistas

\_\_\_\_\_ periódicos \_\_\_\_\_ la Biblia \_\_\_\_\_ encyclopedias

\_\_\_\_\_ computadora/internet \_\_\_\_\_ libros de niños

\_\_\_\_\_ otro (por favor lista) \_\_\_\_\_

¿Sería usted cómodo con que una maestra venga a su casa para aprender más de la lectura y prácticas de cómo escribir en su cultura? \_\_\_\_\_ sí \_\_\_\_\_ no

Gracias!

**\*\*After this was administered, the researcher discovered that the Spanish translation of the Home Survey for Kindergarten parents was very poor, with several misspellings and grammatical errors. However, this did not effect the readability of the Survey. In the future, the researcher will double check translations.**

## **Appendix B**

### **Survey Responses**

Please return the following with the Survey. Responses can be written in English or Spanish.

What questions were difficult to understand?

Is there any wording that would make the questions easier to understand?

Are there other questions that I should ask to better understand the home literacy environment of Hispanic kindergartners?

Other-

Regrese por favor el siguiente cuestionario. Las respuestas pueden estar escritas en ingles o español.

¿Qué preguntas eran difíciles para entender?

¿Hay cualquier fraseo que haría las preguntas más fáciles para entender?

¿Hay otras preguntas que debo de preguntar para poder entender mejor la capacidad de lectura en la familia Hispana de Kinder?

Otra Cosa-

\*\*After this was administered, the researcher discovered that the Spanish translation of the Response Sheet was poor, with several misspellings and grammatical errors. However, this did not effect the readability of the Survey. In the future, the researcher will double check translations.

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your family.
2. How long have you live in Kansas City, KS?
3. What does your family do for fun?
4. Where did you grow up? Tell me about it.
5. What kinds of literacy did you experience growing up?
6. Tell me about your school experience. What is the highest grade you completed?
7. Are you working outside the home now? What are your hours?
8. Tell me about a typical day at your house.
9. What do the kids do when they get home from school?
10. What types of literacy do you use in your daily life (i.e. making grocery lists, reading to your kids)
11. When you read to your child, do you discuss the pictures? Word Meanings?
12. Do you ask questions? If so, when? Before? During? After?
13. How do your other children interact with their kindergarten sibling during literacy activities?
14. What do you think parents/grandparents can do to help their children learn how to read?
15. Does your child complete the homework that is sent home? Do you help with it?

16. What type of material do you enjoy?

17. Why do you read to your child?

18. Do you prefer to read to your child in English or Spanish? Why?



## Appendix D

### Interview Questions for further clarification of understanding

#### Hector-Child

1. 1. What reading and writing do you use in your everyday life?
  - What does Hector see you doing?
  - Does he try to copy what you do?
  
2. How has your reading and writing practices changed since your other kids were Hector's age?
  - Is what you do with Hector different? If so, why?
  - Do you have as much time to spend on reading and writing with Hector?
  - Are the reading and writing that you use personally different?
  
3. About how many times a week do you read to Hector?
  - How many times does someone else read to Hector?
  
4. Do you go to the library?
  - a. Does he check out books?
  - b. Does he attend "Story hour"?
  - c. Does he participate in other activities at the library?
  - d. Do you check out books from the library?
  - e. Do your other kids go to the library?
  
5. Do you tell stories to Hector?
  
6. How many kids' books do you think you have at your house?
  
7. Does Hector talk about the reading and writing we do at school?
  - About books that the teacher reads?
  - About Animated Literacy characters that they're studying?

## Appendix E

### Phone Interview Clarifying Questions

March 10, 2007

#### Veronica

Does Luis read to Veronica?

If so, how often?

Do you have to ask him or will he do it on his own?

English or Spanish?

What percentage of time do you and your husband speak to Veronica in Spanish?

What percentage of time do Luis and Erica speak to Veronica in Spanish?

How often does Dad take the kids to the library?

Does Veronica talk to you about what they did at school?

Does Veronica ever use a computer?            How often?

Does Veronica watch educational T.V.shows?            How often?

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent

November, 2006

Dear Parents,

I am currently conducting a study to learn more about the literacy in Mexican American kindergartners' homes. This will help educators know what types of literacy activities are happening at home and how to build on it. My research is conducted through Kansas State University and the principal investigator is Dr. Socorro Herrera. Please call her at (785) 532-2125 if you have any questions. The families that participate in the study will fill out surveys, have an interview and may have a home visit. Those who chose to have the home visit, will receive English/Spanish storybooks to keep. This study will take place from August through December this year.

Please sign below if you would like to participate in the study. I really appreciate your help. It will help me understand our students' and families literacy experiences better. Hopefully, the school can build on the foundation that parents are building.

Sincerely,

Ramona Stowe

.....

I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation or penalty.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study. My signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

Participant Name : \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Noviembre, 2006

Estimados Padres,

Actualmente conduzco un estudio para aprender más sobre el alfabetismo en las casas de los estudiantes Mexico Americanos de kinder. Este ayudará a educadores a comprender que tipo de actividades de alfabetismo pasan en casa y como utilizarlos constructivamente. Mi investigación es conducida por la Universidad del Estado de Kansas y el investigador principal es el Doctor Socorro Herrera. Por favor llamele al (785) 532-2125 si tiene preguntas. Las familias que participen en el estudio se les pedira que llenen un cuestionario, tendran una entrevista, y puede que tengan una visita en casa. Aquellos que decidan tener visita en casa, recibiran libros de cuentos en Ingles y Español de regalo. Este es estudio ocurrira de Septiembre a Diciembre de este año.

Por favor firme abajo si le gustaria participar en el estudio. Realmente aprecio su ayuda. Esto me ayudará a entender a nuestros estudiantes y a las experiencias de alfabetismo en familias mejor. Esperamos que las escuela pueda construir en los cimientos los cuales los padres de familia estan construyendo.

Sinceramente,

Ramona Stowe

.....  
Entiendo que este proyecto es para fines de insvestigación, y que mi participación es completamente voluntaria. Tambien entiendo que si decido participar en este estudio, yo puedo retirar mi consentimiento en cualquier momento, y dejar de participar en cualquier momento, sin explicación o pena.

Verifico que mi firma abajo indica que he leído y entendido esta forma de consentimiento, y con mucho gusto consiento en participar en este estudio. Mi firma reconoce que he recibido una copia firmada y datado de esta forma de consentimiento.

Nombre del participante \_\_\_\_\_

Firma del participante \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

**\*\*After this was administered, the researcher discovered that the Spanish translation of the Informed Consent was poor, with several misspellings and grammatical errors. However, this did not effect the readability of the Survey. In the future, the researcher will double check translations.**

## Appendix G

### Glossary

**Emergent literacy**-The earliest phases of literacy development; before children begin to read and write conventionally.

**Phonemic awareness**- A special kind of phonological awareness involving the conscious attention to the smallest units of oral language- individual sounds within spoken words (Burns, Griffin, & Snow, 1999; Morris et al., 2003).

**Phonological awareness**-Knowing that oral language has structure that is separate from meaning; attending to the sub-lexical structure of words (e.g. “egg” has one syllable and two phonemes) (Burns, Griffin & Snow, 1999).

**Onset**-The consonant(s) at the start of a syllable; the remainder of the syllable is called its *rime*. In “swift,” “sw” is the onset and “ift” is the rime.

**Rime**-The portion of a syllable that follows the “onset.”