

PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF EARLY READING

KAREN E. WALKER

ABSTRACT

Research concerning preschool teachers' constructions of early reading has potential to influence teachers' curricular decisions and classroom practice. Six preschool teachers in North Texas were interviewed in regard to what they think about early reading and how they develop these understandings or constructions. The systematic, inductive analysis led to the development of an overarching theme of the interdependent and relational nature of early reading influences. The preschool teachers' goals for students and instructional decisions indicated they held unique and evolving constructions of early reading from their childhood experiences that grounded their pedagogical practices.

The field of early reading has been dominated by an emphasis on research-based practices since 1985 with the publication of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson). Since the 1980s, the federal government has made determined efforts to define early reading and discover why so many children fail to learn to read. In 2008, the National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) made specific recommendations concerning the building blocks of beginning reading. On the whole, NELP provided broad, comprehensive views of the skills necessary for success in reading. Six skills correlate with later literacy success: alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid naming of letters and digits, rapid naming of objects and colors, writing or writing name, and phonological memory (NELP, 2008).

Unfortunately, NELP (2008) minimized crucial contributions of the various skills children must develop as successful readers in their executive summary and recommendations for practitioners to only those findings relating to skills considered the easiest to measure and change (Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Neuman, Burchinal, & Golinkoff, 2009). NELP (2008) did not find skills considered in practice to be crucial to literacy development in third grade and beyond such as listening comprehension and oral language development to predict success with early literacy. Even though NELP (2008) may have national importance, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) defines the reading curriculum taught to early readers (K-2) in Texas and specifies the skills valued by the state's educational policy makers (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2011). In addition, TEA's Prekindergarten Guidelines defines pre-reading for 3 and 4 year olds (TEA, 2011).

The NELP (2008), TEKS and Prekindergarten Guidelines (TEA, 2011) represent paradigms for promoting historical, social, and intellectual contexts based on who holds power and authority in

society (Foucault, 1977). These paradigms occur as the result of *discourse*, a theoretical perspective linking the potential connections between public discourse and individual constructions (Foucault, 1977).

Constructions involve social cognitions at the core of how information is processed and combined to form attitudes, or perceived evaluations, and beliefs, or perceived facts. The trajectory of these mental constructs depends upon the initial formation of conceptual models, how static and kinetic combinations of information intertwine to affect them, and what happens to them as they are reconstructed. Teachers' constructions may be related to classroom practice (Pajares, 1992) and could influence teacher's perceptions, decisions, and classroom implementation. They may shape not only the nature of teacher-student interactions but also students' concepts of early reading. Teachers' pedagogical beliefs may influence the interpretation and value placed on literacy activities. The decisions teachers make are not accidental or random but are rooted in their constructions about how children learn to read and how they may more effectively teach (Fang, 1996; Vartuli, 1999). Even though they may not directly impact the values of society, teachers' constructions have the potential to influence the pedagogy of early reading.

Because preschool teachers share many hours daily with young children, they hold conceptual models about student learning. However, these teachers' voices are not often heard outside of the classroom or in research concerning early reading. Teachers are seldom included in the policy-making process, even though policies directly affect their everyday teaching practice (Edmondson, 2004). Much of the current discourse concerning the practice of early reading instruction comes from policies that dictate the definition and means by which reading is taught and how reading success is measured. In this case, discourse represents the connections between policies related to early reading and preschool teachers' constructions related to early reading and reading instruction. The discourses of schooling in general and early reading in particular provide the context in which teachers generate their constructions of early reading.

GIVING VOICE TO PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF EARLY READING

In this study, Foucault's (1977) work on discourse was used to explain the context of teachers' constructions of early literacy. Literacy is a social construct that exists in relation to the arrangement of power in society. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to better understand preschool teachers' constructions of early reading by giving them voice. The research questions were the following:

1. What do preschool teachers say about their early reading experiences?
2. What do preschool teachers say about cultural and political circumstances that influence their constructions of early reading?
3. What do preschool teachers say about their other life experiences that impact their constructions of early reading?

METHODS

To gain understanding of early reading construction, a content analysis of interview data from six preschool teachers was conducted. Participants were selected utilizing a type of purposeful

sampling known as the unique sample (Merriam, 1998). This selection process was based upon unique characteristics or attributes of the phenomenon of interest; in this case participants were recruited from four childcare centers in North Texas. The schools were selected to provide a maximum variation sample, representing a wide range of education programs and diverse populations.

SETTING

The study took place in four early childhood settings in North Texas. North Texas is rich in diversity, encompassing a broad range of people, cultures, and lifestyles. Early childcare and education programs in the area are equally diverse, focusing on providing services to children from families with a broad range of needs, expectations, and income levels. The four locations were chosen because each school had a unique purpose and serves a distinctive population. Site A and B were located on higher education campuses and served the children of local families, faculty, and students. Lead teachers degreed in early childhood education supervised assistant teachers and supported the observation and training opportunities for students enrolled in college and university child development and teacher training programs. The mission of Site C was to help children from families living in poverty learn English. This non-profit organization provides a unique service to urban children considered at-risk of school failure. Bilingual teachers worked to provide a safe nurturing environment while preserving Hispanic families' cultural heritage. Site D was located on a church campus. The affordable school serves the children of local families and church members. Many teachers held degrees in early childhood. Those degreed in other fields were working on earning credentials, such as a Child Development Associate (CDA).

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were six preschool teachers from four early childhood programs in the North Texas area. The rationale for selecting these six teachers was based on their acceptance of the invitation, recommendations from the school directors, the teachers' experiences working with preschool children, their educational backgrounds, and their willingness and availability to participate in the study. They had a wide variety of professional experiences and teacher education opportunities as well as diverse cultures and ways of being. Many teachers were immigrants and spoke more than one language. The teachers practiced a variety of religions. All teachers held at least a high school diploma and many had, or were working toward, the bachelor degree in child development, family studies, or education. Their professional experience ranged from just a few years to 35 years or more. Most had taught in a variety of public and private classroom settings and were identified with pseudonyms. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participants.

Table 1 <i>Demographics of the Participants</i>						
Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Primary Language	Level of Education	Years of Experience
Kayla	Female	Caucasian	26	English	Bachelor's Child Development	5
Andrea	Female	Caucasian	29	English	Bachelor's Interdisciplinary Studies	6
Lori	Female	Caucasian	47	English, but fluent in Spanish	Working on Child Development Associate	30
Ann	Female	Caucasian	61	English	Master's in Elementary Education	30
Natalie	Female	Hispanic	25	Spanish, but is fluent in English	Bachelor's in Child Development	4
Gina	Female	Caucasian	27	English	Masters in Constitutional Law	11

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Open-ended questions (Spradley, 1979) were used for data collection during the interviews. Each participant was interviewed twice, and the first and second interviews were conducted 3-months apart. Interviews were transcribed and transcripts were coded for incidents of meaning relating to the research questions. To ensure the creditability and accuracy of the induction process, peer debriefing with a research associate experienced with early child education and inductive analysis was used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Participants also received opportunities to review transcripts and check for completion and accuracy (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The themes were grounded in evidence in the interview transcripts. However, the themes represent the researcher's perspective and thus the results were not exhaustive of other potential codes, categories, and themes and may not be transferrable to other contexts or preschool teachers in other states.

FINDINGS

One of the primary goals of this study was to highlight the preschool teachers' voices and perspectives that are rarely considered outside the classroom. This qualitative study was conducted under the assumptions that knowledge is created through discourse; discourse is culturally constructed and circulates throughout society, and discourse positions cultures into

regimes of power. As I desired to give voice to my participants, I recognized that my interpretation of their experiences emerged from my perceptions and the constructions I made based on their worldviews.

Early Reading Experiences at Home and School. The first research question involved exploring what preschool teachers said about their early reading experiences. The findings pointed to the complexity of the influences being woven into the six teachers' beliefs and practices. In response to my interview question concerning their early reading experiences, these preschool teachers indicated two influences that they see as most powerful to their early reading experiences: 1) Out-of-school interactions, and 2) In-school interactions. Constructions of their own early reading experiences from pre-readers, to readers, to teachers of reading was a journey influenced by observing readers, discovering reading, struggling with reading, and engaging in relationships that involved reading with parents, siblings, teachers, their own students and their families. Positive relationships with individuals were more likely to lead to positive relationships with text. While variances were often significant, the participants shared similar early experiences. For example, while growing up, all but one of these teachers had siblings in the home that either read to them or that they read to. These were important events that shaped their constructions of early reading.

Out-of-school interaction. The theme *out-of-school interactions* related to teachers' early reading was derived from the conceptual categories of parents, siblings, and playing school. This theme reflected how the participants experienced reading from a very early age. Judging from field notes that described their engagement and their animation during these responses this theme represented, perhaps, the most enjoyable part of interviewing for my participants. I began each interview by asking the same question, "Starting with your own childhood, could you tell me a little about your early reading experiences." Most of the participants confessed that early reading experiences were not something they had thought about recently, or like Natalie, stated, "I don't remember much." As I continued to probe, they found they could bring to mind more and more information about their earliest reading experiences.

Andrea tried to capture the memory of her parents: "Every morning they would sit around the kitchen table drinking coffee and reading the newspaper." As she spoke, she pointed to the places her parents sat and simulated opening the paper and drinking coffee. Many participants shared similar recollections of watching parents read. Gina stated, "My mom could finish a novel in a couple of days. She read incredibly fast." Natalie, who had trouble recalling anything at the beginning of our interview, shared, "Now I know what she [mother] was reading. Back then, it was just like books, not now . . . what do you call those? . . . self-help books. Now I know she reads that. Before I just thought she was reading books."

Not only did they observe their parents reading, but their family members also read to them. "He [father] would read to us at bedtime . . . every night, and I'm pretty sure my dad made a lot of it up," answered Kayla. Siblings also read to participants. Lori remembered how, "We would sit down and play school. They [sisters] would read to us." Kayla said her cousins "would make up fantastical stories like dad did for me and my sisters."

The earliest relationships with parents and siblings, those behaviors observed as children, are often the behaviors that continue throughout life. While individuals may not always emulate the behaviors learned from family members, those early behaviors do influence future choices and

behaviors. Their families significantly impacted how the participants became readers and constructed meaning in and the value of reading. These family-related attitudes and considerations became embedded in their conceptual frames concerning early reading and the process of learning to read and influenced their decisions and classroom practice. The participants' literacy perspectives were nurtured from the influences of their upbringing and home environments (Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

Often these shared reading experiences were in the context of "playing school," a significant childhood activity for these teachers. Lori explained, "I was always the student; when I got older and had a little sister then I got to be the teacher." Andrea recalled the temperament of her inner-child teacher when she described how she played school with her younger sister:

I made sure she was sitting in her desk. We had a little chalkboard thing that my mom left out for us, and I would write things and have her copy things down on her paper. I was *that* teacher.

The participants' reading experiences with siblings were important. However, the times they shared stories with their parents by being read to, watching their parents read, or engaging in reading activities led to their constructions about reading. All participants shared that their parents read in different forms that included novels, the *Bible*, technical writing for work, self-help books, newspapers, and magazines. Participants' homes contained many texts, and all had access to and used their schools or public libraries. Opportunities to read were available.

The six participants were strongly influenced by their families and upbringing. Andrea shared that, "When my parents were having barbecues or people over, we [she and her younger sister] would go back to this little nook in the backyard. It was covered, a little hideaway in the backyard, where we kept some books." She told me she was very close to her younger sister, and she looked forward to her parents' parties so she could spend time reading with her in this special place.

Kayla discussed her dad fabricating stories for her and her sister. She began to smile and became animated as she spoke:

I remember this one story he would tell us. It was scary . . . about a cheese monster that lived in the forest behind our house. The cheese monster would come into our house and get our cheese. He'd make this noise that sounded like opening the cheese wrapper.

Kayla also revealed that her father was an alcoholic, and these storytelling sessions when he gave her his undivided attention became much-loved chances for her to spend quality time with him.

Ann reminisced, "I do remember the one time my dad read to me. He was sick, and I was sick, and we bonded that way together. And now that you are asking me, I am thinking about that." Ann was very close to her mother, but did not have an opportunity to know her father well. This recollection emerged as an important memory, and the only time she could remember him reading to her. From the six teachers' earliest remembrances of observing their parents read and being read to, the words spoken revealed cherished time spent with family members. For the most part, these happy times led to early reading while playing school with siblings, visits to the library, or retreating to a backyard hideaway.

In-school interactions. The second theme from the data analysis, *in-school interactions* related to teachers' early reading, emerged from the conceptual categories of student-teacher relationships

and learning to read. The participants frequently cited examples of the importance of the relationships they had with their first teachers. While the six participants tended to be content with their early reading experiences, and most recalled pleasant memories, several of the women shared stressful experiences learning to read. My small sample experienced the same struggles as many U.S. children. Only one of my six participants recalled no difficulty learning to read. The other five associated their difficulties with attention, visual reception, phonemic awareness, learning English as a second language, and maturity. All six felt that the relationships shared with their teachers made the biggest impact toward their success in early reading.

Later, as the interviewees described the process of learning to read, the importance of relationships continued to be evident. They reported that they accomplished more and were more likely to cooperate with reading interventions when they felt their teachers cared about them. Andrea shared, "The relationship that I had with my teacher, I felt like it affected everything else. I felt like she [her 1st grade teacher] cared about me." None shared anything about their early teachers' abilities to teach reading, but connected a caring, responsive relationship with their teachers as leading to successes with reading.

As adults, and now preschool teachers, the influences of their early experiences shaped their literate selves. From birth, they interacted with people out-of-school, including their parents and siblings, and in-school with teachers. Their teacher education programs, field experiences, and experiences in their own classrooms continued to form and shape their professional perceptions through a process of generating and refining convictions concerning early reading. Along the way, they uncovered incongruities between their own constructions and what occurred in other classrooms, schools, and more broadly, in the policies and politics that influence reading and reading instruction.

Political and Cultural Influences on Teachers' Constructions of Early Reading. The second research question attempted to uncover the influences of politics and cultural on the teachers' constructions of early reading in their classrooms. I anticipated an overflow of opinions concerning the present state of early literacy instruction. After all, these practicing teachers should be feeling the pressure of the National Early Literacy Panel's (2008) recommendations that had influenced the state's prekindergarten guidelines. As I consider the meaning and implication of the responses I received, I reflect that the content of my questions, the way I posed questions, and whether or not I adequately probed for expanded answers influenced the data I gathered for this research question. Another possible place to look for meaning was in what my participants *did not* say about policy and political influences. These teachers never voiced concern about the overarching educational system or policy directed at educational outcomes. They believed they held the authority over the experiences occurring in their classrooms by presenting activities and opportunities they believed to be beneficial to the students.

As Andrea finished telling me how her observations of her mother's experiences with standardized testing was the basis of her decision to become a preschool teacher, I asked her if she would discuss that further. She responded, "I don't want... [pause] I'm getting on my soapbox." I assured her that was okay. She continued about her mother's experiences, but indicated that she was not feeling any particular pressure concerning her preschool class and policy or political influences, stating that, "politics is something I just don't spend a lot of time on." Two of the preschool teachers appeared visibly uncomfortable when I questioned them about policy and political influences. One replied

that she would rather just talk about reading, and another said that politics were things her parents worried about. Other participants did want to discuss policy and political influences at all. These non-verbal behaviors and attempts to avoid this line of questioning could be as telling as what other participants did say.

Ann, the most experienced teacher, wanted those with political power to visit her classroom. Apparently, she felt that there is a disconnect between their policies and the realities in her classroom. She said,

“They [politicians] need to come visit the classroom and stay for more than 30 minutes. I don’t know if their perception would change, or if they could do anything about it, but I think their eyes might be opened to see what all is involved. You’re teaching, and a child throw’s up. Well, you can’t keep on teaching. You have to be flexible, so you don’t want take it so hard-core that you can’t give any. You’ve got to have that interest, love, caring, and flexibility.”

She was aware of changes to reading instruction. Again Ann,

“Everything has sort of drifted down, especially the kindergartens; they are wanting them to be on the first grade level. They want them to be reading. The district I just left two years ago... they wanted them to be reading on level five or six by the end of kindergarten, which is a higher level. But, they think they are getting them ready for first grade. Which in a way they are, but a lot of kids are not ready for that.”

Kayla explained, “because of the push in grade school for children to master reading early, we are careful to expose children to lots of books.” Andrea, who as a child felt that early reading instruction had been forced on her, shared, “My director has said this several times, ‘Second grade is like fourth grade used to be.’ We’re trying to drive it down more and more. So instead of letting kids play, and have a good time, and develop useful skills... they [policy mandates] are forcing kids to do developmentally inappropriate activities.”

Three of the participants discussed their concerns about standardized testing and a teach-to-the-test mentality, but acknowledged that most testing occurs during elementary school. It was not something this collective group of preschool teachers was particularly concerned about. These responses indicate that policy and political influences were making their way into these preschool teachers’ classrooms, impacting their instructions practices, and possibly reshaping their constructions concerning early reading. Ann explained it best,

It’s that pendulum; it switches back and forth. Sometimes the school districts don’t know what’s best, so you have to take a little bit of this and a little bit of that to make it work in your own classroom. Everything won’t be the cure all, and we just have to do some positive thinking and just do basic concepts of things you know the kids need. And add it to, you can’t give up the public part, you have to do what they require. It’s gotten worse now, because they are testing more. One of my friends said, “They are always testing.” Well they are testing not only for reading, but math, science, social studies. I don’t know how to get away from that because it’s what the State of Texas wants. They want to be on top. I say well, you do what you can, the best you can. And make sure you feel you’ve given the kids a whole year of things you think they need, then it’s up to the next grade level to go on.

The school setting at which the participants taught appeared to have greatly influenced them in the areas of curriculum and program goals. For example, one teacher described the mission of her school as "literacy." She said, "That's our thing; that's what we do." Ironically enough, this same teacher denied offering her students any pre-reading opportunities or instruction. She described instructional strategies involving flash cards, introducing a letter of the week, and initiating vocabulary development activities. Only when I mentioned the word "literacy" did she respond with, "Oh, yes! We do pre-literacy, just not pre-reading." Likewise, another teacher responded that her school did not do letters. While the difference in terminology may only be a matter of semantics, it does seem to imply the teachers and/or their education programs emphasized the static, prescriptive teaching method suggested by the NELP (2008) rather than the kinetic unfolding of emergent literacy. Regardless of the terminology used to describe early reading and the process of learning to read, the findings indicated that children are influenced by their school and home environments and begin doing the critical cognitive work of learning to read during their preschool years. These influences make a vital contribution in these years to children's success as readers.

What became evident in the data was the relationship between knowledge and truth actually being about "relations of power, not relations of meaning" (Foucault, 1977, p. 114). These relations of power are socially constructed and lived out in these preschool teachers' classrooms. Their discourse provided a view of teaching and learning and established a space in which they could operate without being affected by influences from policy and politics and with little desire for altering the discourse. Regardless of the terminology used to describe early reading and the process of learning to read, these findings indicated that children were influenced by their school and home environments, and began doing the critical cognitive work of learning to read during their preschool years. These influences made a vital contribution in these years to children's success as readers.

Other Life Experiences Impacting Constructions of Early Reading. The third research question addressed the preschool teachers' other life experiences that impacted their constructions of early reading and the process of learning to read. How preschool teachers come to know and construct views concerning early reading was the focus of this study. Without exception, these teachers referred to these experiences as influencing their approach to teaching in general and to reading in particular. An examination of history from the perspective of these individuals led to uncovering the patterns about early reading as a personal and professional experience. According to Natalie, life experiences directed her career path, "I didn't really plan on it [becoming a teacher]... we had an option to take an elective [in high school] and they had a course in child development. So, I took that and two more semesters of it. And, I really enjoyed it. That's why I studied early childhood education." And, according to Andrea, life experiences influenced her behaviors in the classroom, "Kindergarten was not a very good year for me. I just remember crying every day and being really sad. It was not good. I feel like it [early reading] was crammed down my throat so much that all I wanted to do was regurgitate it and then be done with it. Maybe that's why I think it's so important now."

These teachers were in agreement that, whether or not individuals realized it, or liked it, the influence of family was powerful in relation to early reading. They also reacted to the cultural environments of the children they taught and their families. All of the teachers reported needing

the support of their students' families to help develop strong reading skills; they could not do it alone. No one teacher seemed to have a pat answer for how to get more families involved in reading activities at home or to appreciate the value of reading to their children. The teachers could not ascertain a pattern for those family members who showed an interest in supporting reading at home and those who did not. The students served by these teachers came from a wide diversity of home environments: some lived in urban areas, thick with poverty, and others lived in affluent, suburban neighborhoods. All of the teachers described having some difficulty enlisting help from their students' families.

No two teachers, even if they worked with the same age group or even in the same preschool center, approached reading in exactly the same way. Though they might have shared the same instructional goals and followed the same guidelines, the teachers made decisions and engaged in practices based on what they knew and believed to be worthwhile for their individual students. The perspectives uncovered in the interviews revealed different beliefs about early reading, including the process of learning to read. From a lifetime of interacting with people, ideas, and things, these preschool teachers learned to construct knowledge about early reading as they engaged in a process of seeking and making meaning from their own personal, practical, and professional experiences. All of these events involved relationships with parents, professors, administrators, fellow teachers, students, and families. The interplay between the authority and power held in these relationships and the discourse afforded to members of these relationships contributed to the eventual constructions of early reading the teachers characterized. Whether these discourses created what the participants held as truth could have added to what the teachers believed to be knowledge and truth (Foucault, 1977).

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore preschool teachers' constructions of early reading. The perspectives uncovered in the interviews revealed different beliefs about early reading and about the process of learning to read. None of the six teachers approached reading in exactly the same way. The themes developed showed there were many ideas that influenced these preschool teachers understanding of early reading instruction (e.g., the students and families they served, the programs in which they taught, or several aspects of their own educational and background experiences).

Learning to read is a critical milestone for children living in a literate society. In the US, reading skills are the foundation for academic success. Researchers and stakeholders have spent a considerable effort attempting to identify components of early reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). However, educational approaches to reading instruction have been plagued by the cliché of the swinging pendulum causing educators to be tugged back and forth during political discourse and the consequences of the policies that emerge from that discourse. Unquestionably, teachers are pressured to provide learning environments that expose young children to precursor skills identified as necessary for later

success in reading (NELP, 2000; Roskos & Neuman 2005). The preschool teachers interviewed for this study understood the importance of supporting young children by providing authentic learning experiences and emphasizing relationships with early readers and through encouraging early readers to develop positive relationships with reading. Even though these six teachers did not express it, it is very likely that outside influences of policy and political circumstances did affect them in pedagogical practice. I was not able to uncover this influence, or at least not as well as I would have liked. I can attribute this lack of information to my unsophisticated interviewing skills and the ideas of shared discourse and relationships.

For the past several years, I have attended classes, read widely, and written broadly for graduate courses about topics surrounding early reading and education policy. While I have focused on more theoretical issues related to early reading instruction and policy, my participants have spent the past several years in preschool classrooms interacting with children in the earliest stages of literacy. They have prepared and presented lessons, spent time one-on-one with children, and encouraged families. Their constructions are grounded in these practical experiences. My worldview has become top-down and philosophical; while theirs remains bottom-up and practical – in the trenches – dynamic, ever changing with the individual needs of the children they teach. Perhaps this suggests why researchers and policy-makers continue to see a gap between theory, policy, and practice (Knight, Lloyd, Arbaugh, Edmondson, Nolan, McDonald, & Whitney, 2011).

IMPLICATIONS

Those who spend the most time involved in education with young children, the classroom teachers, are rarely included in the discourse over decisions that directly affect classroom practice (Edmondson, 2004). Both the positive and negative interactions that occur early in life with individuals and text become embedded in children's future conceptual models of early reading. These constructions have less to do with definitions, policies, and instructional strategies, and everything to do with a caring, responsive relationship with an experienced early childhood teacher focused on helping a child learn to read and a meaningful, personal relationship with text.

From these teachers' earliest recollections of observing their parents read and of being read to, the words spoken revealed cherished time spent with family members. For the most part, these happy times led to early reading while playing school with siblings, visits to the library, or retreating to a backyard hideaway. Later, as they described the process of learning to read, the importance of relationships continued to be evident. The participants reported that they accomplished more and were more likely to cooperate with reading interventions when they felt their teachers cared about them. Andrea shared, "And the relationship that I had with my teacher I felt like it affected everything else. I felt like she [her 1st grade teacher] cared about me." None shared anything about their early teachers' abilities to teach reading, but connected a caring, responsive relationship with their teacher to their success with reading.

These six teachers also considered it valuable to develop a strong rapport with their students' families. "Parents are the first teacher and their participation impacts reading success," stated Ann. They believed relating to the family enabled success in reading to be supported at home. Within the development of every category, an underlying notion of a connection with a person, process, or thing was discovered. Constructions about early reading and learning to read influenced almost every aspect of these preschool teachers' instructional decisions and practice.

In sum, constructions appear to be dynamic and never complete, and early reading continues to evolve. Because I framed this project with the belief that teachers' voices tend not to be heard the early reading discourse, I end this study with the following recommendations for future research. First, an observational case study of a single preschool teacher could facilitate policymakers understanding of the complexity of beginning reading instruction. Second, a phenomenological focus on the constructions of Kindergarten, first, or second grade public school teachers working with children at different stages of the reading process and operating under state standards and accountability mandates could provide insight into the real effect of law and policy on both teachers and students involved in beginning reading instruction.

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AUTHOR

Karent E. Walker, Camp Fire First Texas, Director of School Readiness Excel for Success Initiative, kwalktex1@msn.com