RESEARCH ARTICLE

Examining Families' Early Literacy Beliefs and Practices within a Head Start Program: Building Bridges

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Bridging early literacy learning between home and early education settings requires understanding families' literacy beliefs and practices. In this study, 213 families in a rural Midwestern Head Start program completed The Family Early Literacy Survey, which asked participants to report literacy beliefs and practices using Likert scale-items and open-ended questions. The findings document that families believed it was important for their child to develop early literacy and that they engaged in strategies to support early literacy development such as reading a book with their child or helping them with their homework. However, they reported few home activities related to children's specific early literacy skills (i.e., writing the child's name, learning letter sounds), instead relying on the Head Start program to address the development of these skills. Implications of the findings for building bridges between preschool programs and families to support children's early literacy skills are discussed.

"Somehow we need to bridge the gap between home and school so that reading in one is reading in the other" (Taylor, 1983, p. 95).

Children actively engage in trying to understand the world around them at a young age within the context of their home, community, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). It is within these settings that children's ways of, "talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, integrating, believing, valuing, and feeling" (Gee, 2001, p. 35) begin to develop, providing a foundation for early literacy development. Relying on their family members as their primary models, children begin to acquire foundational literacy skills that are both meaning-focused (e.g. comprehension, vocabulary) and code-specific (e.g. alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness) (Friesen & Butera, 2013; Goldstein, 2011; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). These early learning experiences

provide the foundation for later reading and writing success (Duncan et al., 2007; National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012).

When a child begins attending a preschool program, she continues to be influenced by her environment and the people within it (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Guttentag, 2008). There is evidence that promoting strong partnerships between school and home within early education settings can strengthen the impact of instruction on young children's learning (e.g. Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006), including children's early literacy development (Darling & Westberg, 2004; Sheridan, Knoche, Kupzyk, Edwards, & Marvin, 2011). For example, in a review of 20 different family intervention studies that included a total of 1,583 families, a positive association was found between family involvement and children's early literacy acquisition (Darling & Westberg). In turn, bridging learning between the home and classroom is viewed as an essential component of best practices in high-quality early education (DEC, 2010; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; NAEYC, 2009).

For some children and families, a bridge between home and school can be easily built as the practices within the home compliment both the expectations and learning within the classroom. In her seminal work in which she coined the term "family literacy", Taylor (1983) followed six families who actively engaged in shared book reading, writing activities, and creative play with their young children, creating a rich oral language environment. Upon entering school, these children seamlessly integrated into typical school-based early literacy activities and the families comfortably engaged in activities expected of them for supporting their child's learning at home (e.g. homework, continued book reading at home, ample opportunities to explore and use text).

In other instances, children enter preschool settings in which the literacy practices emphasized within their homes and community contrast with the literacy practices within the school setting. These differences have been captured in several, influential ethnographic works (e.g. Compton-Lilly, 2003; Heath, 1983; Purcell-Gates, 1995; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). For example, an oral language tradition including verbal storytelling and informal chats with neighbors may be more prevalent forms of literacy in some families and communities as opposed to reading and writing of text. Research has also documented that children within some families have limited opportunities to develop early literacy due to challenges (e.g. health, emotional well-being, lack of finances, disability) and/or limited accessibility to resources (e.g. books, time, quality childcare) within their family or community (Foster, 2002; Neuman, 2006; Park, Turnball, & Turnball, 2002). These children then enter preschool programs with different or limited early literacy abilities compared to their peers (Denton Flanagan, & McPhee, 2009; Justice, Bowles, Pence Turnbull, & Skibbe, 2009; Markowitz et al., 2006).

Acknowledging the significance of how families impact children's learning and development in all areas, including early literacy, early care and education programs are urged to involve and partner with families (e.g. DEC; NAEYC). For example, Head Start, the nation's flagship early intervention program for low-income children and their families, has adopted two pertinent frameworks to guide to promote children's learning and engage families. The first, The Head Start Development and Early Learning Framework, outlines 11 domains reflective of the program's commitment to children's holistic development, including physical growth & health, social-emotional competence, creative art, and literacy knowledge & skills (Office of Head Start, 2010). Within the literacy knowledge & skill domain, specific elements including book appreciation, phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, print concepts and conventions, and early writing are emphasized. The second framework, The Head Start Parent, Family, and

Community Engagement Framework, stresses the need for families to be systematically involved in program foundations and impact areas in order to increase family engagement in the program's activities and ensure positive child outcomes (Office of Head Start, 2011).

At issue is how to best involve families in promoting children's early literacy. Historically, functional approaches to family involvement have focused on assessing perceived deficits in a family's home literacy practices (e.g. lack of books, limited writing of text) that must be remedied. In this approach, families are trained to replicate school-like early literacy activities in the home to address the perceived deficits. The sustainability and meaningfulness of these attempts have been questioned as these interventions may undermine families' confidence in their own abilities and do not facilitate a reciprocal partnership with schools (e.g. Auerbach, 1995; Denessen, 2007; McNaughton, 2006; Ordonez-Jasis, 2010; Rodriguez-Brown, 2010).

An alternative approach to supporting family involvement begins by seeking to understand the family and community context of the child with the intent to build from already evident capacities within them (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; McNaughton, 2006). Adopting the funds of knowledge perspective (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), it is assumed that families are competent, resourceful, and have gained meaningful knowledge from life experiences. In this approach, family involvement initiatives seek to make full use of family capacities and strengths to inform school practices (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). An important beginning to this approach is to understand families' literacy beliefs and practices in order to design effective literacy instruction to bridge home-school settings (Bingham, 2007)

Understanding Families' Literacy Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs may be one of the best indicators of the decisions individuals make throughout their lives (Fives & Buehl, 2008). Researchers have examined the beliefs family members hold about early literacy development (e.g. Baker & Scher, 2002; Bingham, 2007; DeBaryshe, 1995; DeBaryshe, Binder, & Buell, 2000; Evans Fox, Cremaso, & McKinnon, 2004; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991; Lynch, Anderson, Anderson & Shaprio, 2006; Sonnenschein, Baker, Serpell, Scher, Turitt, & Munserman, 1997; Spiegel, Fitzgerald, & Cunningham, 1993; Stipek, Milburn, Clements, & Daniels, 1992). An important finding from this research is that families differ in their beliefs about how children most effectively acquire early literacy skills, with some family members favoring practices that promote a more skills-based, phonetic approach to early literacy instruction while others favor a more experiential, whole language perspective. For example, in an early effort, Fitzgerald, Spiegel, and Cunningham (1991) examined the beliefs of 108 parents of kindergarten-aged children using open-ended and Likert scaled questions. The findings suggested that parents with lower reading levels valued early literacy development that was more skill-based in contrast to those with higher reading levels who valued more experiential, whole language approaches. Similar findings have been observed in other studies of families who differ in educational level (Lynch et al., 2006; Stipek et al., 1992) and socioeconomic status (DeBaryshe, 1995; Sonnenschien, et al., 1997).

Families' beliefs about early literacy development may contrast with those ascribed to by early educators. For example, Evans et al. (2004) surveyed 148 families and 53 kindergarten teachers using their Likert scale, Approaches to Beginning Reading and Reading Instruction (ABRRI). Items were designed to capture different approaches to early literacy development (phonetic, skill-based vs. holistic, whole language). While the results indicated that both families

and teachers believed support for children's literacy development was critical, families ascribed more often to skills-a based approach to early literacy acquisition while teachers supported a more holistic perspective.

The beliefs families hold about early literacy development may influence home practices that support children's learning (e.g. Bingham, 2007; DeBaryshe, et al., 2000; Lynch et al., 2006). For example, Lynch et al. (2006) asked 35 parents with preschool-aged children to use a 5-point Likert scale to rank the importance of various early literacy components as they relate to how children learn to read and write. The participants were also asked to name the five most important ways that they helped their children acquire early literacy. The results of the study indicated that families' answers were highly correlated with the self-reported behaviors they used in the home to support literacy development. Bingham (2007) examined the relationship between 60 mothers' early literacy beliefs and their book reading interactions with their four-year-old children using both self-reported measures and observations. The results indicated that the mothers' literacy beliefs were positively related to the quality of the home literacy environment and their book reading interactions with their children. For example, if a mother believed that joint book reading was important in supporting their child's early literacy skills, they were more likely to be observed engaging in this activity with their child and enjoying the activity (e.g. positive affect, verbalizations, and physical contact).

Purpose of This Study

Given the importance of early literacy development, there is a need for continued investigation into how early education settings can effectively partner with families to meaningfully support young children's learning. This is especially important for building bridges with families facing challenging circumstances including poverty, as is the case for children and families enrolled in Head Start. By adopting the funds of knowledge perspective (Moll et al., 1992; Gonzalez et al., 2005) that recognize the capacity and strengths of families, existing literacy beliefs and practices within homes can provide an important foundation to build partnerships that support children's early literacy development (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Clarke Brown, 2013; Office of Head Start, 2010). Specifically, findings about how families view children's early literacy development can be used to design early literacy instruction that bridge learning between families and early education programs.

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1) What do families believe is important for their preschool-aged child to learn about early literacy?
2) How do families describe their efforts to support their preschool-aged child's early literacy development?
3) What do families hope that their preschool-aged child will learn about early literacy within Head Start?

METHODS

Setting

This study was conducted within the Quarry Hills Head Start preschool program (QHHS; pseudonym) located within a rural area of a Midwestern state. The QHHS program serves 281 families in five centers located across a three county service area. Like all Head Start programs, children are eligible to attend QHHS if their family meets the income guidelines. As of 2014, the guidelines stipulated that a child from a family of four was eligible if the family made less than $23,850. Currently, the percentage of families living below the poverty line within the QHHS service area exceeds the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Like many Head Start programs, a family case manager at each of the QHHS centers plays an important role in involving families within the program. These individuals manage family recruitment and eligibility, facilitate bi-monthly family meetings and activities, organize goal-setting meetings with families, and supervise family support for QHHS. The program engages in a conscientious effort to support families in being part of their children's early literacy development. This included sending home weekly "homework" packets consisting of worksheets and games related to classroom literacy activities. A library book was usually sent home with the packets, accompanied by a generic set of questions that the family could use to discuss the book with their child. Further, families were given a list of specific academic, social, and study skills children were to learn in Head Start based on a document about kindergarten readiness from a nearby public school kindergarten program. The list included early literacy skills such as being able to identify all uppercase and lowercase letters, recognize at least half of the letter's sounds, and write their first name.

Participants

All families (n = 281) currently enrolled in the QHHS program were invited to participate in the study. Twelve families had more than one child enrolled in the program and completed one survey. Thus, 269 families were eligible to participate and 213 families completed a survey, representing an 89% response rate.

Family members who completed the survey were primarily mothers (77%) under the age of 30 (63%), Caucasian (87%), and fluent in English (100%). Respondents indicated that they had either dropped out of high school (17%) or had obtained a high school degree or a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) (66%). Nearly half of the family participants did not work outside the home (49%).

Instrument

The Family Early Literacy Survey was developed to address the study's research questions. In the first section, demographic information about the family participant was collected (e.g. name, age, highest level of education, current employment, relationship to Head Start student).

The second section of the survey utilized a revised version of the Likert scale items in the survey entitled Approaches to Beginning Reading and Reading Instruction (ABRRI; Cronbach's

alpha, .70) (Evans et al., 2004; Evans, Barraball, & Eberlee, 1998). This scale asks participants to rate 22 items on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (no importance) to 5 (high importance) according to their importance in learning to read, write, and communicate. The first 14 of these items described early literacy activities, materials, and goals often encountered in early childhood settings. The last eight ABRRI items included strategies that adults might use to support children's early literacy. The scale was modified with permission from the authors so that a picture was included with each statement in order to increase readability (M. A. Evans, personal communication, June 30, 2010). For example, one ABRRI item asked the participants to rate how important it was for a child to have the confidence to guess a word using a picture or topic. The corresponding picture included the word "sun" and an illustration of a sun. A young girl was pictured saying, "I think this word says sun because of the picture!".

In the third and final section of the survey, participants were asked five open-ended questions about the families' literacy experiences, beliefs, and practices. These questions sought to uncover what Edwards and her colleagues (1999) call the "literacy stories" of a family and aimed to illustrate the family's literacy beliefs and practices. Questions included inquiry about the family's daily routines and literacy uses, personal experiences learning to read and write, and expectations about their child's early literacy development in the QHHS program. The final question simply asked families if they had anything additional to share.

Survey Pilot

The Family Early Literacy Survey was pilot tested with a convenience sample of 25 families of preschool-age children to evaluate its usability and ensure item clarity (Fowler, 2009; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Pilot study participants were asked to complete the survey and provide feedback, including general impressions of the survey, suggested changes regarding wording or organization, or additions about anything they felt was important for supporting children's early literacy from a family perspective. Minor revisions to wording and survey format on the open-ended questions were made after the pilot testing.

Procedures

Program staff provided information about convenient times to administer the survey when family members would already be at the five QHHS centers (e.g. picking up children, attending family activities) between the end of September and beginning of October. All families within the QHHS program received a postcard in their child's backpack inviting one member of their family to complete a survey and explaining that in appreciation, participants would receive a $10 gift card to a large retail store and a children's picture book.

During the specified time at each center, families were greeted and directed to the space in the center for survey completion (e.g. a meeting room, foyer, classroom). Depending on the size of the center, 2 - 4 individuals who had completed necessary Human Subjects Approval were trained to facilitate survey completion on site. These individuals were available to read the survey aloud to the participants or scribe responses, if requested. In total, 120 surveys were collected at the Heat Start centers.

For those families who could not attend the face-to-face survey sessions, the surveys were sent home within their child's backpack. The survey included instructions to return the survey to the center upon completion. In total, 89 surveys were collected in this manner. In four cases, the survey was completed over the phone by the first author after the families expressed interest but were unable to come to the center at the given time and/or fill it out themselves.

Data Analysis

To organize data collected, each survey was coded according to center and classroom, and data were gathered on spreadsheets. Quantitative data (i.e. demographics and Likert scale responses) were imported to SPSS, a quantitative data analysis program, for statistical analyses.

Survey responses to the open ended questions were organized into categories initially and then into themes of interest (Creswell, 2002; Merriam, 2009). This was completed first on paper and then using the qualitative software program, NVivo. For example, in responding to the first question about typical activities that involve reading, writing, and communicating, family member respondents often explained ways they read together. Initial categories included *Times Families Read Together* (e.g., We always read together before bed), *Types of Materials Read Together* (e.g., My daughter always wants to read Princess books with me), and *Who Reads With the Child* (e.g., My kids love to read together too). These three categories were combined into one theme entitled, *Reading Together*.

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the themes that emerged and ensure that the perspectives about the data were not biased by the researcher's perspective, three peer reviewers were asked to review a selection of the open-ended questions (20% of all surveys received), searching out counter-examples and providing their own perspective on emerging categories/themes (McMillan & Schumacher, 2009). Ensuing discussion between the peer reviewers and researchers helped ensure that the wording of the theme titles was clear and that there was agreement on how the responses had been organized.

Results

Families' Early Literacy Beliefs

The first research question guiding this study sought to understand what families' believed was important for their preschool-aged child to learn about in regards to early literacy. Within the Family Early Literacy Survey, the ABRRI survey items asked family member to rank the importance of a variety of early literacy skills for their preschool child. Response to the items on the ABRRI scale were negatively skewed (values -0.768 to -2.754, *M*= 1.27) as 84% of all responses on the survey about the importance of various early literacy skills were answered "Very Important" (60.8%) or "Important" (23.2%). A full range of scores in which responses varied from "Very Important" to "Not Important At All" was found in 16 of the 22 items. Items with the highest mean ratings of importance related to learning the alphabet (4.83), using books with easy sentences and familiar words (4.68), and developing confidence to guess words (4.57). The mean and range of all scores for each item are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics for ABRRI Items

Item	*M*	*SD*	*Range*
Practice and learn letters of alphabet	4.83	.456	3-5
Use books with familiar spelling and easy sentences	4.68	.640	2-5
Develop confidence to write in whatever form one can	4.67	.578	3-5
Develop ability to sound out words	4.64	.732	1-5
Use picture cues to read new words	4.64	.634	2-5
Develop oral language as basis for reading-writing	4.60	.619	2-5
Develop confidence to guess words from picture-topic	4.57	.749	1-5
Know letter combinations represent sounds	4.50	.757	2-5
Sound out letter-groups of letters to read new words	4.48	.800	1-5
Develop broad reading interests	4.45	.839	1-5
Develop ability to hear separate sounds in words	4.43	.854	1-5
Practice to immediately recognize words	4.43	.856	1-5
Use books with high interest, natural language	4.31	.845	1-5
Use general word knowledge to read a new word	4.28	.902	2-5
Develop ability to fluently read aloud with expression	4.26	.967	1-5
Divide words with parts-syllables to read new word	4.22	.915	1-5
Think about similar looking words to read new word	4.20	1.012	1-5
Use pronunciation rules to read new words	4.14	1.071	1-5
Use meaning of text read to read new words	4.12	1.068	1-5
Develop personal dictionary with words-topics of interest	4.12	.976	1-5
Skip to rest of sentence for help on new word	4.11	1.004	1-5
Develop accurate oral reading	4.09	1.117	1-5

A factor analysis was conducted to examine the underlying structure of the items from the ABRRI scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was .916 and the intercorrelation matrix of the 22 items showed both high and low correlations (.174 to .729), indicating that the matrix was factorable. Due to the high correlation between items, an initial solution was obtained using the maximum likelihood method and designating a promax rotation (Field, 2009). The extraction of two factors was specified in the method because an initial analysis resulted in two eigenvalues (10.24, 1.87) that accounted for 55% of the variance in responses for all items. The use of two factors was further supported by the change of slope observed in the scree plot after the second point (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). To evaluate the subsequent factor loadings, a cutoff point of 0.4 was used to guide interpretation (Field, 2009).

The resulting two factors did not represent different beliefs about how early literacy was best acquired (e.g. phonetic, skill-based vs. holistic, experiential approach) as it had in past research with the ABRRI scale (e.g. Evans et al., 2004). Instead, Factor 1 consisted of 15 items that predominantly related to specific early literacy skills (Cronbach's Alpha, 0.95). These included items such as sounding out letters to read new words, hearing different sounds in words (phonological awareness), and practicing to immediately recognize words (i.e., sight words). Factor 2, defined by six items, also included items about early literacy development (Cronbach's Alpha, 0.81). However, most of these items related to commonly considered strategies to support early literacy rather than specific early literacy skills. Factor items included statements about

children's confidence to guess words, develop broad reading interests, recognize letters, and write in whatever form the child uses. An important caveat relates to an item asking about oral language development, which loaded on both factors. It may be that oral language is well suited to both categories. Alternatively, families may not have understood what the question meant. Therefore, the item was dropped from the analysis.

Non-parametric statistics were used to further examine respondents' answers within the two factors (Field, 2009). Overall, items were rated significantly higher in importance within Factor 2, which predominantly represented commonly considered strategies to support early literacy ($M = 4.64$) compared to Factor 1 that represented more specific early literacy skills ($M = 4.31$; Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, $p < 0.001$). Education level appeared to influence the importance survey respondents placed on items within the first factor (Kruskal-Wallis, $p < 0.05$). Participants who had completed some postsecondary education (e.g. two year associate degree, four year bachelor's degree) rated these items significantly higher ($M = 4.77$) than those with a high school degree/ GED equivalence ($M = 4.65$) or who had not completed high school ($M = 4.59$). Education level was not significantly related to items on the second factor (commonly considered strategies to support early literacy). Further, there were no other significant relationships between demographics characteristics (age, ethnicity, employment) and response within each factor. The commonalities for each item on the ABRRI and the two subsequent factors are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Two-Factor Structure for ABRRI

Item	Communality	Factor 1	Factor 2
Factor 1: Specific Early Literacy Skills			
Use pronunciation rules to read new words	0.73	**0.94**	--
Use meaning of text read to read new words	0.71	**0.85**	--
Develop accurate oral reading	0.70	**0.85**	--
Use general word knowledge to read a new word	0.68	**0.85**	--
Divide words with parts-syllables to read new word	0.71	**0.80**	--
Sound out letter-groups of letters to read new words	0.58	**0.77**	--
Know letter combinations represent sounds	0.44	**0.73**	--
Think about similar looking words to read new word	0.57	**0.70**	--
Develop ability to fluently read aloud with expression	0.60	**0.65**	--
Develop personal dictionary with words-topics of interest	0.56	**0.64**	--
Develop ability to hear separate sounds in words	0.46	**0.63**	--
Skip to rest of sentence for help on new word	0.44	**0.63**	--
Practice to immediately recognize words	0.48	**0.61**	--
Develop ability to sound out words	0.23	**0.46**	--
Use books with high interest, natural language	0.46	**0.44**	**--**

Factor 2: Common Strategies to Support Early Literacy

Use books with familiar spelling and easy sentences	0.50	--	**0.79**
Use picture cues to read new words	0.52	--	**0.75**
Develop confidence to guess words from picture-topic	0.49	--	**0.73**
Develop broad reading interests	0.41	--	**0.59**
Practice and learn letters of the alphabet	0.37	**--**	**0.47**
Develop confidence to write in whatever form one can	0.23	**--**	**0.42**
Develop oral language as basis for reading-writing	0.37	**0.31**	**0.36**

Note: Factor loadings smaller than 0.40 are represented by dashes.

Families' Early Literacy Practices

 The second research question examined family practices related to supporting their preschool-aged children's early literacy development. The first three open-ended questions focused on these practices as well as experiences that may inform their practice (i.e., family members' personal experiences learning to read and write). For each question, the responses are detailed below and frequency is provided in Table 3.

In the first open-ended question, family participants were asked to explain how reading, writing, or communicating was used in their homes during a typical day. Almost all of the literacy activities described were those completed with, or by, their child. Their own literacy practices or more general literacy uses in their home were seldom mentioned. The most common responses included reading together (67%) and homework, referring at times to the daily Head Start homework (e.g. the "homework" packets the program sent home each week) and/or other children in the family's homework (42%). Over a third of participants (39%) explained that they supported children's language development throughout the day. For example, "We always ask about each others' days" or "We talk about what we see and are doing". Some families also reported using writing-related activities like coloring and drawing, detailing specific activities such as, tracing or writing letters, and specific writing materials such as chalk, paint, or pencils were listed (30%). It is also important to note that there were few responses describing activities to support their child's specific early literacy skills such as learning letter sounds or helping the child write their name (13%).

In the second question survey respondents were asked to identify what they viewed as the most important things they did to support their child in learning to read, write, and communicate. As in the previous question, the most common responses included reading together (62%) or writing-related activities (e.g. painting, coloring, drawing) (37%). Less than a third of respondents (29%) indicated they participated in activities focused on specific early literacy skills (e.g. letter recognition or letter sounds). Of note is the fact that 20% of the responses related to general caregiving behaviors such as providing encouragement and spending time with the child, rather than any activity specific to early literacy.

 In the third question, survey respondents were asked to describe their personal experiences learning to read and write. Over one-fourth (27%) recalled negative experiences such as "I had a hard time with it". Of note was the fact that respondents identified family members helping them learn more often than teachers or school (24% vs. 12%). For example, "My grandmother spent a lot of time with me helping me."

TABLE 3
Family Literacy Survey Open-Ended Responses

Question	Most Common Themes*	Examples of Responses
What activities in your typical day include reading, writing, and communicating?	Reading together (67%) Homework (42%) Communicate with each other (39%) Writing-related activities (30%) Specific early literacy skills (13%)	*"We always read before bedtime."* *"We help the girls with their homework."* *"I talk a lot with my kids – they are all I have."* *"Writing letters to family"* *"Mommy helps Dale recite his ABC's…"*
What are the most important things *that you do to help your child in* Head Start learn to read, write, and communicate?	Reading activities (62%) Writing-related activities (37%) Specific literacy skill instruction (29%) Adult behaviors (21%)	*"Get easy books for her to help read, also reread…"* *"I draw letters and ask her to draw like I did."* *"Letter sounds"* *"Encourage child everyday"*
What do you remember about your own experiences learning to read and write?	Overall negative experience (49%) Overall positive experience (25%) Family memories (24%) School memories (12%)	*"Hard, I was a slow reader….I got very frustrated."* *"I remember I loved to read…It made me feel independent."* *"I remember my papaw (who raised me) teaching me to read at the age of 6 out of a dictionary.*
What should a child learn about reading, writing, and communicating in Head Start?	Specific literacy skill instruction (64%) General interest in literacy (31%) Social/emotional competency (20%)	*"Small words, small sentences, letters, name, be friendly, manners, patience."* *"They should learn that it will be used everyday."* *"Getting along with others."*

Note: Some responses included content that fit under numerous categories. In turn, the percentages do not equal 100% and are instead reflective of how often this type of response appear

Families' Expectations About Early Literacy Learning in Head Start

The final research question sought to uncover families' expectations for their preschool-aged child in Head Start regarding early literacy development. In turn, the fourth open-ended question asked family members what they thought their child should learn about reading, writing, and communicating during their time in Head Start. The majority of responses (64%) listed specific literacy skills including recognizing the alphabet (27%), recognizing and writing their names (18%), sounding out letters and words (17%), and word recognition (14%). Almost a third of the answers (31%) eluded to the importance of developing a general interest in literacy such as "That it is important and fun" and "That it is very important to be successful in the future and that it will make them smart." The second most common responses related to the development of social emotional competence rather than literacy per se. These family members wanted their children to be respectful and learn to control their emotions (20%). For example, one participant wrote, "Getting along with others, being a good listener, and wanting to listen" while another stated, "That it is hard but just keep trying and stay calm."

To provide an opportunity for families to give additional information related to the research questions, the final question asked family participants if they had anything else they would like to share. Over four fifths of respondents left this blank or wrote "no". Of those that did respond, the most common answers related to the positive impact of the QHHS program. One mother wrote how Head Start had been "great for both of her sons," referring to the one that attended the program and his younger sibling, and she reported using the homework packets with both children. Another individual wrote that before Head Start the family did not read a lot but now that her daughter wanted to look at books, "We all read more".

DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore the early literacy beliefs and practices of families with children in a rural Midwestern Head Start program. The results of the Family Early Literacy Survey, collected from a large majority of the families in the program, provide important insights into building bridges related to early literacy between an early education program and the families it supports.

In seeking to uncover the existing literacy beliefs held by families, the survey responses demonstrated a strong belief that early literacy development was important for their preschool-aged children. This was demonstrated by how all ABRRI scale items were ranked as very important for children's early literacy development. This finding alone is significant as both families and the Head Start program agree on the importance of supporting early literacy development. .

Previous studies that examined families' beliefs about early literacy development have uncovered dichotomous views about how early literacy development is best supported (e.g. phonetic, skill-based vs. holistic, experiential approaches). However, the results of the factor analysis for the ABRRI scale (Evans et al., 2004) in the current study resulted in two factors different from the findings in previous studies using this scale. In this study the first factor generally represented specific types of early literacy skills (e.g. sounding out letters, developing syllable awareness) while the second factor described commonly considered strategies for supporting children's early literacy (e.g., encouraging children's interests in literacy, building skills in writing by encouraging early attempts). The fact that survey respondents are the family

members of preschool children who in most cases are not yet undertaking the formal process of learning to read and write may explain in part why the factor structure did not reflect a skills-based phonetic approach or a holistic, experiential approach as specific issues related to how children acquire literacy are not yet relevant.

The factor structure in this study may also be evidence that families in this study were unsure about what early literacy development entailed and how they could support this learning. Overall, survey respondents ranked items pertaining to commonly considered strategies for supporting early literacy significantly higher in importance than items reflecting specific early literacy skills. Further, families were more likely to name a commonly considered strategy for supporting early literacy (i.e., reading a book with their child) as an activity they used in their home than they were to report activities supporting specific early literacy skills. Non-parametric statistics suggested that education level appeared to influence the importance survey respondents placed on items within the first factor. Family participants with higher educational achievements were more likely to rank early literacy skills as more important than respondents with less education. As the majority of family participants in the QHHS program had not pursed higher education, the need to expand our understanding of the influences of family members' own educational experiences on their literacy beliefs and practices is apparent. However, caution is needed in interpreting these findings as the sample with this interpretation given the small sample included only a small percentage (17%), which had completed education beyond high school or a GED.

Family participants reported within the open-ended responses that they currently undertook a variety of activities within their homes to support their children's early literacy development. This included reading together, completing homework, and talking together. It is important to note that when asked how literacy was used within their homes, most responses described activities with their children instead of describing their own literacy uses such as reading the newspaper, making a grocery list or reading information from a computer's website. These findings suggest that these types of literacy activities may not be especially salient in the homes of QHHS families, or at least were not being recognized as important funds of knowledge. Family respondents appeared to believe that their child's early literacy skills would be acquired in the Head Start program. Numerous survey respondents acknowledged their own struggles with literacy and it seems apparent that those who struggled in acquiring it themselves may lack a clear understanding of the processes involved in acquiring literacy. More importantly, they are not likely to see themselves as particularly competent in supporting early literacy development in their children. Under these circumstances, they may stick to what they know they can do such as looking at a book with their child or helping them with homework by sitting with them, leaving more specific early literacy skills to be taught within Head Start.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study to accurately situate the results and promote thought about how to address these issues in further research. First, the study focused on the literacy beliefs and practices of families in one Head Start program that is not necessarily representative of other Head Start programs across the country. It is thus important to use caution in generalizing findings to other Head Start or early education programs. Further research should examine family literacy beliefs and practices in a range of Head Start program types as well as in other early care and education programs.

A survey was chosen as a means to examine the early literacy beliefs and practices of a large community of families. It enabled data to be collected from the majority of families in the QHHS program (89%), which is recognized as a high return rate in social science research. However, there are limitations to this type of data collection. The survey included the ABRRI scale (Evans et al., 2004). This was the first known time that this tool was used with families in Head Start. As the scale was adapted to aid family members' comprehension of questions the nature of the instrument changed and the impact of these changes is unknown but may influence the scale's external validity. Further, assistance was offered to families' completing the survey at the centers. This enabled family members to take part in the study with limited skills/confidence in their own literacy skills. However, this could have impacted participants' ability to respond openly and rather respond in a way they felt was proper (social desirability). Lastly, the families who did not participate probably represent those who are more disengaged from the Head Start community (and may arguably be those most in need of support). In turn, it is these families that may most need partnership with the program in order to support children's early literacy. In turn, further research utilizing other data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, focus groups) and seeking all families' voices would be important to purse.

Further Directions

The study provides some important insight into how the early literacy bridge between families and programs might best be designed and built. Utilizing a funds of knowledge perspective in which the strengths and capabilities of the families' are focused upon, it becomes apparent that there are meaningful places to begin. For example, many family respondents described the importance of encouraging their child, reading together each night, and engaging in efforts to talk with their children. Further, a number of responses recalled the important role of their own families in helping them learn to read and write. This suggests that families view themselves as having the potential to support children's literacy, a role that the Head Start program could emphasize and support.

Like many Head Start programs in recent years, QHHS program has intensified its efforts to support early literacy learning. For example, seeking to involve families in their efforts, early literacy homework packets were being regularly sent home. Many families reported completing this "homework" within the survey as a way to support their children's early literacy. Indeed, such packets may be an important first step in building the early literacy bridge between the program and families. However, it also runs the risk of simply expecting families to replicate school literacy practices without building from their own existing literacy practices and expertise.

The QHHS program and other Head Start programs would do well to identify existing funds of knowledge within families and use this knowledge to inform the design of efforts such as the "homework" packets. This may be a matter as simple as adding a few additional questions to the program's family needs assessments or sending home a questionnaire that seeks to learn about families' literacy stories as the open-ended questions in the survey did. It may also be that Head Start teachers making home visits can inquire about family literacy practices. Efforts can then draw from these responses and seek to build instruction based on what families are already doing.

In our recent work with Head Start families, we have sought to design monthly family projects that connect to classroom learning but also provide opportunities for families to

positively engage with their child within their own routines and practices (Butera, Friesen, Mihai, & Vaiouli, in progress; Friesen, Butera, Mihai, & Palmer, 2012). For example, when focusing on measurement in the classroom, the project encouraged families to look for different measurement tools in their homes (e.g. thermometers, rulers, measuring cups), compare feet sizes, and measure items in their homes with a ruler that was included with the instructions. When a child brought back the project, QHHS teachers provided children with the opportunity to tell about what they did with their family to measure. Further, family members were asked to come into the class and share how they use measuring within their home and at work (e.g. construction worker, baker, seamstress).

It is also the case that "homework packets" or projects as described above can be used to help families learn about supporting early literacy skills. Brief introductions to the activities families and their children are to complete together can include an explanation of the rationale for supporting early literacy skills. For example, in the measurement family project a brief summary of a fictional picture book read in class about measurement was included along with questions that family members could ask their child about the story. There was a brief explanation of why it was important to engage in discussion about stories after they are read. The focus letters in the classroom were provided with instructions for families to look for letters in print in their homes and they were asked to help their child make note of the sound of the letter. Further, families were encouraged to examine different letters and words for their sizes and shapes. In each instance, a brief explanation was provided about how knowing letter names and sounds would help children learn to read and write.

On a large scale, the need for a multi-generational effort to support literacy development seems apparent (Anderson, Anderson, Friedrich, & Kim, 2010; Wasik & Van Horn, 2012). In order to support children's early literacy development, parents must feel competent about their own literacy and their ability to support it in their children.

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