An Examination of Early Literacy in an Early Childhood Classroom

Fawna Ann Lovelace

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AN EXAMINATION OF EARLY LITERACY IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM

by

Fawna Ann Lovelace

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Major: Instruction and Curriculum Leadership

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For Chase, Dylan, & Kade
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ABSTRACT


The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how one early childhood education teacher promotes her first graders’ early literacy skills. Reading is a major component for students’ successful learning and development. The female participant taught at a private, Catholic school. Research questions were: What assumptions does an early childhood education teacher make about early literacy? How does an early childhood teacher promote early literacy through phonemic awareness activities? What role does the classroom environment play in the children’s acquisition of early literacy skills? Data for this qualitative study were collected from a questionnaire, interviews, videotaped observations, lesson plans, photos, and a researcher’s journal. Data analysis revealed that one teacher’s promotion of early literacy skills involved four themes: individualized instruction, parental involvement, emergent literacy, and classroom environment. Results from the study indicated that the participant holds the following assumptions: (a) all children learn differently and have differing needs and interests and, therefore, teachers must adjust their teaching strategies to meet the individual needs of their students; (b) parental involvement is an important component in the promotion of early literacy skills; and, (c) emergent literacy directly relates to phonemic awareness and should be incorporated into all aspects of an early childhood classroom. To promote her students’ early literacy skills through phonemic awareness activities, the participant spent the entire first semester teaching children basic early literacy skills such as rhyming, phonetic sound enunciation, and decoding. She also worked with the students on
identifying and manipulating phonemes. In regards to classroom environment, the participant had a warm, well-organized classroom that allowed students easy access to learning materials.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Learning to read is essential for anyone who intends to succeed in today’s society. Without basic literacy skills, one cannot fully function or meet the ever-changing demands of our culture. Activities, such as grocery shopping or driving, that are viewed as daily rituals for many, can be overwhelming obstacles for one who lacks basic literacy skills. Therefore, early childhood educators have the responsibility of preparing students for later reading success by implementing activities that promote early literacy skills.

Early literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that children acquire prior to actually learning to read and write (Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003).

One way to promote early literacy skills is to help children’s development of phonemic awareness which can be defined as the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes, the smallest units that make up the spoken language (Allor, Gansle, & Denny, 2006; Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Castles, Coltheart, Wilson, Valpied, & Wedgwood, 2009; Cheesman, McGuire, Shankweiler, & Coyne, 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Flett & Conderman, 2002; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Gromko, 2005; Loeb, Gillam, Hoffman, Brandel, & Marquis, 2009; Wasik, 2001). Phonemic awareness instruction leads to the strengthening of phonemic awareness skills and the improvement of reading development and ability (Allor, 2002; Allor et al., 2006; Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Wasik, 2001). Early literacy skills are encouraged when young children are immersed in a language-rich environment and given opportunities to manipulate the sounds of the language (Strickland, 2004; Wasik, 2001). According to the National Reading Panel’s Report (2000), phonemic awareness instruction significantly improves reading skills.
Reading is an essential component of our culture. Individuals lacking basic literacy skills will inevitably struggle in our fast-paced society in which reading is required to complete many, if not all, of the tasks of day to day life. Therefore, in order to prepare young children for later reading success, early childhood educators must implement phonemic awareness activities to promote early literacy. Since phonemic awareness activities have been proven to support the acquisition of early literacy skills, we as educators must make phonemic awareness instruction a priority.

Despite a large number of adult literacy programs in the United States, adult literacy levels are very low (Lynch, 2009). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics’ National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) states that approximately 90 million American adults lack sufficient literacy skills needed to successfully function in our society (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins & Kolstad, 1992). Recent estimates indicate that between 30 and 40% of school-aged children do not exhibit basic levels of literacy (Allor et al., 2006). Therefore, a need exists in our society to improve the reading proficiency of Americans. Because children’s literacy skills can be developed earlier through phonemic awareness activities (Cheesman et al., 2009; IRA, 1998; Richgels, 2001; Snider, 1997), and to better understand the effect of such teaching methods on early literacy, research is needed at the beginning of formal education. Limited research has been done on the implementation of phonemic awareness activities as a means of promoting early childhood literacy. Despite the prominence of the notion that phonemic awareness directly impacts later reading success, little evidence exists to directly support the hypothesis (Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Castles et al., 2009). To fill
these needs, this case study will be conducted, examining how one seasoned teacher promotes her first graders’ literacy skills through the use of phonemic awareness.

**Theoretical Framework**

Social constructionism is the theoretical framework upon which the research is based. Social constructionism is simultaneously realist and relativist (Crotty, 2003). No contradiction exists to say that something is real and socially constructed. If we accept social constructionism to be relativist, as we should, then we will see that ‘the way things are’ is really just the sense that we make of them (Crotty, 2003; Lichtman, 2010). As such, we view our understandings less dogmatically and understand that others in a different time and place may have different interpretations of the same phenomena.

Constructionism is the epistemology upon which the study is based. Crotty (2003) defines constructionism as the view that “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within as essentially social context” (p. 42). As such, no object can be sufficiently described without reference to the conscious being interacting with it, nor can an experience be adequately described without reference to its object (Crotty, 2003; Lichtman, 2010).

Constructionism bonds objectivity and subjectivity together. Constructionism mirrors intentionality, meaning referentiality, relatedness, directedness, and ‘aboutness.’ Intentionality implies that an active relationship exists between a conscious subject and the object of the subject’s consciousness (Crotty, 2003; Lichtman, 2010). By working within the theoretical framework of social constructionism qualitative research will be
able to answer in-depth questions that require higher order thinking skills. Questions answering how and why can be easily addressed (Lichtman, 2010).

Research Questions

Through this study, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What assumptions does an early childhood education teacher make about early literacy?
2. How does an early childhood teacher promote students’ early literacy through phonemic awareness activities?
3. What role does the classroom environment play in the children’s acquisition of early literacy skills?

Significance of the Study

While numerous studies have been done regarding the importance of phonemic awareness instruction in early childhood (Allor, 2002; Richgels, 2001; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001), little is known about teachers’ perceptions of phonemic awareness instruction as a means of promoting early literacy. Few studies have specifically addressed the issue from the perspective of an early childhood educator or examined methodologies used by teachers to promote early literacy. Because teachers’ values, beliefs, and perceptions of early literacy can influence students’ learning experiences, examining such issues can benefit all children.
Limitations of the Study

1. This qualitative study focused only on one teacher. While the small scale of the study allowed the researcher to develop a personal relationship with the participant, it limited the amount of data available.

2. The study was conducted in a private, Catholic school. Many of the students at the school are privileged and may have had different life experiences than children from lower socio-economic statuses.

3. The study was conducted in a relatively small school that serves less than 400 students.

Definition of Key Terms

*Phonemic awareness* is the ability to hear and manipulate phonemes in the spoken language (Atwill, Blanchare, Gorin, & Burstein, 2007; Flett & Conderman, 2002; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Ming & Dukes, 2010; Wasik, 2001).

*Phonemes* are the smallest units that make up the spoken language (Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Hansen & Bernstorf, 2002; Loeb et al., 2009; Richgels, 2001; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000)

*Emergent literacy* can be defined as the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy (Sulzby, 1989).

*Parental involvement* refers to the active participation of parents in the school as advocates for education, supporters of academic learning, and volunteers.

*Individualized instruction* can be defined as a method of instruction in which students’ interests and abilities contribute to the decision making process in the classroom regarding subject matter, instructional materials, and pace of learning.
Classroom environment refers to both the physical organization and arrangement of the classroom as well as the emotional atmosphere.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to describe and to understand how one early childhood education teacher promotes her first graders’ reading skills through the use of phonemic awareness. Theoretical and empirical literature was reviewed in order to establish the background for the study. This review also included the definition of phonemic awareness, benefits of phonemic awareness instruction, activities promoting phonemic awareness, teachers’ views of phonemic awareness, implementation of phonemic awareness activities, and learning differences between boys and girls.

Phonemic awareness is the focus of the study; thus particular attention will be given to research on phonemic awareness.

Phonemic Awareness

Definition of Phonemic Awareness

People, including educators, often confuse phonemic awareness and phonological awareness. Phonemes are the smallest units that make up the spoken language, and syllables and words are made by combining phonemes (Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Hansen & Bernstorf, 2002; Loeb et al., 2009; Richgels, 2001; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). The ability to hear and manipulate phonemes in the spoken language is known as phonemic awareness (Atwill et al., 2007; Flett & Conderman, 2002; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Ming & Dukes, 2010; Wasik, 2001). According to the International Reading Association Position Statement (1998):

Phonemic awareness is characterized in terms of the facility of the language learner to manipulate the sounds of oral speech. A child who possesses phonemic
awareness can segment sounds in words and blend strings of isolated sounds together to form recognizable word forms. (p. 3)

Phonemic awareness does not require the mastery of sounds, but rather the awareness of the sounds (Wasik, 2001), and is an aspect of phonological awareness. Phonological awareness refers to all aspects of phonemic awareness as well an awareness of larger spoken units such as syllables and rhyming words (Ashmore, Farrier, Paulsom, & Chu, 2003; Ehri, et al., 2001; Loeb, et al., 2009; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

**Benefits of Phonemic Awareness Instruction**

Research reveals that phonemic awareness is key to early word identification and learning to read the English printed language, where letters represent the different sounds of the language (Ashmore et al., 2003; Cheesman et al., 2009; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Richgels, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). According to the International Reading Association Position Statement (1998), the relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read is reciprocal: phonemic awareness aids in the development of reading skills, and reading instruction and experiences with print aid phonemic awareness development. By immersing children in a rich language environment and providing opportunities for children to play with the language, parents and educators are enabling children to naturally learn to manipulate the sounds that are used to create words (Wasik, 2001).

Studies show not only that phonemic awareness predicts future reading abilities, but also that the lack thereof is a primary cause of reading difficulties (Allor, 2002; Allor et al., 2006; Castles & Coltheart, 2004; Castles et al., 2009; Cheesman et al., 2009; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Loeb et al., 2009; Richgels, 2001; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001).
Students who lack a basic understanding of phonemic awareness gain little from reading instruction (Allor et al., 2006). Phonemic awareness is a prerequisite for success in phonics instruction (Ashmore et al., 2003). Beginning readers and spellers need to have a conscious awareness of phonemes, not just an unconscious perception of them (Richgels, 2001). Children who do not live in print-rich environments usually have weaker phonemic awareness (Chapman, 1996; Wasik, 2001) and, therefore, have a higher rate of reading difficulties than those children who live in print-rich environments (Strickland, 2004; Wasik, 2001). The International Reading Association Position Statement (1998) claims that high levels of phonemic awareness in very young children are directly related to home experiences in which the children interact with print including being read to at home, playing letter games, and engaging in early writing experiences.

Ashmore et al. (2003) find that explicit instruction in phonemic awareness positively affect phonological awareness and English language reading ability in Chinese primary school children. Participating in the study are 202 first- and second-grade students, 95 females and 107 males. The participants attended a private elementary school in Hangzou, People’s Republic of China. During a 10-week period, the 101 students in the experimental group participated in phoneme production/replication, rhyming, phoneme deletion, phoneme isolation, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation and counting the sounds, and phoneme substitution with English sounds. At the conclusion of the 10-week period, the researchers found a consistent difference in words learned and phonological awareness in both the males and females in the experimental group (Ashmore et al., 2003).
A study conducted by Morag Stuart (1999) finds that an early concentration on teaching phoneme awareness can greatly improve reading and spelling performance in inner city second language learners. Stuart’s sample includes 112 five-year-olds, 96 of whom were learning English as a second language. The participants were divided into two groups, a control group and an experimental group. Members of the experimental group received phonemic awareness instruction during the 12-week period. Members of the control group did not receive explicit phonemic instruction. At the end of the study, the experimental group had acquired more skills related to phonemic awareness and was better able to apply the skills to reading and writing than the control group. A follow-up study conducted a year later showed that the members of the experimental group still had a significant advantage over the members of the control group in regards to their level of phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge.

Recent studies suggest that phonemic awareness instruction is enhanced when presented in conjunction with other literacy skills such as decoding and letter-sound correspondence (Allor et al, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2001; NRP, 2000). In addition, children benefit from being taught to transfer phonemic awareness skills to decoding activities (Allor et al, 2006; Fuchs, et al, 2000; NRP, 2000).

Phonemic awareness instruction results in better phonemic awareness skills, more rapid response to reading instruction, and improved reading development and ability (Allor, 2002; Ehri et al., 2001; Wasik, 2001). Research conducted by Snider (1997) demonstrates a significant correlation between performance on phonemic awareness tasks in kindergarten and reading achievement in second grade. The participants were 73 students from a small rural community whose parents signed a written consent form. In
order to gage the participants’ phonemic awareness while in kindergarten, individual tests were administered. Achievement test scores were used to measure second grade reading achievement. Scores were only available for 50 of the original 73 participants. Limitations of the study included that of all the participants were from the same area, the original phonemic awareness test lacked phoneme synthesis tasks, and many of the achievement test scores for the students who tested in the bottom quartile in kindergarten were unavailable.

Activities Promoting Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness instruction can be implemented by using sound and word related activities. The sound related activities include: playing sound games that require participants to name items that begin with a particular sound (Flett & Conderman, 2002); sorting activities that require participants to sort objects or pictures of objects by initial sounds (Flett & Conderman, 2002); and recognizing individual sounds in words, known as phoneme isolation (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith, & Olson, 1992; Strickland, 2004; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Additionally, the following sound related activities can be used as a part of phonemic awareness instruction: recognizing the common sound in different words, known as phoneme identity (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Snider, 1997; Snowball, 1990; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) recognizing the word that sounds different in a series of three to four words, known as phoneme categorization (Allor et al., 2006; Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Snider, 1997; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) combining a series of separately spoken sounds to form a recognizable word, known a phoneme blending (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000) and breaking a word into its
sounds, known as phoneme segmentation (Allor et al., 2006; Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Also, phonemic awareness can be encouraged through: the manipulation of sounds and words through developmental spelling and rhyme (Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Richardson, 1997; Roskos et al., 2003); decoding and identifying words using the sound-letter associations (Richardson, 1997); and exercising auditory discrimination to differentiate between sounds in words (Wasik, 2001).

While many phonemic awareness activities can be implemented in the classroom, the following word related activities, in particular, have been found to improve phonemic awareness through instruction and practice: removing a particular phoneme and recognizing the remaining word, known as phoneme deletion (Ehri et al., 2001; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000); separating the form of a word from its meaning and function (Norris & Hoffman, 2002); reciting and listening to nursery rhymes in various formats including books, poems, songs, and chants (Flett & Conderman, 2002; Snowball, 1990; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000); rehearsing word plays including puns and tongue twisters (Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Wasik, 2001) and solving riddles using phoneme substitution tasks (Flett & Conderman, 2002). Additionally, reading rhyme-rich books, such as the Dr. Seuss series, encourages the development of phonemic awareness. Exposure to multiple rhyming words teaches children to differentiate between the meanings of rhyming words (Flett & Conderman, 2002; Wasik, 2001).
Teachers’ Views of Phonemic Awareness

In a study conducted by Shaffer, Campbell, and Rakes (2000), a sample of public school teachers from three areas of the southeastern United States were surveyed. Of the teachers receiving the survey, 208 voluntarily responded. The majority of the responses received were from female teachers who held bachelor’s degrees (N = 116), and of the respondents, 71 held Masters’ degrees. The remaining held other advanced degrees. Over half of the respondents reported having eight or more years of teaching experience, and only 42 were involved in their first or second year of teaching. The results of the survey demonstrated that teachers generally agree on the importance of phonemic awareness and its contribution to successful reading. While the majority of teachers agreed that some degree of phonemic awareness is necessary to become an effective independent reader, many teachers reported the need for more personal professional instruction in order to increase their teaching effectiveness and classroom delivery (Shaffer et al., 2000). Because only 42 teachers were included in this study, it is difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population.

A study conducted by Lovelace (2005), an early childhood educator, supports the notion that phonemic awareness instruction is an essential component of early literacy instruction. She found activities involving skills such as rhyme, repetition, and phoneme manipulation promote phonemic awareness and, in turn, help students learn skills needed to read. By implementing phonemic awareness activities in the classroom, educators can better prepare children for later success in reading. Although this study asked detailed questions, Lovelace (2005) only included 10 teachers. Future studies should include more participants.
Cheesman et al. (2009) have found that a significant number of beginning teachers seem to be inadequately prepared to facilitate phonemic awareness instruction. In their study of 223 first-year teachers, the knowledge of how to best implement phonemic awareness instruction was examined. Findings included new teachers had limited knowledge of phonemic awareness and were unable to differentiate between phonemic awareness and phonics. Teachers were generally unable to implement task-appropriate activities for developing phonemic awareness in their students. This study did not address the reasons why the beginning teachers lacked the requisite foundational knowledge in phonemic awareness. The exact content included in teacher education programs was not examined (Cheesman et al., 2009).

*Implementation of Phonemic Awareness Activities*

The amount of time that is allotted during a typical school day for instruction directly related to phonemic awareness varies from situation to situation. Teachers must determine based on an understanding of the research related to phonemic awareness and the needs and abilities of the students how much focused instruction is needed (IRAPS, 1998). In their position statement, the Board of Directors of the IRA (1998) noted that the research findings on phonemic awareness might be misused or overgeneralized. Policy initiatives that require teachers to allot specific amounts of time to phonemic awareness instruction for all students and that require the use of particular training programs for all students were of particular concern.

In implementation, phonemic awareness should be incorporated into classroom practices in a developmentally appropriate fashion. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) affirm that “Most children do not automatically acquire phonemic awareness, but
they gain this awareness when preschool teachers purposely support it and provide the
degree of assistance needed by each child” (p. 147). Students should not be constantly
drilled on phonemic awareness skills, but rather given the opportunity to develop
phonemic awareness through read alouds, nursery rhymes, poetry, and circle time
activities (Wasik, 2001). The Mississippi Department of Education (2006) reports that
Pre-Kindergarten students should begin to demonstrate phonemic awareness by
distinguishing sound units/syllables, recognizing rhyming words, and noticing beginning
phonemes/sounds. Children benefit from both literacy interactions with adults and
opportunities for independent exploration of written language (Chapman, 1996).
Phonemic awareness activities should be directly related to the regular classroom
practices and incorporated into the daily routine in such a way that children can develop a
foundation for future learning (Wasik, 2001).

In keeping with the issue of phonemic awareness, Hoffman (2010) articulates that
in order to support and to develop children’s reading and literacy skills, teachers need to
provide them with both constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained skills include
alphabet knowledge, print awareness, and phonemic awareness, while unconstrained
skills are related to oral language, comprehension, critical thinking, and composition.
“Constrained skills typically develop in a relatively short period of time, because there is
a concrete limit to the understanding needed for mastery” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 11).
Constrained skills (such as phonemic awareness) are essentially easy to teach, and for
that reason, once a child develops phonological awareness, he/she has “no more skills to
learn in that area of literacy development” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 11).
Furthering this idea of teaching phonemic awareness to young children early on, Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman (2010) recommend that in classroom environments literacy should be infused throughout the school day, and everything children do needs to be meaningful and authentic to them. Teachers’ instruction related to literacy must be flexible and should promote students’ active participation. In the same manner, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theory (1978) informs educators that learning should occur through social interactions among students and adults. “Literacy develops within a social context in which children have the opportunity to interact with and respond to printed language and to other children and adults who are using printed language” (Morrison, 2009, p. 315).

**Impact of Music on Early Literacy**

In order for the brain’s musical and language centers to develop, young children must be exposed to both music and words. Therefore, it is imperative for early childhood programs to offer developmentally appropriate environments that allow children to experiment with music and words (Beaty & Pratt, 2003). Music has an impact on brain activity and can foster increased learning abilities in young children (Allman, 1990; Mueller, 2003). For that reason, many parents include music in the daily lives of their children (Fisher, 2001). As a result, many young children begin school with knowledge of numerous jingles, songs, and rhymes.

appropriate symbols may develop cognitive processes similar to those needed for segmentation of a spoken word into its phonemes” (p.199). Beaty and Pratt (2003) assert that children’s singing, rhyming, skipping and word games are the basis for the development of phonemic awareness. When used to promote phonemic awareness, music should be interactive, stimulating, and developmentally appropriate (Hill-Clarke & Robinson, 2004).

Young children can learn important concepts through songs. While singing, hearing, discussing, and writing songs, children are building background knowledge that can aid in the development of early literacy skills (Smith, 2000). Songs give children the opportunity to play with the language through rhyme, repetition, and word manipulation (Fisher & McDonald, 2001). Through music, children can explore the concepts of print and rhyme (Fisher & McDonald, 2001).

In acquainting children with music for the development of literacy, teachers need to understand that by singing songs, chanting rhymes, finger playing, and clapping out the syllables of children’s names, they can promote children’s awareness of the sounds of language (Copple & Bredekampe, 2009). Likewise, Hoffman (2010) recommends that songs, poems, and wordplay should be necessary language and literacy instruction for teachers of young children. Learning through the use of music can enhance children’s development of vocabulary, comprehension skills, abstract thinking, and listening skills (Hill-Clarke & Robinson, 2004).

Impact of Gender on the Acquisition of Phonemic Awareness

Although children should be viewed as individuals, rather than members of a particular sex, educators cannot deny the apparent differences in learning between boys
and girls. While girls tend to acquire complex verbal skills at an earlier age than do boys, boys often excel in areas involving visual-spatial skills (Arbetter, 1991; Grant, 1995; Gurian, 2001). Girls tend to prefer activities involving creative arts and writing; boys tend to prefer playing with blocks and legoes. Girls are likely to be more cooperative while boys are often more aggressive (Arbetter, 1991; Gurian, 2001). The differences abound, and it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide meaningful learning opportunities for children of both genders.

Boys and girls possess very different learning styles (Colley, Ball, Kirby, Harvey, & Vingelen, 2002; Grant, 1995; Gurian, 2001; Healy, 2001) and phonemic awareness is an important predecessor to early word identification and learning to read the English language (Ashmore et al., 2003; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Richgels, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). It is important for early childhood educators to be knowledgeable in the area of phonemic awareness and to be able to implement gender-appropriate activities in the classroom that promote the acquisition of phonemic awareness skills. Shaffer et al. (2000) have surveyed a sample of public school teachers from three areas of the southeastern United States and have found that while teachers agree that phonemic awareness is important to early reading acquisition, many teachers express a need for more professional instruction on the implementation of phonemic awareness activities and lessons.

In order to better prepare our students to learn to read, early childhood educators must be able to address the needs of both boys and girls in the classroom while providing an environment that promotes phonemic awareness skills. To do this, early childhood
educators must be knowledgeable in the area of phonemic awareness and understand how
gender differences affect the development of phonemic awareness skills.

Learning Differences Between Boys and Girls

Girls tend to undervalue their successes while their male counterparts often
mature more slowly. Both of these facts contribute to the debate among some teachers as
to whether boys and girls need to learn in different ways in different environments
(Grant, 1995). Findings from a research study conducted by Holmes-Lonergan (2003)
have demonstrated that students in mixed-sex groups experience more problems
completing tasks than do students in same-sex groups. On the contrary, some researchers
claim that separating males and females polarizes the sexes and encourages stereotypical
treatment of boys and girls (Owens, Smothers, & Love, 2003).

Females often have less interest in math as well as less confidence in their
mathematical abilities than do males (Beller & Gafni, 2000; Catsambis, 1994). Research
has proven that some mathematically talented females do not perform at levels that
commensurate with their abilities (Gavin & Reis, 2003). One possible reason for this is
that females are often intimidated when their peers, particularly males, call out the
answers to challenging questions before they have had time to solve the problems (Gavin
& Reis, 2003). When in the presence of boys, girls often become more passive (Holmes-
Lonergan, 2003). In classroom situations, girls are often rewarded for their conformity to
classroom rules by being ignored (Owens et al., 2003). Another possible reason for girls’
lack of achievement in math in comparison to the achievement of their male counterparts
is that girls tend to talk through the problems, whereas boys are more likely to solve
problems by touching and looking, a form of abstract reasoning needed to solve higher math problems (Healy, 2001).

While standardized and psychological assessments reveal that girls are equal to or above their male peers in the early years of their education, upon high school graduation they have often fallen behind their male counterparts (Beller & Gafni, 2000; Owens et al., 2003). Some attribute the lower level of female achievement, especially in mathematics and science, to gender inequality in the educational system (Gavin & Reis, 2003; Owens et al., 2003; Weiss, 2001). Research reveals that teachers interact more with males than with females (Weiss, 2001). Differences in the treatment of boys and girls during early learning experiences can result in enduring learning patterns (Owens, Smothers, & Love, 2003).

Parental Involvement in Education

Although research indicates that virtually all families care for their children and want to be included in their children’s education and that most teachers would like to involve families in the school experience (Epstein, 1995), parent-involvement in schools is remarkably low (Edwards, 2004). Uninvolved parents send negative messages to their children while, on the other hand, involved parents can improve their children’s self-esteem—which ultimately can lead to greater success in school (Canter & Canter, 1991). Based on the underlying premise that when children feel cared for and supported in their academic efforts they are more likely to strive for success, partnership activities can be planned to engage, lead, and motivate students to create their own successes (Epstein, 1995).
A strong connection exists between supportive parental involvement in education and early literacy development (Strickland, 2004). Many informal and enjoyable methods of developing early language and literacy skills can be implemented in the home (Strickland, 2004). Because of the common belief that emerged in the mid-1900s that literacy instruction is most effective when implemented by experts who are knowledgeable of the scientific research on early literacy, many parents have taken a “hands-off” approach to implementing early literacy instruction (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006). When working with parents to promote children’s literacy development, activities provided should be as specific as possible and include practical suggestions (Strickland, 2004).

Successful home-school communication must exist before parental involvement in the classroom can be expected (Bridgemohan, van Wyk, & van Staden, 2005; Canter & Canter, 1991; DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Domina, 2005; Strickland, 2004). If parents are unaware of what is occurring in the classroom, they are unlikely to become involved in the day-to-day routines of the classroom (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Canter & Canter, 1991). For these reasons, communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, is an essential component of an effective school program (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Canter & Canter, 1991). Interestingly, students are a key component of the home-school connection being they are often the parents’ main source of information (Epstein, 1995). In addition, if parents are made to feel welcome and accepted in the school environment, they are more likely to be willing to make the effort to strengthen the home-school connection (Edwards, 2004; Strickland, 2004).
Student achievement is positively influenced by parental involvement (Canter & Canter, 1991; Darling & Westberg, 2004; Epstein, 1995; Hester, 1989; Strickland, 2004). Epstein (1995) asserts that school, family, and community partnerships can improve school programs, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others, aid teachers, and most importantly, help children succeed in school and in life.

Vandergrift and Greene (1992) maintain that two independent components of parental involvement in education exist: parents as supporters and parents as active partners. Some parents are actively involved in their children’s lives, yet are not supportive of the educational process. Others are supportive of teachers and other school personnel, but are not active at school. In order to be most beneficial, both components must be present. In many circumstances this is challenging due to single-parent households and households where both parents work outside of the home (Vandergrift & Green, 1992).

One way to promote parental involvement is through family literacy. Family literacy can be defined as, “an approach that explicitly addresses the family dimension in literacy” (McNicol & Dalton, 2002, p.247). Crawford and Zygouris-Coe (2006) find it encompassing of the methods that people learn and apply literacy in the home and the community. Such methods of supporting literacy in the homes and the community can be understood by Vygotsky’s (1978) theory stating that learning occurs through the social interaction between an adult and a child. A study conducted by Whitehurst et al. (1988) has found that increased parent/child interactions during joint book readings positively affect children’s linguistic development.
Another study has found that involved parental involvement in a reading instructional routine directly relates to finds parental participation and increased reading levels in kindergarten students (Imperato, 2009). In the study, parents were encouraged to spend 10-15 minutes daily engaging in literacy activities that included sharing a short passage and engaging in a brief phonics or phonemic awareness activity derived from the text. Parent training sessions were used to explain to parents exactly how to best work their children and the benefits of the routine. Log sheets, including a column for parent comments, were used to track student participation. At the end of the study, the children in the control group demonstrated a significant increase in reading skills.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to describe and to understand how one early childhood education teacher promotes students’ early literacy skills. This study is based on qualitative research described by Bogden and Biklen (2003) and Lichtman (2010). This study included information about the research design, participant, setting, data collection and procedures, and data analysis. Permission to work with teachers was obtained from the director of education and the principal of the school in which the research was conducted. Approval from IRB was obtained (see Appendix A).

From this point forward, the researcher will be referred to in first person. While use of the first person is common in some fields, in others, third person voice is the norm. The common belief in academic writing that avoids the use of first person is that it interferes with the impression of objectivity created by the work (Given, 2008). On the contrary, Bogden and Biklen (2003) view the use of “the researcher” as pretentious rather than honest and direct. Lichtman (2010) recommends that first person writing is more personal and allows the researcher to emerge himself/herself in the research. In qualitative research in particular, many authors prefer the use of the first person because it gives voice to the participants’ perspectives (Given, 2008). As such, the first person will be used in reference to the researcher in this manuscript.

Research Design

For the purpose of this qualitative study, I examined the methods that one-first-grade teacher used to promote phonemic awareness in her classroom. The research was based on the assumption that phonemic awareness instruction is an essential component
of early literacy teaching method and that teachers’ understanding of the importance of phonemic awareness can influence students’ early literacy learning experiences (Shaffer et al., 2000; Lovelace, 2005). The complex picture of how teachers achieve their educational goals is not easily documented by quantitative research methods (LeTendre, 1999). On the contrary, qualitative research aspires to construct an understanding of the meanings individuals have developed through everyday experiences (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). To obtain extensive and highly detailed study of how a teacher promotes students’ early reading skills through phonemic awareness, a qualitative research design was implemented.

The qualitative study provided well-documented information on how one teacher promotes students’ early literacy skills through phonemic awareness instruction. Underlying the proposed research is the guiding assumption that early childhood teachers are able to promote children’s early literacy skills using phonemic awareness activities (Allor, 2002; Allor, et al., 2006; Richgels, 2001; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001). The strength of qualitative research includes the ability to take into consideration a full variety of evidence such as documents, interviews, and observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lichtman, 2011; Yin, 1989).

**Participant**

The teacher participant, who will be referred to as Sister Mary, was selected from a study that focused on documenting and understanding how early childhood teachers promote students’ early literacy skills through phonemic awareness activities (Lovelace, 2005). I chose Sister Mary for this study based on the notion that “The most important consideration is to identify those persons in the research setting who may have the best
information with which to address the study’s research questions” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 40). Additionally, Patton (1990) claims that convenience sampling is used often in qualitative research because researchers have expedient access to participants. The participant is a seasoned educator and nun who has a particular interest in reading and early literacy. She holds two Master’s degrees and has 18 credit hours towards a third Master’s degree in Educational Leadership (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant’s Degrees*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor of Science</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Science</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Science</td>
<td>Theological Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Setting*

The study was conducted in a private, Catholic school that serves students in grades Pre-Kindergarten through eighth grade. The school was both accredited by the state and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. The school is located in a suburban town in the Southern part of the United States. The location was selected based on convenience of access.

Approximately 358 students were enrolled at the school at the time of the study. According to the admissions office, the demographic make-up of the school was as
follows (see Table 2 and Table 3): 6.7% African American, 3.1% Asian, 81% Caucasian, 4.2% Hispanic, and 5.3% Multi-racial. Of the students enrolled at the school, 51% were female and 49% were male. Catholics made up 58% of the student population. Approximately 20% of the students received financial aid.

Table 2

Racial Demographics of School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>289</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Religious Demographics Based on Race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race and Religion</th>
<th># of Students</th>
<th>% of Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American Catholic</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American Non-Catholic</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Catholic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Non-Catholic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Catholic</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Non-Catholic</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Catholic</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic Non-Catholic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial Catholic</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-racial Non-Catholic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>358</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the data for the study was collected in the participant’s first grade classroom. Sister Mary’s class had 21 students and no assistant. The classroom is equipped with a plethora of resources to aid in the development of early literacy. Routines have been established; the children are aware of the classroom expectations and know what to do throughout the day. Parents can often be found in the classroom working with the children.

While the amount of materials available in the classroom seemed to be overwhelming, the organizational techniques administered by Sister Mary in the study
make it an environment that is easily navigated by first grade students. Books are stored in baskets and sorted according to themes or authors. The baskets are located in areas that can be easily accessed by the children. Children are welcome to explore the book area at any point in the day when they have extra time. Puzzles, blocks, and other manipulatives are stored in clear plastic bins that are clearly labeled with both written print and pictures. The clear labels allow the children to make selections in the room without the assistance of the teacher. The overall atmosphere of the classroom is conducive to learning and hands-on exploration. After observing in Sister Mary’s classroom, I wrote the following detailed description of a day in the life of a student in her class.

A Day in Sister Mary’s Classroom

Although the doors do not open until 7:15 a.m., children begin arriving at school as early as 6:55 a.m. Children wait for the school to open in a glass foyer where they visit with friends, complete last minute homework assignments, or just rest in preparation for the upcoming school day. Promptly at 7:15 a.m., the inner doors of the glass foyer are opened and the children hustle to their classrooms. Each morning, Sister is positioned outside her classroom door to greet students as they arrive at school and to remind them to walk in the building and remain on the right side of the hallway.

Students entering Sister’s classroom begin preparation for the upcoming day while visiting with their peers. The children unpack their book bags, sharpen their pencils, give their lunch money to the teacher, visit the bookstore as needed, and begin working on their morning assignments. Each day, the children complete a manuscript paper—a paper containing phonetic picture words. The manuscript papers either
complement the students’ phonics lessons or the theme unit being studied in class.

Students must draw pictures of the words and spell them. Many students are apprehensive about their drawing abilities when the school year begins, but as the school year progresses, Sister convinces the children that they cannot draw incorrectly unless they just do not care about their work. Children can be seen “skywriting” their drawings—a tactic taught by Sister to help them see just what it is that they want to draw.

After the tardy bell rings at 7:30 a.m., morning announcements are broadcast over the school intercom system. All classrooms and hallways are expected to be quiet while an eight grader shares the weather forecast for the day, announces faculty and student birthdays, reads a short, inspirational message, leads the Pledge of Allegiance and the Lord’s Prayer, and informs the student body of any upcoming events or deadlines.

Immediately following the morning announcements, children begin journal writing. Parents, known as “journal moms and dads,” are available to assist the children as needed. Although creative spelling is totally acceptable in student journals, many of the children are hesitant to write if they are uncertain of how to spell the words. Most—particularly those who have had several years of formal schooling—are no longer comfortable with creative spelling. The children are free to approach the parents, who are sitting at a table in the front of the classroom, to ask how to spell certain words or phrases. The parents in turn write the correct spelling on a piece of paper for the student to take back to his or her desk to use while writing in his or her journal. The students also draw pictures reflecting what they have written in their journals. During the first nine weeks of school, the children are required to write at least one sentence in their journals. The second nine weeks, at least two sentences are required. The expectation is
increased to three sentences the third nine weeks and four sentences the fourth nine weeks of school. Children are always welcome to write more than the minimum requirement for the assignment.

While the students are working in their journals, Sister is calling each student to the back of the classroom on an individual basis to have him or her read the homework reading paper from the night before. Each night’s homework reading paper is a copy of the story-dictated by the students to Sister- that was written during class that day. The children are expected to take the story home, share it with their parents, and practice reading it aloud.

After the students finish writing in their journals, they read what they have written to Sister. She does not focus on spelling or punctuation when going over the journal entries, but she does demonstrate the proper use of capital letters at the beginning of sentences and ending punctuation.

Until approximately 9:00 a.m., children in Sister’s classroom are busily working various activities to promote early literacy skills. In addition to the activities previously mentioned, Sister also uses this time to offer extra assistance to any children who may need help with certain manuscript formations or phonetic elements. Any unfinished work, particularly phonics papers, from the previous day may also be completed. Next, Sister directs the children’s attention to the front of the classroom where she begins formal instruction in reading and language arts.

Each day at 10:00 a.m. the children take a break from their studies for a snack. Weather permitting, the class goes outside to enjoy the fresh air while having their snacks. On rainy days the children go to the school cafeteria, known as the Spitfire Grill,
for snack. After approximately a 30 minute break, the children usually return to their classroom to continue with their morning work. Religion class immediately follows snack.

At 11:00 a.m., instruction once again focuses on reading and language arts. During this time, students are once again working with Sister Mary to write the manuscript paper that will eventually become their homework reading paper. Sister Mary asks the students leading questions to guide the writing process. For example, she will ask, “Who did something? What did he do? What did he bring? Where did he bring it?” By asking the questions, Sister is teaching the students the components that go together to make a sentence and that the sentences can be put together to make a story. As the students dictate, Sister Mary records the student input on a large tablet at the front of the classroom. Once the story is complete, sister uses dialect to encourage the students to interact with the text. For example, she has various props including a big hand and a monster finger, that she allows the students to use to locate particular sentence components or words.

Next, Sister Mary visits a second grade classroom to teach religion. While Sister is gone, the classroom teacher from the second grade comes to Sister’s room to teach Social Studies and Phonics. At 12:15, the students go to lunch. Recess immediately follows. After lunch, Sister Mary teaches religion to another second grade class while that teacher comes to Sister Mary’s classroom to teach math. The last period of the day is spent in a support class-spanish, music, library, gym, or computer. School dismisses at 2:50 p.m. Monday through Thursday. School dismisses at 2:00 p.m. on Friday.
Data Collection and Procedures

This study uses a combination of six different methods of collecting data: questionnaires, interviews, videotaped observations, lesson plans, photos, and a researcher’s journal. Each method will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Questionnaires. Prior to the onset of formal observations, I administered a questionnaire (Appendix B). The questionnaire was given to Sister Mary to answer on her own time, without interference from me, the researcher. Sister Mary was asked to complete the questionnaire within 14 days. The questionnaire included the following eight questions (see Table 4):
Table 4

*Questionnaire*

Questions

1. What is your philosophy of early childhood education?

2. How do you define phonemic awareness?

3. What activities do you use to promote phonemic awareness in your classroom?


5. Do you use music to promote phonemic awareness? If so, how?

6. What kinds of music do you use to promote phonemic awareness? Please list 3 names of records, tapes, or songs that you use in your classroom.

7. What do you consider to be the most difficult aspect of promoting phonemic awareness in an early childhood classroom?

8. Do you have any comments regarding phonemic awareness?

My intent with the questionnaire was to lead Sister Mary to reflect on her teaching in the classroom and her beliefs regarding early childhood education, particularly in the area of early literacy and phonemic awareness. The questions were open-ended in order to give the participant the opportunity to express her beliefs rather than simply answering “yes” or “no” questions.

A second questionnaire was administered in August 2010 in order to gain further information regarding Sister Mary’s classroom practices. Like the first questionnaire, the
questions were open-ended so that Sister Mary could elaborate on her beliefs and practices.

**Interviews.** After receiving the information that Sister Mary provided in her questionnaire, I scheduled a time after school one day to conduct an audiotaped interview. Sister had informed me that after school was the best time for her to do an interview because she almost always stays after school when the other teachers leave to go home. In preparation for the interview, I reviewed the participant’s responses to the survey questions. I wrote down 18 questions (see Appendix C) that I intended to ask based on information learned about Sister Mary’s view of phonemic awareness and early literacy. I included questions regarding her background and philosophy of education in order to better familiarize myself with Sister Mary.

Prior to the onset of the interview, I informed Sister Mary of the confidentiality of the information that she provided in the interview and that a pseudonym would be assigned to her for the purpose of the transcription notes and the qualitative research study. I also told her that the interview was voluntary and that the data from the interview would be analyzed for educational research purposes. Sister Mary was given the opportunity to ask any questions prior to signing the consent form. The actual interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes. Over the course of the next few days, I transcribed the interview and began reviewing the data carefully using felt tip markers for coding purposes. In order to identify themes, I read and reread the data.

After reviewing the data, I decided that a second interview with Sister Mary would be beneficial for the purpose of member checking. I requested to schedule another interview. Sister Mary agreed to meet with me the following day after school. At that
time, I provided Sister Mary with a copy of the four questions (see Appendix D) I intended to ask. The second interview was less formal and lasted 40 minutes. That night, I transcribed the second interview.

Observations. I conducted eight observations of Sister Mary’s class. Observation times ranged from ten minutes to two hours each. All observations were done during the morning hours due to the fact that this is when the class focuses primarily on reading and language arts. The observations allowed me to see not only the physical arrangement and organization of the classroom, but also Sister Mary’s teaching techniques and interactions with the students. Detailed notes from the observations were made in my researcher’s journal. Two of the observations were videotaped. The data were reviewed independently, and in conjunction with one early childhood educator who has over 25 years of experience in teaching.

Lesson Plans. One form of written documentation collected for the purpose of this qualitative study was Sister Mary’s lesson plans. Lesson plans are written for organizational purposes and to guide instruction (Chubbuck & Zembylas, 2008). The lesson plans helped to give me a clearer picture of exactly what Sister Mary had planned for each week studied—the objectives she intended to cover, the materials needed for the lessons, and the procedures for implementation. The lesson plans also included a list of teacher resources needed, websites for students to use to reinforce the concepts learned, and references to the state learning standards and objectives. The lesson plans were reflective of Sister Mary’s organizational style.

I took special note of the time Sister Mary must have spent creating her lesson plans—they were quite extensive and handwritten. On average, the lesson plans for the
week were fifteen pages long. Rather than using a lesson plan book, Sister Mary used blank white paper to write her lesson plans. A planning web often accompanied the lesson plans that gave me a snapshot of Sister Mary’s objectives for the week in language arts, math, social studies, science, literature, and art. Because Sister Mary’s class is theme-based, the planning web helped to demonstrate how she linked the information presented to her students across the curriculum.

Photos. Photos were taken during both formal and informal visits to Sister Mary’s classroom. The photos helped to give an accurate portrayal of the classroom environment and organization. Bogden and Biklen (2003) and Nakamura (2003) claim photos can be used as descriptive and objective data in qualitative research. A photo disc containing pictures of learning activities conducted over the last few years was provided by Sister Mary.

Researcher’s Journal. The researcher’s journal was used to record my personal thoughts as particular ideas emerged throughout the course of the study (Lichtman, 2010). I used the journal to take notes during observations, to reflect following observations, and to document any questions that I needed to further examine. For example, when reviewing data, I often stumbled upon comments made by Sister Mary that needed clarification. I would document my question in the researcher’s journal for member checking purposes. I could then revisit my notes in my researcher’s journal prior to questioning Sister Mary to verify the accuracy of my thoughts and observations. I also used the researcher’s journal to document vivid descriptions of the classroom environment.
Data Analysis

Data were coded and categorized using qualitative analysis methods (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Lichtman, 2010, 2011), focusing on Sister Mary’s thinking and experiences regarding teaching phonemic awareness. I followed the six steps described by Lichtman (2010): Step 1, I coded the data initially by reading them in their entirety; Step 2, I read the data and revisited initial coding; Step 3, I developed an initial list of categories; Step 4, I modified my initial list by reading it again with fresh perspectives; Step 5, I revised my categories and subcategories; and Step 6, I moved from my categories to themes. In order to verify the analysis of the data as well as credibility, “The peer/colleague examination is used to solicit feedback and suggestions regarding changes or data analysis” (Lee, Butler, & Tippins, 2007, p. 44). One person who is trained in child development coded and categorized each response independently, and the coder and I reached agreement on the coding and categorization of all data.

Furthermore, to verify accuracy of analysis and credibility (Lee et al., 2007), member checking (Lichtman, 2010; Rager, 2005) was implemented. To illustrate, Rager asked her participants to review her transcript for accuracy and talked to them in order to verify the quotations from her transcripts. Lee, Butler, and Tippins also requested their participant to “read the transcript and tentative interpretations in order to ensure that they are plausible” (p. 44). Likewise, Lichtman (2010) notes that the results need to be assessed by the participants to check the credibility of results. After I interviewed Sister Mary twice, I asked her to read my analysis, and following member checking, the themes that emerged from this study changed.
Summary

In summary, various qualitative research methods were used to explore how one seasoned early childhood educator promotes students’ early literacy skills through phonemic awareness activities. The three primary sources of data collection included written documents, interviews, and direct observations. Lesson plans, surveys, transcribed interviews, and the researcher’s journal were sources of written documentation. Data were coded and categorized used qualitative analysis methods (Bogden & Biklan, 2003, Lichtman, 2010). Themes emerged from the data analysis process.
CHAPTER 4

Results

This chapter summarizes the major findings according to the interpretations of the questionnaires, interviews, videotaping, lesson plans, photos, and researcher’s journal. The results of the data analysis are presented as the themes that unfold in the qualitative data are described. The four themes are introduced and elaborated on accordingly.

From the data analysis, the following four themes emerged: individualized instruction, parental involvement, emergent literacy, and classroom environment. Individualized instruction can be defined as a method of instruction in which students’ interests and abilities contribute to the decision making process in the classroom regarding subject matter, instructional materials, and pace of learning. If individual needs of a student differ from the class as a whole, appropriate modifications will be made. Parental involvement can be defined as the active participation of parents in the school, as advocates for education, supporters of academic learning, and volunteers. Emergent literacy can be defined as the reading and writing behaviors that precede and develop into conventional literacy (Sulzby, 1989). Classroom environment refers to both the physical organization and arrangement of the classroom as well as the emotional atmosphere. Both aspects of the classroom environment contribute to the overall learning process. Each theme will be discussed accordingly.

Individualized Instruction

Throughout the course of my research, I repeatedly found different means in which Sister Mary adjusted her teaching to meet the individual needs and interests of her students. As I analyzed the data, individualized instruction emerged as one of the four
themes. As seen in Table 5, the individualized instruction was found in five of my six data sources. In the following section, the supporting evidence for the theme are presented.

Table 5

*Individualized Instruction Theme Found in Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Theme Found</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Videotape</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson Plans</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photos</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Journal</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sister Mary appeared to be using individualized instruction in order to promote her students’ early literacy skills. Here is an excerpt from my field notes on the 17th of November, 2006 stating that,

Time is allotted in the schedule each day to allow students one-on-one time with the teacher to review the previous day’s assignments and address any issues that may have arisen. At this time, particular focus is given to each child’s ability to read and decode a selection from the previous day.

The above statement demonstrates that, despite the class size and lack of an assistant, Sister Mary makes time every day to work with each child individually. Noted in my
researcher’s journal in February 2007 is that this one-on-one time with Sister Mary allows the students to “ask questions that they may not have been comfortable asking in a large group setting.”

Sister Mary appears to connect information learned in the classroom to the individual lives of the students in order to make the lessons more meaningful. An example of Sister Mary’s use of individualized instruction is evident in her lesson plans from September 15, 2006. In Sister Mary’s lesson plan she asserts that she wanted to relate to the children’s everyday life experiences by associating the students’ birthdays with Tomie de Paola’s birthday. In honor of his birthday, the students in her class were reading books by Tomie de Paola. In order to relate Tomie de Paola’s birthday to their own birthdays, the students then discussed how each child who had a birthday in the month of September had celebrated or planned to celebrate his or her birthday. One objective from this lesson that addressed the individualized aspect of her teaching stated, “The student will interact with others for various purposes in classroom and school community based on first-hand experiences using reading, writing, listening, and speaking.” I found that this objective directly related the theme of individualized instruction because Sister related student experiences, such as birthday celebrations, to the topic being discussed in class to make the topic more meaningful for the students.

Another objective from the lesson plans (September 15, 2006) stated, “The student will use an appropriate writing process to express personal ideas and feelings.” The theme of individualized instruction was apparent in this objective because Sister Mary gave the students the opportunity to express in writing their personal reflections on the topic being discussed in class. Such activities provide students the opportunity to personalize the
learning process and make it their own. In the teaching procedures section of her lesson plans, Sister Mary describes how she intended to demonstrate good writing skills while writing a class story on the chart paper at the front of the classroom. Her lesson plans noted a particular focus to be placed on using complete sentences and ending punctuation as the students dictated the story. The topic of the story was student birthdays and the events relating to the student birthdays. The following exert demonstrates how Sister Mary included each individual student who had a September birthday in her lesson plan:

- Mary’s birthday from last week (Sept. 8)
  - Decorating a cake for her birthday
  - Going to church
- Emily’s birthday on Sunday
  - Party
- Micah’s birthday tomorrow
  - How celebrated?
- Tomie de Paola’s birthday tomorrow

Sister Mary’s lesson plans very clearly demonstrate that she attempts to relate the theme of the week to the lives of the students in her class, which is a form of individualized instruction.

Another example of individualized instruction came from an interview January 31, 2006. “One thing, I do a lot of one-on-one with those children who have a lot of trouble,” she said. “The more trouble they have, the more one-on-one time I spend with them.” When working with those children, “I may have to sit with them and guide their
hands across the page whether it’s print for math or print for reading.” In reference to struggling students, Sister Mary said,

If a child really has a difficult time learning the vocabulary, instead of marking the words that he gets wrong, we’ll highlight the words that he gets right so that the word that he knows that day is what pops out.

She also commented that, “some children need much larger flashcards than others.”

When responding to a question regarding preventing struggling students from giving up on learning, Sister Mary said, “A lot of times you just have to really find-you have to almost make questions for them-tailor made to that specific child. Then watch for something-watch for the light in their eyes.” All of these remarks reflect the theme of individualized instruction because they demonstrate how Sister Mary modifies her teaching strategies to meet the needs of all students in her class.

During an interview on August 18, 2010, Sister Mary explained the measures she takes to adjust her teaching to better serve all students. Modifications mentioned included providing easier readers for struggling students, changing seating arrangements, and offering highlighters to help students visualize word parts. She said, “I have to modify overall expectations sometimes.” Sister Mary expounded upon her beliefs in regards to students who have more obvious issues in the classroom. She expressed the importance of being upfront with her students and explaining that all children are different and have different needs. She said that she sometimes uses the example of a child who has to frequently use the restroom. Sister Mary said, “You can’t say that that isn’t fair because it is fair- that is what his or her body needs.” Sister Mary specifically mentioned children with Asperger’s Syndrome. The other students in the class have to be
told that, “This child just cannot handle this or that. You have to be very kind and stay away when he or she needs his space.” Additionally, Sister Mary said, “So it really just depends on what each child needs.”

In a videotape from February 5, 2007, Sister Mary can be observed redirecting a child’s focus during large group instruction. Sister Mary noticed that the particular student was struggling to keep up with the lesson and, therefore, moved into close proximity of the child and helped to refocus the child by moving his finger to the appropriate spot in the text and then guiding his finger along the text as the class read aloud. Sister Mary repeated this action two different times during the course of the lesson as she observed the child struggling. In the same video, Sister Mary called random students to the chart at the front of the room to identify new vocabulary words that had been introduced by underlining them with a squiggly line. I commented in my field notes (February 5, 2007) that, “Sister Mary keeps her students focused and engaged in the lesson by using hands-on learning activities and randomly selecting students to participate in the lesson.”

In response to a question on the questionnaire (Appendix B) Sister Mary described her philosophy of early childhood education:

I think that whatever is being learned (experienced) ought to be in the context of the individual child’s life, ever broadening his or her life experiences. Whatever I know or think, I can say. Whatever I can say, I write down. Whatever I write down, I can read back to someone else. Education should be about the wonder-the ‘ooh and ah’ of life around the child. It is about making connections. It should be fun, but also work with age appropriate responsibility.
Sister Mary’s philosophy of early childhood education demonstrates her desire to relate classroom learning to all students’ lives—a practice which is reflective of the theme of individualized instruction.

On August 18, 2010, I visited Sister Mary’s classroom for an informal observation. Following the observation, I interviewed Sister Mary. During the interview, Sister Mary explains that her instructional units are theme-based but sometimes shift based on student interests. She stated:

For example, today a child brought a cicada to school, so we wrote about the cicada and found out that a cicada is an insect. The story, the words that the students put together, became the homework reading paper. So, the cicada is important to the children—that became the topic for today.

The statement made by Sister Mary demonstrates that she, as an educator, is willing to adjust her lesson plans to reflect the interests and needs of her students. Following the interview, I reviewed my notes from my researcher’s journal. The following was recorded in my researcher’s journal:

When I arrived in Sister Mary’s classroom today, the children were gathered around her in a circle on the carpet listening to a story. When Sister Mary paused to greet me, the children could not contain their excitement. They were so eager to share with me the cicada that a student had brought to school that day. The cicada was under a large, tabletop magnifying glass on the child’s desk. The children all started talking at once sharing facts with me that they had learned about insects.
I had noted in my researcher’s journal that day how excited the students were to learn about insects. The interview with Sister Mary linked the entry in my researcher’s journal with the theme of individualized instruction. I realized that the students’ eagerness to learn about insects was a direct result of Sister Mary allowing her students to guide the learning process. They were excited because Sister Mary changed the course of the day to focus on a topic that interested them and to which they could relate.

When I visited the class on September 2, 2010, for an informal observation, I took note in my researcher’s journal that one child had a mesh insect holder on her desk. Inside was a large yellow moth and a cricket. I commented that the student interest in insects appeared to still be strong two weeks following the initial lesson on insects. Obviously, the students had an investment in the learning process. I said, “By allowing the student to modify the direction of learning after the cicada was brought in, Sister Mary made the learning meaningful for the students.” That day, I also documented in my researcher’s journal that while waiting in car line for her mother to arrive, the little girl explained to me that the moth and the cricket were insects because they had three body parts and six legs. When the mother arrived, she laughed and told me that her daughter had been collecting insects since learning about them in Sister Mary’s class. She even said, “I found a glass beside the bed with a cricket and a lightening bug in it!” In my researcher’s journal (September 2, 2010), I commented,

Sister Mary definitely took advantage of a teachable moment when the child brought the cicada to school to share. I do not think that any teacher-initiated topic would spark the same level of interest, particularly 2 weeks following the initial lesson.
While Sister Mary never intended to teach about insects that particular day in September, she found a topic that interested the students and that they were excited about and capitalized on it. To me, this is the epitome of individualized instruction-changing the entire plan for the day to meet the interests and needs of the students in the class.

*Parental Involvement*

Through data analysis, parental involvement emerged as another theme. As seen in Table 6, evidence of parental involvement was found in the interviews, questionnaire, and researcher’s journal. Although only evident in three of my six data sources, it was apparent how integral it was to the overall learning of Sister Mary’s students. In the following section, the theme of parental involvement is discussed in detail.

Table 6

*Parental Involvement Theme Found in Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<td>Videotapes</td>
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<td>Lesson Plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>Photos</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Journal</td>
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This belief is illustrated by the following practice that Sister Mary exhibited on a daily basis. Students were sent home with a homework reading paper that was an exact duplicate of a piece that Sister Mary and the students created together throughout the course of the day. Parents were expected to read the paper with their children, listen as their children read the paper and then engage their children in follow-up activities to reinforce the concept. While specific activities were not designated each day, Sister Mary frequently sent her students home with lists of suggestions that parents could use at home. At the end of each nine weeks, Sister Mary sent each child home with a bound copy of all of his or her activities, both from home and school that parents could use to identify any specific areas in which their child needs extra help or assistance. Information regarding this practice was documented in the researcher’s journal (February 5, 2007).

Another method that Sister Mary uses to promote parental involvement in the classroom is the use of journal moms and dads. In a questionnaire (August 2010), Sister Mary explained, “I encourage parents to act as journal moms or dads at school (before they have to go to work).” Journal moms and dads volunteer in the classroom for 15 to 45 minutes following the morning announcements every day except Monday (interview, August 18, 2010). Journal moms and dads help the students with their journals by writing down whatever words, phrases, or sentences that the children ask them to write. The children can then return to their desks and put the information in their journals.

Sister Mary’s comment in one of the interviews (January 31, 2006) also reflects the emphasis that she places on parental involvement. She said, “Almost every night I will send notes home about what we are studying or how we are studying it or questions that parents might ask the child so that they can get back into the same conversation at
home again.” During the interview on August 18, 2010, Sister Mary explained why she sends the notes home to parents by stating,

I think a lot of the time parents don’t know how (to help). They really, truly don’t know how to help their child with reading. They don’t know what to do and so I think that some parents look at those guidelines and realize what they can do to help their child.

By providing parents with clear guidelines about ways to work with the children on early literacy activities at home, Sister Mary is encouraging parental involvement in education.

Flashcards are another method that Sister Mary uses to promote parental involvement. She explained the use of flashcards in a questionnaire (August 2010) by saying,

The children also take home flashcards (kept in a file box) of every word learned in our story writing. Parents are given directions on how to play games with their child. (1) Find the word that rhymes with… (2) Find the word that is the same as… (3) Find the word that is the opposite of… (4) Find the word that is a noun or naming word, verb or action word, etc. (5) Use the flashcards and put them together to make a sentence. (6) Find all the color words, action words, naming words, describing words, number words, names of people, names of characters, etc.

During an interview (August 18, 2010), Sister Mary said, “I am pretty mandatory with the parents that they have to study those flashcards at home.”

Many of the tasks that Sister Mary requires her students to complete at home cannot be done without the assistance of a parent. During an interview on January 31,
2006, she commented, “They can’t do their homework without parent participation…99 percent of their homework is done with their parents.” Not only does Sister Mary expect that parents work with their children to complete homework assignments, she also has developed a system in which parents must take accountability for their child’s work. During an interview on August 18, 2010, in regards to homework assignments Sister Mary said,

The parents have to sign it. They have to sign that they have seen it, they have worked with their child, and they know what their child has done…It is their job.

If it is not done, they are signing a lie. I mean, really and truly.

By taking such a strong stance regarding parental involvement, Sister Mary demonstrates the importance that she places on this particular facet of education. One example of such a letter reads as follows:

Parent Signature_________________________

Dear Parents, Guardians,

SOME REMINDERS:

1. Practice flashcards each night.
   - In sentences
   - In categories (animals, colors, etc.)
   - “Find a word that means…”
   - In ABC order
   - As a game
   - Flashed and called out

We are working for instantaneous recognition.
2. Homework Reading Papers: These papers contain stories that we compose during class. We talk, share, write, read, and share.

- What we think, we can say.
- What we say, we can write.
- What we write, we can read.
- What we read, we can share.

Please go over the stories. Talk about them. Read them to anyone you can find to listen.

3. Punctuation: We are working at the following basic skills:

- The first word in each sentence begins with a capital letter.
- Months of the year begin with capital letters.
- Days of the week begin with capital letters.
- People’s names begin with capital letters.
- Every sentence must end with a punctuation mark (., !, ?).
- Telling (declarative) sentences end with a period.
- Asking (interrogative) sentences end with a question mark (a.k.a. ear listening for an answer with a period).
- Excited (exclamatory) sentences end with an exclamation or excited mark.
- We use the correct word along with the more primary expressions.

4. Snacks: Please remember to send a healthy snack with your child every day.

- We ask that all snacks be very healthy snacks. Good snacks include:
  - Nuts
o Pretzels
o Popcorn
o Fruit
o Vegetables
o Yogurt
o Dried Fruit
o Peanut butter
o Bread
o Crackers
o Cheese
o Dry, unsugared cereal
o Jerky sticks
o Meat
o Sandwiches

5. Homework: Monday-Thursday:

- Homework reinforces skills and concepts taught in class.

- It gives additional exposure and helps remind you, dear parent, where there are special needs, gifts, etc.

- It lets you see exactly what we are studying, thus providing you with concrete ways of helping your child.

- Please do not work for long periods in a single sitting.

  - Two or three 10-minute sessions are usually more productive than one one-hour session.
6. Signatures: I ask you to please sign ALL papers. This helps me to know that you have seen, reviewed, and/or studied the material and that you know what we are working on that day.

   - All lessons should be signed, studied, and returned the next morning.
   - Other work of the day should also be returned.
   - Grades are recorded after the papers are returned.
   - Please sign in the upper right hand corner.

7. Written Absentee Notes: It is required by law that when a child misses school, a written note with the reason for the absence be sent when your child returns to school. Thank you!

8. The word “a” is pronounced like the short “u” in “up” or “cup.”

9. The word “the” rhymes with “a,” not “me.”

10. The letter “a” with a breve mark over it is called a short a. Short a has the vowel sound in “man.” When the vowels have a macron over them, they are long vowels. They say their own names.

11. You may study rhyming words such as:

   a
   an
   can
   pan
   fan
   Dan

   a
   lay
   day
   way
   say
   play

   If b-e-d is bed, what is r-e-d?
If r-e-d is red, what is T-e-d?
If T-e-d is Ted, what is f-e-d?

12. Manuscript Writing: In manuscript writing, we study all lines and letters as a part of the Three Bears Lines stories.

- Paper Bear Lines: Stop at the top line.
- Mama Bear Lines: Stop between the middle and top lines.
- Baby Bear Lines: Stop at the middle dashed line.
- Goldilocks Lines: Circles

Our letters are made as:

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt Uu Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz

The above letter, as well as all others, was hand-written using exemplary penmanship.

Emergent Literacy

A large portion of each day in Sister Mary’s classroom is spent focusing on emergent literacy. Whether working independently, writing in journals, or participating in large group instruction, students are constantly engaged in activities that promote the development of early literacy skills. As shown in Table 7, the theme was evident in five of my six data sources.
Table 7

*Emergent Literacy Theme in Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Theme Found</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Lesson Plans</td>
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<td>Photo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Journal</td>
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When responding to the questions on the initial questionnaire, Sister Mary mentioned ideas associated with the development of early literacy 12 times. When describing her philosophy of early childhood education, recall the fact that Sister Mary included the following, “Whatever I know or think, I can say. Whatever I can say, I can write down. Whatever I write down, I can read back to someone else.” The fact that the process of learning to read and write is included in her philosophy of early childhood education shows the emphasis that Sister Mary places on emergent literacy. It is also interesting to note that Sister Mary repeated this quote on many occasions such as during two different interviews and on a questionnaire.

In the first questionnaire administered in the January of 2006, Sister Mary referred to learning to read and write as a process that emerges when a child goes from thinking ideas, to vocalizing the ideas, and then writing them on paper, and being able to read them back. During the interview on January 31, 2006, Sister Mary said,
If children can think things, they can eventually say those things and if they can say them, we (as a class) can put them on paper and if we can put them on paper, then they can read it back to the people that they care about and to me. That is the reading process.

A second questionnaire was administered in August 2010 so that I, the researcher, could learn more about Sister Mary’s classroom practices that promote early literacy. When describing her classroom activities, she said, “We think. We talk. We write. We read. We share. Then we start all over again.” I found this description strikingly similar to Sister Mary’s descriptions of the reading process from over four years earlier. I, as a researcher, am often worried when conducting interviews that the participant will tell me what I want to hear rather than adequately describing his or her classroom practices. Finding such continuity in the data, despite the period of time that had elapsed since the initial questionnaire was administered and interview was conducted, demonstrates to me that Sister Mary actually practices the techniques that she described in the interviews and questionnaires. The tactics that she uses to teach children to read remain constant.

From the onset of first grade, children are learning to put their ideas on paper. In Sister Mary’s class, journal writing is intended to teach the children how to write correctly. As mentioned earlier, journal moms and dads are available to assist with the writing four days a week. In an interview on August 18, 2010, Sister Mary expounded upon her reason for using journal parents. She said,

The children aren’t satisfied with inventive spelling anymore. They have been in school too long. They don’t want to put it on the paper if it is misspelled. So by having the journal parent, they can just go up and say ‘I need this word’ or ‘I
need the word guacamole.’ Some of them just ask the parent to write the whole sentence. The child dictates and the parent puts it on paper. These observations are contradictory to what other educators who recommend that children should not be discouraged from their creative spelling, but Sister Mary’s teaching suggests otherwise. Although, Sister Mary supports children’s creative spelling when it is appropriate, she wants the children to feel comfortable writing and spelling with the help of adults.

After this type of activity, the child then returns to his or her desk and writes in the journal. While most students choose to use the journal moms and dads, some do not. Sister Mary explained that although proper punctuation and spelling are not required in the journals, problems can arise when the students write independently and the letters consistently have no phonetic connection to their intended sounds (interview, August 18, 2010). As the year progresses, the writing expectations increase. The first nine weeks, the children must write one sentence or more. The second nine weeks, the students write at least two sentences. The third nine weeks, three sentences are required. The fourth nine weeks, at least four sentences must be written (lesson plans, January 31, 2006).

When talking about journal writing, Sister Mary said, “It is amazing. I mean, it is just totally amazing what their stories turn out to be and how well they learn to write” (interview, January 31, 2006). “There is no limit to what they can write,” she said (interview, August 18, 2010).

When describing classroom activities during an interview (January 31, 2006), Sister Mary said, “We read. Read. We read all day long. I mean we read books constantly.” In the same interview, she stated that she,
Encourages children to take books home at night regardless of whether they can read them or not. The students can either read them or their parents can read the books to them or the parent and the child can take turns reading.

When children begin working with take home reading books intended for independent reading, books which are easy for the children to read, the children must read aloud to an adult. In reference to this practice, Sister Mary said, “My statement to parents always is-as much as your child wants to do or as much as you can endure” (interview, January 31, 2006).

As part of emergent literacy, Sister Mary describes phonemic awareness as the process involved when children develop an “awareness of sounds-that sounds have a relationship to letters (interview January 31, 2006). The letters only help them put on paper the sounds that they are making orally.” When leading the class in large group instruction, Sister Mary writes the stories that the children create on a large chart at the front of the classroom (researcher’s journal; lesson plans; videotape, February 5, 2007). When describing this process, Sister Mary said, “Whatever sounds the children are saying and hearing are going on the board. They’re seeing the sounds, the letters that make the sounds, go up on the board as they are making the sounds aloud” (interview, January 31, 2006).

An obstacle that Sister Mary faces when teaching her students to read is enunciation. Data supporting this idea can be found in the initial questionnaire (January 30, 2006) and interview (January 31, 2006). In regards to the most difficult aspect of promoting phonemic awareness, Sister Mary responded, “Children hear the southern sounds of words all around them. The southern vowel sounds rarely match the dictionary
sounds and spelling of the letter sounds. Thus, we have to almost teach a new sound language” (questionnaire). In an interview (January 31, 2006), she said, “In the South it is very, very difficult for students to learn phonetic sounds because, for example, short ‘e’ and short ‘i’ make the same sound.” Sister Mary also expressed that children struggle with connecting the actual letters to the sounds because, “they are hearing the sounds incorrectly.” In an effort to combat the effects of poor enunciation on the development of emergent literacy skills, Sister Mary works with word parts, or syllables. She has students clap sounds and make “crazy, stupid jingles that they will remember” so that the students can “hear the sound, the correct sound, over and over and over” (interview, January 31, 2006).

In another interview (January 31, 2006), Sister Mary expressed that medial consonants tend to be a problem for first graders because “many children do not pronounce the medial consonants correctly, nor do their parents.” In order to help children develop competence in this area, Sister Mary breaks words down for the students by sound (researcher’s journal; interview, January 31, 2006). Sister Mary explained, for example, “Alright, pumpkin-‘p’ is the first sound. What sound do you hear next? ‘Uhh, uhh.’ What vowel sound is this?” By implementing this practice, Sister Mary is using phonemic awareness activities to promote her students’ emergent literacy skills.

Phonemic awareness is promoted when children engage in activities that help them learn to hear the individual sounds of the language. Sister Mary uses the following phonemic awareness activities to encourage the development of her students’ emergent literacy skills: rhyming, singing, clapping, stomping, snapping, writing word parts on chart paper, writing on chalkboards, finding word parts within words, using word parts to
create new words, finding all possible words within words, and skywriting as sounds are made (questionnaire; interview, January 31, 2006; interview, August 18, 2010; lesson plans; video tape, February 5, 2007).

It is noteworthy to mention that Sister Mary’s students are not given reading textbooks until the second semester of school. During the first semester, the students are working to build vocabulary fluency, alphabet skills, knowledge of rhyme, and other such emergent literacy skills (interview, January 31, 2006). Sister Mary said, “If in the first actual textbook they put in their hands they know every word in the book, their excitement knows no bounds because they get so excited-I can read this book!” (interview, January 31, 2006). Sister Mary expressed (interview, January 31, 2006) that when children are learning to read, they are, “so caught up in it that it just happens. It happens and then they’re excited because all of the sudden they realize that they are reading!” It appears that she has developed an appropriate system to lead her students to successful literacy development.

*Classroom Environment*

While conducting research in Sister Mary’s classroom, I began to realize how important the classroom environment that she creates is to the success of her students. Through data analysis, classroom environment emerged as the fourth theme. It was found in four of the six data sources (see Table 8).
Table 8

*Classroom Environment Theme Found in Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Photos</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Researcher’s Journal</td>
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A visitor to the school could gain a sense of the learning environment in Sister Mary’s class without ever actually entering the classroom. Bright, colorful student-created pictures accompanied by teacher-written text (see Appendix E) line the halls outside the first grade. As demonstrated in a photo (see Appendix F), the class mission statement that the students helped write during the first week of school is prominently displayed. The mission statement says:

Room 1B knows that God loves us the way we are. We will act the way God wants us to act. We promise to talk in a kind way. We promise to act in a kind way. (Be nice.) We promise to listen to each other.

The mission statement reflects the emotional environment that Sister Mary strives to maintain. As noted in my researcher’s journal (August 20, 2010), students are often found in the hallway outside the classroom coloring large poster-sized murals that
illustrate the theme for the week. In a questionnaire (August 2010), Sister Mary explained that,

If planning a culminating mural we might have a discussion to figure out the scenes within the mural, then who wants to work together on the scene, where to work at it, etc. The mural becomes their piece of work from planning to finished product.

In my research journal (August 20, 2010), I commented how excited the students were to share with me the mural that they were working on in the hall that day, “There is nothing like seeing children who are excited about learning!”

As shown in the photos (see Appendix G), Sister Mary’s classroom is equipped with an overabundance of books, manipulatives, and other learning materials. My first impression of Sister Mary’s classroom was that while being very appealing to the eye, the plethora of materials could be very overwhelming for a teacher. In an interview on August 18, 2010, Sister Mary commented, “There are probably a thousand or two thousand books in this room.” Without a well-defined method of organization, the classroom has the potential to become very disorganized and difficult to locate items inside. In order to prevent this, Sister Mary has a very distinct organizational method. No empty space exists in the classroom-clear plastic tubs labeled with the name of the items found inside line shelves all around the classroom (videotape, February 5, 2007). On a questionnaire from August 2010, Sister Mary explained that she uses tubs to store her books so that, “Children look at book covers rather than book spines.” Noted in my researcher’s journal on November 17th, 2006,
Sister Mary’s classroom has more books than I have ever seen in one room before. They are organized in plastic tubs located around the classroom in areas that are easily accessible to the students. Two large bookshelves cover almost the entire length of the classroom and are filled with tubs of books. Each tub is clearly labeled either by author or by theme. Although students are allowed free access to classroom books, the books clearly stay well-organized.

Sister Mary’s meticulous organization was apparent on videotape (February 5, 2007) when a teacher’s assistant from a pre-kindergarten classroom came to borrow a particular book for a lesson on presidents. Sister Mary was able to go directly to the correct tub of books and locate the particular book without hesitation all while continuing to teach her first-grade students.

While physical organization is a key component of the classroom environment, the emotional atmosphere is also important. As can be seen on videotape (February 5, 2007), students are eager, active participants in the learning process. Students appear to have difficulty staying in their seats when raising their hands in hopes of getting to answer questions or come to the front of the classroom to work on the large chart at the front of the classroom. As documented in my researcher’s journal (February 2007), Sister Mary “stays very calm—does not fuss.” She asks students to have good manners—“Manners, please come back” (videotape, February 5, 2007). She comments, “We have the right to be heard, but the responsibility to listen to others” (videotape, February 5, 2007). I recorded in my field notes (March 2007) that Sister Mary “admits errors—she laughs at herself.”
Throughout the course of my study, the overall mood in Sister Mary’s classroom appeared to be generally light-hearted (researcher’s journal, September 2010). Students seem to enjoy learning and want to participate in the lessons. Expectations are high, but all student efforts are praised. During an interview on August 18 2010, Sister Mary made reference to her expectations for student drawings by saying that she tells her students, “I don’t expect you to do anything but your best. As long as you try your best, then it is good.”

As noted in my research journal (November 17th, 2006) during an early morning observation, the students appeared to be “everywhere and off-task” when I entered the classroom. Upon further observation, I found that although the students were everywhere, they were not off-task. They were just all participating in different learning activities. In an interview on August 18, 2010, Sister Mary said:

“Actually there are at least four things going on normally. Alright, some of them will be going to get help with their journals, they are reading their homework reading papers to me. That is when I listen to every child read their homework reading paper. They probably have a phonics paper from the day before that they have to finish. They might have math papers and math problems that they have to copy off the board…We use what is on the computers. We go in alphabetical order. So, there are quite a few things going on that first hour, hour and a half of the morning.

While the morning routine in Sister Mary’s classroom may appear to be very chaotic, a great deal of learning is occurring. Both one-on-one work with the teacher and parent volunteers and independent activities transpire during this time.
In August 2010, Sister Mary was asked to respond to a questionnaire which led her to describe her classroom environment. She provided a list of words and phrases that she felt accurately described her classroom. Items mentioned are included in Table 9.

Table 9  
*Classroom Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sister Mary’s Description of the Classroom Environment</th>
<th>My Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colorful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciplined</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly but demanding</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything has specific learning purpose</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes cluttered, but always organized</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning games</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books to read just because they are there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tubs of theme-related books</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big books (over 100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small books</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite authors</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
Table 9 (continued)

*Classroom Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sister Mary’s Description of the Classroom Environment</th>
<th>My Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-fiction</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionaries and encyclopedias</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Songs</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record players</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassette players</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD players</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall maps</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sister Mary’s list of words and phrases are encompassing of what I, as a researcher, observed in her classroom. Both the physical attributes of the room and the emotional
atmosphere contribute to the overall environment. Sister Mary’s strong focus on early literacy is apparent in all facets of the classroom environment.

**Summary of Findings**

Data analysis revealed that one teacher’s promotion of early literacy skills, particularly in the area of phonemic awareness, involved four themes: (a) individualized instruction, (b) parental involvement, (c) emergent literacy, and (d) classroom environment. First, the findings suggest that individualized instruction is an integral component in the development of phonemic awareness skills and early literacy. Each child learns differently and has different needs and interests. Therefore, it is the responsibility of Sister Mary to adjust her teaching strategies to meet the needs of each individual child. Second, parental involvement aids in the development of early literacy skills. When Sister Mary is aware of the importance of parental involvement in education and implements measures to ensure that parents are active participants in the student learning process, early literacy is encouraged. Third, according to Sister Mary’s teaching methods, emergent literacy directly relates to her students’ promotion of phonemic awareness. Finally, the classroom environment includes both the physical organization of the classroom as well as the emotional atmosphere. Sister Mary creates a classroom environment that is conducive to student learning, particularly in the area of early literacy.
CHAPTER 5
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to describe and to understand how one early childhood education teacher promotes students’ early literacy skills through the use of phonemic awareness activities. The three specific research questions addressed in this study were: 1) What assumptions does an early childhood education teacher make about early literacy? 2) How is an early childhood teacher promoting students’ early literacy through phonemic awareness activities? 3) What role does the classroom environment play in children’s acquisition of early literacy skills—particularly phonemic awareness skills? Each research question is addressed accordingly. Implications, recommendations, and personal reflections also are included in this chapter.

Research Question 1
What assumptions does an early childhood education teacher make about early literacy?

Sister Mary appeared to have the following assumptions regarding early literacy:

1) Emergent literacy should be the primary focus of an early childhood classroom and should be incorporated into all aspects of the school day.

2) Individualized instruction promotes student learning and early literacy.

3) Parental involvement aids in the development of early literacy skills.

To address this research question, I will describe each of the three assumptions that were found.
Assumption 1

As defined by Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), emergent literacy “consists of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing and the environments that support these developments.” Emergent literacy refers to the notion that the “acquisition of early literacy skills is best conceptualized as a developmental continuum, with its origins early in the life of a child, rather than an all-or-none phenomenon that begins when children start school” (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p.848). When promoting emergent literacy, social interactions in a literacy-rich environment are important components (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

While Sister Mary ensures that students in her classroom receive thorough instruction in all areas of the curriculum, it is quite clear that emergent literacy is her primary focus. She incorporates lessons in literacy into all subject areas and provides students with opportunities to build early literacy skills even during their free time. Once work is complete, students can be found reading from the plethora of books that are located in the classroom, working with interactive computer programs geared to aid in the development of early literacy skills, playing word games, manipulating magnetic letters, and participating in other age-appropriate activities. Bradley and Jones (2007) suggest that a strong foundation in literacy is essential in order for children to succeed academically. Likewise, Roskos et al. (2003) support that engaging children with materials that encourage student identification and manipulation of the letters of the alphabet as an essential early literacy teaching strategy.

In contrast to the rigid, skills-oriented approach to reading instruction that was once believed to be most effective, Sister Mary implements a constructive, interactive
model of reading instruction (Hiebert, 1988). Rather than simply lecturing, Sister Mary encourages students to actively participate in the learning process through open communication and interaction with the instructor and their peers, as well as manipulation of objects within the classroom. Every day Sister writes class stories on the chart paper at the front of the classroom as students dictate. Once the stories are written, Sister Mary encourages the students to further explore the texts by playing word games and allowing students to come to the front of the classroom and locate various words or word parts within the stories. These observations are supported by researchers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hill-Clarke & Robinson, 2004; Flett & Conderman, 2002; Ehri et al., 2001; Wasik, 2001) stating that phonemic awareness is promoted by using sound and word related activities.

Sister Mary capitalizes on all teachable moments to promote early literacy skills regardless of the subject being taught at the time. It is not uncommon for the focus of a science or social studies lesson to move in the direction of early literacy. Following my research, it is quite clear that Sister Mary holds the assumption that emergent literacy should be the primary focus of an early childhood classroom and should be incorporated into all aspects of the school day. The present observations are further supported by Hoffman (2010) noting that “literacy should be infused throughout the school day in ways that relate to children’s own lives” (p. 15).

Assumption 2

After studying Sister Mary’s teaching, it is apparent that she believes that individualized instruction promotes student learning and early literacy. She not only works with each child in her class on an individual basis every day, she also modifies her
instruction and lesson plans based on students’ interests, experiences, and abilities. When explaining her philosophy of early childhood education, Sister Mary indicated that whatever children experience or learn needs to be in the context of their lives. She also claimed that children need to be able to make connections between what they are learning in the classroom and what they are experiencing in life. Sister Mary’s notion of the importance of making connections is supported by Protheroe (2007) who stated that effective teachers allow students to make connections between subjects. Sister Mary’s philosophy is congruent with the emergent literacy perspective which suggests that beginning reading instruction ought to develop around the literacy experiences that individual children bring to school (Hiebert, 1988). Similarly, Evers, Lang, and Smith (2009) claim that linking between the children’s in-school and out-of-school lives builds relationships and connections that make learning relevant while communicating to parents and students that they are valued.

Sister Mary appears to be very aware of her students’ abilities and limitations. She seems to expect the students to do the very best that they can do, yet, she is aware that this expectation is very different for each child. For students who struggle, Sister Mary makes modifications in her teaching strategies. For example, when working with certain students, Sister Mary uses larger flashcards than she uses with the other students. Some students are moved to different areas of the classroom to work so that they are not so easily distracted. During large group instruction, Sister Mary often situates herself in close proximity to certain students so that she can redirect their attention as needed. Sister Mary also modifies her instructional strategies for students who excel. She increases her expectations to make the assignments more challenging. Through her
actions including making connections, being aware of her students’ abilities and limitations, and changing her teaching strategies based on students’ needs, Sister Mary demonstrates her belief in the importance of individualizing instruction to meet the needs of her students. One of her actions, making connections, is an important teaching strategy for early childhood teachers to have (Chaille, 2008; Jensen, 2006). In order to support children’s abilities to make connections, Sister Mary uses various teaching methods that have been proven to be helpful to young children’s development and learning.

Assumption 3

The final assumption that I found Sister Mary to have is that parental involvement aids in the development of early literacy skills. Her beliefs are congruent with those of DeCusati and Johnson (2004) and Strickland (2004) who emphasize that high levels of parental involvement directly impact student achievement, particularly in the area of early literacy. Whether one is familiar with Sister Mary’s teaching or just visiting the school for the first time, it is apparent that parental involvement is key to the success of Sister Mary’s students. Parents can be found in the classroom working with children every day. On any given day, one will typically find that more than one of Sister Mary’s students will have a parent come to the school to eat lunch with the class. Homework assignments cannot be completed without parental involvement. Parents not only have to work with the children to complete the assignment, but also sign the paper stating that they have worked with the children. After studying Sister Mary’s teaching, it is clear to me that she devotes a great deal of time to encouraging parental involvement in the school and teaching parents how to better serve as proponents for their child’s education. DeCusati and Johnson (2004) stress the importance of the quality of parental participation.

Parental involvement in the classroom is dependent upon successful home-school communication (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Canter & Canter, 1992; DeCusati & Johnson, 2004; Domina, 2005; Strickland, 2004). Parents must be made aware of what is happening in both the classroom and the school so that they can determine what opportunities to become involved best suit their schedules and abilities. Sister Mary frequently uses written communication to inform her parents of what is happening at the school. Parent signatures are often required on both homework assignments and teacher notes so that Sister Mary can have documentation that the parents have read and understand what opportunities are available for volunteerism as well as what the expectations are for both students and parents in regards to academic learning.

Sister Mary’s successful parental involvement in her classroom can be understood by reviewing Joyce Epstein’s (2001) six main types of such involvement:

- Parenting: Teach families how to best support student learning in the home.
- Communicating: Effective communication between home and school regarding school programs and student progress.
- Volunteering: Recruit and manage parents to help in school activities both in the classroom and at school-wide functions.
- Learning at home: Offer ideas and suggestions to parents regarding how to best help students learn using homework and other curriculum-related games and activities.
• Decision-making: Involve parents in the decision-making process and establish a system of parent representation.

• Collaborating with the community: Identify and integrate community resources to strengthen school programs, family activities, and student learning.

Sister Mary does an exceptional job of implementing all types of parental involvement from Epstein’s (2001) framework. In order to encourage parenting skills and learning at home, she often sends home long, detailed letters that offer parents suggestions on techniques to use in the home that support the early literacy skills being learned at school.

In addition, Sister Mary uses a red folder as her primary source of communication with her students’ parents. Each child takes home a red folder every day. Inside the folder is the homework reading paper for the night, any graded papers that need to be signed, and parent letters from teachers, administration or the parent-teacher organization. Another form of communication is the mandatory parent-student-teacher conferences that are held twice a year to ensure that parents are aware of their child’s progress in school.

To promote volunteerism, Sister Mary utilizes different sources. To illustrate, at the beginning of the school year she places a large poster outside of her classroom explaining that she needs volunteers to help with various classroom tasks such as being a journal mom or dad. She has a sign-up sheet available so that parents can volunteer for the days and times that best fit their schedules. She also sends notes to all the parents in the school requesting volunteers to help complete specific tasks such as cleaning the school grounds and gardening. Many of Sister Mary’s parents actively participate in the
parent-teacher organization (PTO) which contributes to the decision-making within the school. The PTO selects fundraisers for the students to participate in, allots money for different activities as well as teacher expenditures, and organizes school-wide events such as “Family Fun Night.” Parents are also involved in community-wide projects and fundraisers. From time to time, the school will partner with local businesses to promote community involvement within the school.

Expanding the involvement of parents in the education of their children is an effective strategy for improving the quality of education (Driessen, Smit, & Sleegers, 2005). Enz (1995) recommends that helping parents to understand how children become readers and writers is one of the most important jobs of educators. Likewise, Sister Mary appears to believe that parental involvement is integral to the development of children’s early literacy skills. All of her three assumptions tend to support her students’ promotion of early literacy.

Research Question 2

How is an early childhood teacher promoting students’ early literacy through phonemic awareness activities?

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the smallest units of the spoken language which are known as phonemes (Atwill et al., 2007; Ehri et al., 2001; Flett & Conderman, 2002; Gromko, 2005; Wasik, 2001). Instruction in phonemic awareness improves phonemic awareness skills and, thus, leads to the improvement of reading skills and development (Allor, 2002; Castles, et al., 2009; Ehri, et al., 2001; Wasik, 2001). Sister Mary incorporates phonemic awareness activities into her
classroom teaching practices daily. Everything she implements in the classroom seems to promote her students’ learning and development.

Evidence of how Sister Mary promotes phonemic awareness can be found in her method of presenting the text. Rather than passing out textbooks on the first day of school, Sister Mary spends the entire first semester teaching children basic early literacy skills such as rhyming, phonetic sound enunciation, and decoding. She also works with the students on identifying and manipulating phonemes. This perspective is congruent with other studies done by researchers (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Hoffman, 2010; Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2011) who suggest that because children’s phonemic awareness develops early on, at first teachers must pay closer attention to their students’ basic literacy skills, including recognizing and manipulating individual sounds of words. By the second semester when Sister Mary hands out the textbooks, the children are actually ready to read. Her reasoning behind this practice is to ensure that her students are actually able to read the first real textbook that they have in their hands. Sister Mary expressed that the excitement that this creates is immeasurable.

Another example of how Sister Mary promotes phonemic awareness in her first-graders is through the use of journals. Sister Mary has the students write in their journals and draw a picture to illustrate their story every day. Each quarter, the writing expectations increase. Sister Mary has assigned parents particular days to come into the classroom and serve as journal moms and dads. The journal moms and dads assist students with spelling. Although Sister Mary does not have a problem with inventive spelling and spelling is not graded in journal writing, she has found that many of her students are hesitant to write when they are uncertain how to spell particular words. To
eliminate this problem, journal moms and dads are available. Sister Mary wants the students to become comfortable writing and does not want their creativity limited to only words that they are confident writing. Students are only pushed to use the parent support when their independent writing appears to have no phonetic connection to the words intended. Sister Mary sees no benefit in students writing letters that have no connection to actual words.

Sister Mary frequently utilizes rhyming activities into her lessons. In an interview she expressed surprise that some of the children have a lot of trouble rhyming. This was never the case for her previously. In understanding this issue, Copple and Bredekamp (2009) explain that most children do not acquire phonemic awareness without teachers’ instruction, and rhyming is one of the best ways of developing such awareness. Hoffman’s (2010) constrained skills can also be helpful. According to her article, she finds that when teachers teach students constrained skills such as phonemic awareness, they need to develop it quite early on in students’ literacy skill acquisition periods. However, since “constrained skills usually develop in a relatively short period of time”, some children will have difficulty in understanding and performing phonemic awareness related activities, including rhyming. In order to address this learning deficit, Sister Mary has a number of tapes on rhyming that she uses with her students—sometimes just for fun and sometimes in conjunction with a specific lesson. Rhyming and repetitive books are other means that Sister Mary uses in her classroom to increase her students’ rhyming skills. Such teaching methods support and encourage the development of phonemic awareness and, in turn, better prepare students for later success in reading (Flett & Conderman, 2002; Snowball, 1990; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).
In addition to rhyming, Sister Mary also incorporates sound and word games into her instruction. For example, Sister Mary writes a story that the students dictate each day on the big chart at the front of the classroom. She has students come forward to locate words, word parts, letters, and other elements within the writing. She also utilizes large pocket charts when engaging students in word games. She often has words related to the theme of the week along with pictures of the things represented by the words in the large, blue pocket charts. Students are able to match the words with their corresponding pictures. Another popular activity that is implemented in Sister Mary’s class is finding words within words. Sister Mary often writes a long word on the chart paper at the front of the classroom and asks the students to identify all possible little words that can be found within the big word. Phonemic awareness skills that are encouraged by the use of word games include:

- **Phoneme isolation**: Recognizing individual sounds in words (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Strickland, 2004; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000),

- **Phoneme identity**: Recognizing the common sounds in different words (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Snider, 1997; Snowball, 1990; Yopp & Yopp, 2000),

- **Phoneme categorization**: Recognizing the word that sounds different in a series of three to four words (Allor et al., 2006; Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Snider 1997; Yopp & Yopp, 2000),
• Phoneme blending: Combining a series of separately spoken sounds to form a recognizable word (Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000),

• Phoneme segmentation: Breaking a word into its sounds (Allor, et al., 2006; Cheesman et al., 2009; Ehri et al., 2001; Griffith & Olson, 1992; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001; Yopp & Yopp, 2000), and

• Phoneme deletion: Removing a particular phoneme and recognizing the remaining word (Ehri et al., 2001; Norris & Hoffman, 2002; Snider, 1997; Wasik, 2001).

Just as Sister Mary sees that phonemic awareness and reading are associated with the development of children’s early literacy skills, Yopp (1992) views the relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read as reciprocal. She states,

In order for children to benefit from formal reading instruction, youngsters must have a certain level of phonemic awareness. Reading instruction, in turn, heightens their awareness of language. Thus phonemic awareness is both a prerequisite and a consequence of learning to read. (p. 697)

When entering Sister Mary’s first grade class, it is to be expected that all students have had some exposure to activities that promote phonemic awareness. While ability levels will vary, it is fair to assume that at some point, either in kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, or preschool, the students have engaged in activities such as rhyming, phoneme segmentation, and phoneme deletion. As the students in Sister Mary’s class engage in activities geared at promoting early literacy, their phonemic awareness increases. This
process is demonstrative of the stance that Yopp (1992) takes regarding the reciprocity of phonemic awareness and learning to read.

Goswami (2000) maintains that the relationship between phonemic awareness and reading development are universal because every study that has examined such connections have found positive correlation. Furthermore, Gromko (2005) states, “The ability to read and write with understanding enhances children’s interpersonal communication, expands their worlds, and leads to independence in learning” (p.199).

Early literacy skills are encouraged when young children are immersed in a language-rich environment and given opportunities to manipulate the sounds of the language (Wasik, 2001). Sister Mary’s teaching strategies exemplify this notion of immersing children in a language-rich environment that provides opportunities to play with the language.

Research Question 3

What role does the classroom environment play in children’s acquisition of early literacy skills?

While physical space plays a definite role in the overall classroom environment, human interactions and qualities also contribute to such environments (Gordon & Brown, 2007). Horn and Banerjee (2009) state that educational environments have three distinct components: the physical environment, the social-emotional environment, and the teaching and learning environment. All influences that affect the children and adults in an early childhood classroom add to the overall environment (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Jackman, 2005; Kohn, 2005).
While the physical environment in Sister Mary’s classroom may appear to be messy at first glance, any keen observations of the classroom’s physical environment support how well-organized the it is. Sister Mary has an overabundance of resources that she uses on a daily basis with her students to help promote their early literacy development. All storage areas in the classroom are clearly labeled. Sister Mary and her students can find all resources needed with ease and without the risk of disturbing others while locating needed items. Diller (2008) maintains that the physical organization and arrangement of a classroom contributes to the underlying degree of difficulty of classroom routines and interactions.

In addition to the physical environment, the socio-emotional environment in her classroom seems to be important. She implements the Christ-centered approach to learning that is encouraged in the small, Catholic school. One example of her strong belief in Christianity can be seen in the mission statement that can be found outside of the classroom. Children regularly attend mass, participate in lessons on religion, and pray. Children are urged to make Christ-like choices in their daily lives and follow the Golden Rule to treat others as you would like to be treated. When situations arise at school where students are exhibiting inappropriate behavior, Sister Mary is quick to help her students get back on the right track and help them make good decisions. While the students may sometimes struggle with making good choices, the overall socio-emotional environment in Sister Mary’s classroom is one of love and respect.

Research indicates that well-structured classroom environments that allow children numerous opportunities to build their own understandings as they manipulate interesting objects and interact with other children foster brain development and enhance
learning (Marion, 2007). Such opportunities, often found within the context of play, allow young children to practice, elaborate, and extend emergent literacy skills (Morrow & Rand, 1991). Ginsbur (2006) expresses that environments allowing such freedom and independence make learning a more enjoyable experience.

Sister Mary’s philosophy of early childhood education, stresses the importance of making learning fun while teaching age-appropriate responsibility and skills. Brewer (2007) asserts that a teacher’s philosophy and goals are reflected in his or her environmental decisions. Sister Mary’s teaching and learning environments are definitely related to her philosophy of education. The children seem to be aware of Sister Mary’s high expectations for behavior and learning, but also know that she strives to make learning enjoyable. Laughter can often be heard coming from Sister Mary’s classroom. At any given time, children can be found interacting with other students, creating artwork, playing games, singing songs, and just enjoying each other.

Rokos et al. (2003) and Strickland (2004) affirm that children’s oral language and early literacy skills develop simultaneously. By listening and speaking, children develop a sense of words and sentences, build an awareness of the sound system, and demonstrate an understanding of words and written materials (Strickland, 2004). Therefore, student communication in conjunction with hands-on learning experiences, as can be found on a daily basis in Sister Mary’s classroom, contributes to the development of early literacy skills. An example of this is when Sister Mary encourages student participation when writing the class story each day. After the story is complete, children are called to the front of the classroom to identify various elements of the story, letters, and word parts.
The first task of a teacher should be to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning (Kaufeldt, 2001). Research indicates that the design of the classroom environment can positively affect literacy development (Morrow & Rand, 1991). As such, it is apparent that Sister Mary strives to maintain a classroom environment in which children are immersed in age-appropriate learning activities while learning to respect themselves and others. Students in Sister Mary’s class seem to be genuinely excited about learning.

Conclusion

Through qualitative analysis, four themes emerged from this research study: (a) individualized instruction, (b) parental involvement, (c) classroom environment, and (d) emergent literacy. I found that children’s early literacy skills, particularly in the area of phonemic awareness, are encouraged when instruction is adjusted to meet the individual needs of the students, parents are active participants in education, classroom environments are well-organized, nurturing places, and emergent literacy is a primary focus.

Implications

The findings of this study have the following educational implications for early childhood educators who acknowledge the importance of promoting early literacy skills through the use of phonemic awareness activities:

1. As demonstrated by the participant in this research study, building students’ confidence and skills in reading prior to introducing the actual textbook can be beneficial.

2. While being supportive of inventive spelling, the teacher in this research study also sees the benefit of allowing a support system to aid students with spelling so that
their confidence builds in regards to writing and they are better able to explore their own creativity.

3. The teacher who participated in this study implemented phonemic awareness activities to promote early literacy skills; thus, other teachers can use phonemic awareness activities in the classroom to encourage early literacy skills.

4. As found in this study, individualized instruction aids in the development of early literacy skills. Teachers should use individualized instruction as often as possible in order improve students’ chances for later success in reading.

5. Parental involvement in education, both at school and in the home, is beneficial for children who are learning to read. Therefore, teachers should encourage parents to be active participants in the education of their children. In doing this, asking parents to sign forms that assure their commitment to support their children’s school activities can enhance their involvement. Another way to involve parents is to mandate a required number of service hours within the school. Research indicates that many parents want to be involved in children’s school lives, but many of them do not know how to do so. For that reason, teachers need to inform parents exactly what they need to do to be involved in their children’s school lives. According to this study, having journal moms and dads appears to be a successful means of promoting children’s early literacy skills.

6. As demonstrated by the teacher who participated in this research study, activities that encourage the development of emergent literacy skills can and should be incorporated into all aspects of the school day.

7. Both the physical organization and emotional atmosphere contribute to the overall classroom environment. Classrooms should be well-organized places where
children are comfortable learning, and such environments should be warm and inviting places where children can express their interests and have them respected.

Recommendations

Over the last few years there has been an increased interest in phonemic awareness (Hoffman, 2010) and early literacy. While multiple research studies have been conducted, few have focused specifically on individual teachers’ perceptions of phonemic awareness and its importance as a means of promoting early literacy.

Additional research is recommended in the following areas:

1. Further research is needed regarding early childhood teachers’ beliefs regarding the role of early literacy activities in the early childhood classroom. Specific examples of activities used in the classroom should be included.

2. Studies comparing the instructional methods of teachers who acknowledge the importance of phonemic awareness in the early childhood classroom and teachers who do not could bring further enlightenment on the topic.

3. Future research should include a larger sample of teachers.

My Personal Reflections

When I graduated from college, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to be a fifth grade teacher in an inner city school. I did just that. While I liked my job, I struggled with the fact that so many of my students did not have the basic literacy skills needed to survive in our society. A few weeks into my first year of teaching, I realized that one of my students could not read. He had made it to the fifth grade and could not read. Other students had similar struggles. My students were obviously not prepared to complete grade level work, but the expectation was for me to
present the lessons following a pre-determined script for all fifth-grade teachers in the school system. The individual needs of my students were not to be taken into account. Rather, I was encouraged to teach lessons geared at improving test scores. I quickly realized that if I were going to make a difference in the lives of children, it would not be in a fifth-grade classroom where so many of the children seemed to have gotten lost in the system years before.

The next school year, I accepted a job teaching Pre-Kindergarten in a small, Christian school. My reasoning behind this decision was to reach the children before they had a chance to fall behind. I wanted to provide my students with a solid foundation in early literacy so that they would not become that fifth-grader who could not read. I quickly fell in love with my job and my students. I was finally making a difference. The only problem was that I realized young children do not learn in the same ways as older students nor do they communicate as older children do. One morning I asked a little girl who was cutting paper into tiny pieces and then blowing the scraps into the floor, “Emily, is that necessary?” She looked up at me with her big, brown eyes and said, “Miss Ann, I don’t know what necessary is.” Soon thereafter, I enrolled in a Master’s program in Instruction and Curriculum Leadership with a focus in Early Childhood Education.

From the day I began working on my Master’s degree, I knew that early literacy was my area of interest. Children cannot survive in our society without basic literacy skills. Reading is essential. I wanted to ensure that all students that I had the opportunity to work with were provided with a strong foundation in early literacy and prepared to become successful readers. In my opinion, phonemic awareness seemed to be the key.
When beginning this journey, I was aware of the recent research in the field of early childhood education that supports the notion that phonemic awareness is an essential component of early literacy instruction that serves to better prepare students for later reading success. Through this study, I hoped to elaborate on the information already known in regards to the use of phonemic awareness as a means of promoting literacy in an early childhood classroom.

As this experience draws to a close and I reflect back upon what I have done, I realize that I do not need to focus so much on the big picture. Researchers have already established the importance of phonemic awareness in terms of later reading success. Rather, for me, the importance of the research is to learn exactly how successful early childhood educators implement phonemic awareness activities in their classrooms. What works and what does not in terms of promoting early literacy?

Through this research, I gained extensive knowledge regarding what teaching methods work for one seasoned, early childhood educator. Sister Mary’s expertise is unquestionable. She has figured out how to successfully reach all students and shape them into young readers by using phonemic awareness activities, individualizing instruction, and encouraging parental involvement. Even more valuable than this general knowledge, are the specific examples of successful practices that were presented in this paper. As a researcher, I can improve upon this work in future studies by broadening the scope and including additional participants.

My experiences as an early childhood educator contribute to my interest in early literacy. As a teacher, I believe that it is my responsibility to provide my students with a solid foundation for later learning. As such, I believe that I have an obligation to offer
my students any resources available, particularly in the area of phonemic awareness, to better prepare them for future learning. Lessons learned through this study will be used to improve my skills as a teacher in promoting my own students’ early literacy.

While I intend to one day teach at the university level, I do not yet feel that my work is done with young children. Each day I go into work, I believe that I am helping to shape young lives through my work with early literacy and, hopefully, instill within my students an innate love of learning. When this chapter of my life comes to a close, then I hope to teach pre-service teachers the importance of instilling within their students the same values.
REFERENCES


Stenhouse Publishers.


Appendix A

Questionnaire

Thank you for agreeing to take the time to fill out this questionnaire. I am interested in your thoughts on the promotion of phonemic awareness in early childhood classrooms.

How long have you been teaching young children?_______________________________

What age group do you teach?_______________________________________________

Your gender: Male_____Female_____

Your educational background:________________________________________________________________

Please provide the following information:

1. What is your philosophy of early childhood education?

2. How do you define phonemic awareness?

3. What activities do you use to promote phonemic awareness in your classroom?

5. Do you use music to promote phonemic awareness? If so, how?

6. What kind of music do you use to promote phonemic awareness? Please list 3 names of records, tapes, or songs that you use in your classroom.

7. What do you consider to be the most difficult aspect of promoting phonemic awareness in an early childhood classroom.

Thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions or concerns, I can be reached at (901)857-6591 or by email at flovelace9@aol.com.
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. First, I would like to learn a little about your background. Can you explain how you entered into the field of education?

2. Can you tell me about your personal educational experience?

3. Can you tell me about your philosophy of early childhood education?

4. How do you encourage early literacy in your classroom?

5. What activities do you use to promote early literacy?

6. Do you use hands-on learning activities in your classroom?

7. Tell me about how you have your classroom organized.

8. How do you define phonemic awareness?

9. Researchers assert that teachers can promote early literacy skills and phonemic awareness using music. Do you think this is true?

10. Tell me how you use music in your classroom.

11. What do you consider to be the most difficult aspect of trying to teach children to read?

12. How do you overcome the barriers of children who do not feel that they are capable of learning and, in turn, do not try?

13. How do encourage children to help one another with learning activities?

14. Can you give me examples from your past teaching experience of moments that stand out—where you really feel that children were grasping the concept of reading?

15. How much do you focus on making children aware of the different syllables that make up a word?

16. How aware are most of the students when they enter first grade of the letters and the sounds that they make?

17. How do you use repetitive books in your classroom?

18. What do you do to encourage parents to work with the children on a regular basis?
Appendix C

Interview Questions (2)

1. How do you modify instruction to meet the individual needs of students?

2. Do you believe that parents should be active participants in their child’s learning? Why or why not? If so, what methods do you use to encourage parents to become active participants in the learning process?

3. As defined by Smith, Hardman, Wall, and Mroz (2004), interactive teaching is an active teaching model that promotes high-quality dialogue and discussion between teachers and students. Do you feel that you use this teaching strategy in your classroom? If so, what are the benefits of interactive teaching?

4. Describe your classroom environment.
Appendix D

Photos of Student Created Pictures

"Bugs" by Margaret Wise Brown: I like bugs, black bugs, green bugs, bad bugs.

I like bugs, black bugs, green bugs, bad bugs.

A bug in a rug, a bug in the grass,
A bug on the sidewalk, a bug in a glass.

Round bugs, Shiny bugs
Fat bugs, Buggy bugs
Big bugs, Lady bugs
Appendix E

Photo of Class Mission Statement Poster

Room 1B knows that God loves us the way we are.
We will act the way God wants us to act.
We promise to talk in a kind way.
We promise to act in a kind way. (Be nice.)
We promise to listen to each other.
Appendix F

Photos of Classroom Library