

# **Emergent Literacy: Parental Perspectives**

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**EMERGENT LITERACY: PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES**

**BY**

**MAUREEN ERIN VAAGS-NYHOF**

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University  
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

**Of**

**MASTER OF EDUCATION**

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## Abstract

This qualitative study focused on parental perceptions regarding emergent literacy development as well as the incidence and kinds of literacy that occurred in the home, especially prior to kindergarten entry. The participants included six, two-parent families in which the oldest child was in kindergarten. Two in-depth interviews were conducted with each family during the winter and spring of 2003.

Findings suggest that while families were familiar with some concepts about emergent literacy, there were areas in which information regarding their role and impact were unfamiliar. Parents understood the value of reading aloud and of providing books but held a wide range of perspectives regarding both the amount of time to spend sharing books and the number of books to provide. Parents generally only saw literacy as the ability to decode printed words, and easily entrusted the responsibility for literacy development to the school. There were differences in the literacy activities in which different children in the household engaged, sometimes depending upon age, and other times on personality or character differences. Emergent literacy behaviours were generally perceived as separate from reading, and were not acknowledged as part of literacy development.

This study suggests the need for further investigation into the efforts of schools and social agencies to provide parents with early, frequent, and enhanced information regarding literacy development in the pivotal first five years of life.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Both the kind and amount of literacy experienced at home, especially in the first five years of life and continuing up through the grades, has immense influence on overall reading, writing and speaking development. This early foundation tends to affect many aspects of a child's life and later educational, employment, and financial success (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997; Bloom, Burrows, Lafleur & Squires, 1997; Workforce Literacy Overview, 2002; Krahm & Lowe, 1998; Allen, 1999).

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Each year educators encounter a number of children who come to school with little or no understanding of books and their use (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Despite the efforts of the school to work together with the parents of young children to develop early literacy, teachers continue to deal with the reading problems affecting "typical" students (McCain & Mustard, 1999). It may seem basic and understood that home literacy is vital to early literacy development. Judging from the preparedness of some children, however, many parents are not receiving or using this information (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Hemphill, & Goodman, 1991). Parents may be confused about reading development after attending parent teacher conferences, parent forums, or carrying on a conversation with the teacher at the classroom door after school or in the parking lot. The message about how they might help their child become a better reader is either not being sent clearly, or not clearly received.

It seems that many parents are uncertain about the importance of literacy before schooling, or how to help their children become readers. In a relevant personal experience, I saw a family sitting comfortably together on the couch watching TV. All except one child, that is, their six-year-old son, who was off in another room by himself, wrestling with a book and trying to read. When asked why he was there, the parents explained that his teacher had sent home a book that he was required to read. They were making certain that he read it. These parents knew it was important that their son, who had been identified as a weak reader, spend time reading. They felt they were following the teacher's instructions but failed to understand that their role was to support, not punish their child. The family also engaged a tutor to spend an hour a week reading and working with their six-year-old. They did not perceive that interacting together during storybook reading and making reading an enjoyable part of family life, as suggested by Taylor (1983), was a better route to follow in helping their son become successful.

Some parents may be concerned about their child's readiness for school, the reading achievement level of their child, or their child's readiness for the next grade, but do not have confidence in their own ability to judge reading success. Parents may feel unsure of their child's ability, because, unlike classroom teachers, they are usually unable to compare their child's success with large numbers of other children at the same age and developmental level. They may have questions about how to help with word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension, or about the most helpful way to assist in this development at home (Oglan, 2000). Suggestions that parents help with additional reading, share stories together, and provide a myriad of books seem to help some, but

parents may still not be satisfied. They may continue to feel uneasy about their ability to judge their child's reading success.

When educators meet together and the conversation moves in the direction of helping parents provide literacy support at home, many teachers speak with awareness about the importance of home literacy activities, reading aloud to children, making print a natural part of daily life, and sharing the joy of reading (McCain & Mustard, 1999; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Books on the topic such as *The Reading Solution* (Kropp, 1993) and *The Read Aloud Handbook* (Trelease, 2001) are familiar. Picture books that appeal to young children are also discussed. To educators, the information and the idea of literacy in the home is not new, nor is it difficult to carry out.

Teachers feel strongly that if they could somehow convey to more parents that reading is not just a school activity, and that parents play an important role in influencing their children's reading development, then many of the learning difficulties and low achievement scores that teachers are dealing with, in increasing numbers, could be more easily addressed (Paratore, 2002). These teachers are not necessarily working in inner city, economically disadvantaged areas, where Snow et al. (1991) suggest literacy problems might be more prevalent because of a lack of preschool experiences with print. Problems exist in more affluent families too, families who often send their children to private schools (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Perhaps parents haven't been informed about the value of family literacy. Or, perhaps teachers and schools aren't building effectively upon the literacy experiences that parents have already provided.

### *Purpose of the Study*

In this study I will try to gain understanding of parental perspectives on literacy development and the kinds of literacy activities they engage in with their children at home. I will attempt to determine if there may be a gap or discrepancy between the information teachers provide to parents regarding early literacy development and the parental role, the information parents have received, and their resultant home practices. The data gathered may begin to identify where the gaps, such as those described in the previous scenario may be occurring, and what may be done to address them. The outcome of such a study will help educators: (a) understand parental perspectives regarding engaging in literacy activities at home, and (b) suggest what needs to be done, or done differently, to help support early literacy development.

### *Significance of the Study*

It has been well established in education and research circles that the first five years of life are key to a child's development, particularly regarding language and communication (McCain & Mustard, 1999). There is much research that demonstrates the importance of home literacy, reading to children long before they begin reading themselves, the value of reading as a life skill, and how literacy influences success in life (Taylor, 1983; Workforce Literacy Overview, 2002). There are several variables that contribute to future reading success such as language development, using print functionally, and reading to children (Taylor, 1983) as well as alphabetic knowledge, print knowledge, knowledge of environmental print, invented spelling, rapid naming, visual memory, and visual perceptual skills (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004). The problem is that children continue to enter school without the necessary literacy prerequisites,

including the ability to express their ideas, respond to stories, identify letter names, and understand that it is the print, not the pictures alone, that conveys meaning (McCain & Mustard, 1999). A primary challenge for researchers is to understand the transfer process. Two questions emerge. First, is something lost from the time teachers inform parents about how they can support their child at home to when parents put the information into practice? Second, is there is a discrepancy between teacher- and parent-held views?

### *Family Literacy*

For many years, literacy development was believed to be the responsibility of the educational system. This perception is now challenged. Literacy happens long before children enter the educational system, and takes place in many more situations than Language Arts classes (Neuman & Dickinson, 2001). Early literacy development or emergent literacy is concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally. The term emergent literacy signals a belief that, in a literate society, young children—even one and two year-olds—are in the process of becoming literate (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

Reading development can not be separated easily or completely from language development. The development of oral language is related to the development of thought processes and cognition, whether, as Piaget says, cognition allows for oral language, or, as Vygotsky contends, language facilitates cognitive growth (Pflaum, 1974). The development of oral language and cognitive growth facilitate reading and writing. The former complements the latter.

How children move from only speaking to speaking and reading and writing is not clear to many people. When asked how their children learned to read early, parents often shrug and answer, “[They] just did it” (Taylor, 1983. p. 91).

Although this perception may not provide a complete explanation of literacy acquisition, there is an element of truth to it. Children learn reading and writing much as they learn to speak, often without formal instruction, and often unbeknownst to the individual shaping and molding that learning - the parents (Cullinan, 1992). Parents or older siblings serve as models (Durkin, 1966). Further, just as language develops in routine activities such as eating and getting ready for bed because the same conversations occur over and over, storybook reading influences reading acquisition because the same books are read and reread again and again. Repetition in meaningful contexts facilitates development.

#### *Early Brain Development*

Literacy development as part of brain development, begins long before a child enters kindergarten or begins formal reading instruction. We now know that the development of the brain in the early years sets the stage for both academic competence and coping ability later in life. Early experiences and stimulating social interactions with adults and other children are far more important for brain development than previously realized (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Neuman and Dickinson (2001) reinforce the importance of early literacy preparation finding that reading achievement shows strong stability over time, with only 5-10% of early successful readers developing problems later, while 65-75% of children identified as reading disabled continue to read poorly, despite remedial efforts.

Clearly, much can and needs to be done to ensure literacy success long before children enter kindergarten or grade one and begin to receive formal reading instruction.

According to Taylor (1983), most literacy and parent education programs stress specific activities and practices to assist not only the adults but also their children. Taylor (1983) suggests that more education is needed in teaching parents about “family literacy”, an idea that encompasses all the ways parents, children, and extended family members develop and use literacy to accomplish day-to-day activities, at home and in their community.

Strickland and Morrow (1989) show that early readers come from homes where diverse oral language is used. Literacy is a functional component of life; speaking, reading and writing are associated with daily activities. Activities are talked about, parents and children read together, and family members write notes to one another. When parents read aloud to their children they demonstrate the connection between oral language and reading and writing.

### *The Impact of Literacy*

Literacy acquisition is fundamental to full participation in a literate society (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997). This is especially true as society moves from an industrial-based economy to one that is information-based with ever-increasing demands on literacy. The emerging knowledge-based economy is placing even greater emphasis on literacy requirements; more jobs will require improved literacy skills and, in fact, jobs requiring little or no literacy are disappearing. Literacy skills have an impact on employment, income, health, and future education. “Literacy is strongly associated with

economic life changes and well being. It affects inter alia, employment stability, the incidence of unemployment and income” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997, p. 17). Allen (1999) states “the earnings of the employed university graduates are large enough to cover not only the costs of their own education, but also the costs of those not working” (p. 6). Not only gaining employment, but also succeeding and progressing in employment settings are affected by literacy skills. Literacy training improves employees’ ability to learn and to work together as a team, and ultimately labour-management relations (Workforce Literacy Overview, 2002). Social well being is also affected by inadequate literacy skills, not only by limiting employment prospects, but also opportunities to participate fully in society (Krahn & Lowe, 1998).

More and more, literacy research (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997; Allen, 1999) indicates that it is literacy, and not, as is often promoted by business and government, technological skills, that is the ticket to success in life. Literacy is a powerful determinant in terms of life chances and quality (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997). Studies show that children who are successful readers early often go on to become better educated (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997), have better employment opportunities (Krahn & Lowe, 1998), find better jobs (Workforce Literacy Overview, 2002), experience more success in the changing workplace and earn more money (Bloom, Burrows, Lafleur & Squires, 1997). Literacy decreases the chances that a person will be unemployed, experience

poverty or become dependent on social assistance (Smith, 1999). Those who are literate tend to experience better health (Health Canada, 1998; Breen, 1997), and experience more life satisfaction (Krahn & Lowe, 1998). Most parents want this for their children.

The popular media is placing increased emphasis on the need for parents to become involved in literacy acquisition. The Internet provides a deluge of information. Solutions that address concerns about literacy development are relatively easy to achieve, by making literacy more visible in the home, especially reading aloud and talking about storybook content with children every day.

The question is, given all that we know about the importance of family literacy, why do children continue to come to school lacking sufficient preschool experiences with print? A further question is, why do educators continue to see students who are more and more ill-prepared for school? Why do parents seem unsure of their role in directing their child's reading development? Families do not hesitate to invest in computers, sports activities, and music lessons for the benefit of their children. The return on investing time to share books with children is surely as valuable, and comparably small and simple to implement. Either parents are not receiving or they are unable to operationalize this message, or for some reason, can't act. The continued prevalence of weak emergent literacy skills, reading problems, and special early reading intervention programs would seem to indicate that our increased understanding of how children become literate is not being communicated to parents.

### *Scope of the Study*

As described in the preceding discussion, well-developed literacy skills add all-encompassing value to a child's life. More recently, research organizations and

government agencies have demonstrated the positive effects of being literate in this technologically driven world (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997).

In order to learn more about parental understanding of literacy before formal instruction takes place, six sets of parents of kindergarten and preschool children and infants were interviewed. The questions for study focused on two major areas: (a) parental understanding of reading, and how it is learned or developed, and (b) parental perceptions regarding the role of the home in literacy development. Other information obtained in the interviews explored parental involvement in literacy development as evidenced by literacy activities that families described they enjoyed together as a family.

The initial questions that guided the research were:

1. Are parents aware that they play a role in the development of their children's literacy?
2. Are parents knowledgeable about literacy development, and the characteristics of a literate home?
3. What are parental perspectives regarding what constitutes a literacy activity and the literacy development of their children?
4. What are the kinds and frequency of literacy activities occurring in the homes of families interviewed?

Answers to these questions were sought by conducting a series of one to two hour in-depth, audio taped interviews with six sets of families. These audiotapes were transcribed and analyzed for recurrent patterns.

### *Definition of Terms*

Terms relevant to this study are defined as follows.

#### *Literacy Terms*

*Emergent Literacy* is concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally. The

term emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) is used to denote the idea that literacy acquisition is a developmental continuum, rather than an event that begins at the start of school. "It consists of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of read and writing and the environments that support these developments" (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, p. 848). Learning how to hold a book, start from the beginning, read from left to right and top to bottom, turn pages, look at illustrations, and make appropriate sounds are emergent literacy behaviours. Thus children learn to be literate when they are immersed in a literacy-rich environment.

*Reading Readiness* is the concept that children need a certain set of skills as prerequisites before reading instruction can begin, predominated in the 1930s and 1940s, and persisted until the 1970s. Instead of waiting for a child's natural maturation, educators focused on nurturing that maturation through instruction in isolated skills such as auditory and visual discrimination, left to right eye progression, visual motor skills, and large motor abilities (Morrow, 2001). It was believed that only after these prerequisite skills were developed, could formal reading instruction begin.

*Literacy* is not only reading and writing, but also includes listening, speaking, viewing and representing for the purpose of communication (Wasik, Dobbins, & Herrmann, 2001).

*Family Literacy* is all the ways parents, children, and extended family members develop and use literacy to accomplish day to day tasks and activities, at home and in their community (Morrow, 2001).

### *Neurological Terms*

*Neural Pathways* are a pathway of connections that form from the nerve cells or neurons to the brain to allow the brain to recognize signals from environmental stimuli (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

*Synapses* are connections formed in the brain. In response to stimuli from the environment through the sense organs, neurons form these connections that allow the brain to recognize the signals of the neural pathways connected to the sensory organs (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

### *Phonological Awareness Terms*

*Phonemes* are the smallest units that make up spoken language. They combine to form words, but are not necessarily associated with only one letter. *Stop* has four phonemes, while *check* has three (Ehri & Nunes, 2002).

*Phonemic Awareness* refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes into spoken words. The skill requires children to be able to isolate, identify, categorize, blend, segment and delete sounds (Ehri & Nunes, 2002).

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

In an informational society literacy is fundamental (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997). This is especially true as we see our world develop from an industrial to an information-based community, accompanied by increasing demands on literacy for full participation and economic benefits. The perception that literacy is the responsibility of schools is presently being challenged. Becoming literate is thought to start at an early age, long before formal instruction in reading and writing begins. Early literacy-related experiences, especially with parents, are most important in preparing children for formal reading and writing instruction in school (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Early literacy development or emergent literacy is concerned with the earliest phases of literacy development, the period between birth and the time when children read and write conventionally. The term emergent literacy (Teale & Sulzby, 1986, Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) comes from an understanding that literacy is an ongoing process. All children are in the process of becoming literate, even in babyhood.

#### *Language, Cognition and Reading Development*

##### *Language Acquisition*

Regardless of culture, ethnic or socioeconomic background, most children are born into a language rich world. They see and hear language all around them, in speech directed at them, in speech directed at people in their presence, in rhymes and songs, in watching television and in listening to the radio (Weinberger, Hannon & Nutbrown, 1990). To understand how a child accomplishes the complicated process of language

acquisition without any formal instruction, the first year of life, before speech begins, must be examined.

### *Behaviourist Views*

According to behaviourists, children, guided by their parents, make sense of their surroundings through a process of operant conditioning. They learn how to manipulate their environment to find explanations and make predictions (Gibson, 1989). They are also very social creatures, showing preference for humans and human voices. They are able to recognize and acknowledge important adults in their lives. This connection is the beginning of communication. Sounds made by the infant are often echoed back by the parent. The characteristics of conversation are present, with turn taking and full attention given to each participant.

Developing the ability to communicate verbally is somewhat dependent on the caregiver. While babies are busy trying to make sense of their world, adults are predisposed to attach meaning and intention to their behaviour. "The baby smiles and [the mother] is pleased that the baby is happy. The baby looks and she follows his or her line of regard and tries to see what the baby is interested in" (Wells, 1986, p. 34). While parents treat their babies as if they had intentions, babies, in the process, do come to have them. They learn that their behaviour can affect their environment, and they are communicating. Parents influence the behaviours that cause change. The actions that parents see as meaningful are the ones babies respond to, and therefore the ones babies learn to use to manipulate their environment. "Babies begin to select those [sounds] that are important and to eliminate those that are not. "'MaMa,' for example, will be retained, for it creates a response" (Strickland & Morrow, 1989, p. 17). Toddlers learn that they

can control the sequence of turns as well as elicit certain types of responses by producing particular types of behaviours themselves.

Additionally, repetition makes up a large part of an infant's life. The regular cycle of feeding, dressing and bathing in the same settings with similar people, provide opportunities to make connections between all the elements present (Wells, 1986). The ability to make predictions, and the satisfaction experienced when predictions are fulfilled allow infants to begin to construct a model of their world:

There is more than one viewpoint on how this base of communication develops into spoken language, after that first year. Skinner's behaviourist model maintains that language is learned through environmental conditioning and imitation of adult models. A word is heard, imitated, rewarded by the adult, and therefore repeated. Thought is an internal, unheard of part of language. This model does not explain the speed with which speech is learned, nor does it allow for the invented language of children (Strickland & Morrow, 1989, p. 17).

#### *Nativist Views*

There is a second theory of language acquisition that assumes an opposing stance. Nativists believe that every child is born with an innate ability to acquire language. Language is natural and can develop without adult modeling. According to Lenneberg (1967), there is a biological element that gives babies the necessary knowledge to construct structures. The invented language that young children often use supports this view. Children will develop rule-governed systems of language usage, generalizing certain forms, such as pluralizing all words with 's' like *feets*, or making all past tense words end with *ed*, as in the example, *My daddy teached me*. These words are not learned by imitation, as no adult would use words like *feets* or *goed* (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

### *Interactionist Views*

Interactionists believe language development fall in between the views of the behaviourists and nativists, and propose that language development results from a combination of both genetic and environmental factors. Interactionists believe that there is an inborn ability to produce language that combines with caregiver interactions. The thinking process also has a role in this theory. The child's ability to think helps children speak, while language and social interactions with adults encourage thought and concept development (Strickland & Morrow, 1989).

### *The Role of Cognition*

Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner examine the relationship between language and cognitive development and the effects one has on the other. These connections are reviewed by Pflaum (1974).

In Piaget's theory, cognitive development determines the course of language growth. Language begins after the child has begun to make sense of his or her world by assimilating new information into what is already known, and by changing pre-existing thought patterns to accommodate the new information. The words first learned by children accompany their actions or observations, but do not determine those actions. Piaget suggests that the functional use of language can only develop to the level of cognitive growth. "Cognitive development determines the course of language growth" (Pflaum, 1974, p. 6).

Vygotsky's work has several contrasts to that of Piaget. His study would suggest that both a child's language and cognitive growth is stimulated by dialogue between adult and child. Language structure is learned long before the child develops full conceptual

understanding of that language structure. "For Vygotsky, the model provided by adults is necessary to teach names, to demonstrate language structures to young children, and to provide practice. From the adult model, children acquire form and structure which are then the organizing sources for the structuring of thought" (Pflaum, 1974, p. 6).

Bruner positions himself somewhere in the middle regarding the role of cognition in language development. He believes that while language does play a significant role in stimulating thought, before language can become active in that role and before acquisition can proceed normally, a child must have both developmental opportunities and successful social interactions. The complex strategies that children use in acquiring language also become strategies available for cognitive learning, further stimulating cognition once language learning begins. Language also helps in general cognitive development because of its abstract nature. Categorizing objects according to inherent characteristics is a cognitive skill that is paralleled in language. In language development, the word is initially the object. Later the child learns that it is the name for an object and can apply to other similar objects as well. Generalizations and categorizations begin to occur (Pflaum, 1974).

For adherents, understanding brain development and its process from birth is also helpful in understanding language and literacy development. Interactions with parents or primary caregivers in the first five to six years of life provide important stimulation to the production of synapses and neural pathways, making connections from the signals of the brain to the sensory organs, touch, vision, sound, pain, taste, smell, temperature and positioning. While the brain is being wired in the early period of development, there is an important pruning process occurring, removing neurons, synapses and even entire

neural pathways that are not being stimulated. Those that are not used are eliminated (McCain & Mustard, 1999). When important neurons do not form connections in those vital years, they can degenerate, making it difficult to form a connection later in life, when a child enters school, for example. “Conversely, when a signal reaches a specific threshold something extraordinary happens to that synapse. It becomes exempt from elimination and retains its protected status into adulthood” (McCain & Mustard, 1999, p. 27).

Parents and caregivers influence the development, elimination or stabilization of these neural connections. Literacy begins in the family, and parents and caregivers are each child’s first and most important teachers (Thomas, Fazio & Stiefelmeyer, 1999). Reading with a child at home plays an important role in a child’s success with language and reading (Honig, 1996). The critical years for language and cognitive skill development start before age one and begin to wane by age four (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Leaving literacy development up to the school, when a child is almost at the end of those early intensive brain development years, can make learning to read a difficult, painful, perhaps impossible process for a child.

### *Stages of Language Development*

For the purpose of explanation, according to Wells (1986) the development of language can be described in stages. Wells (1986) separates his stages based on skills acquired, while Strickland and Morrow (1989) describe their stages according to approximate ages, and the language development that occurs within those age ranges.

### *Wells: Acquired Stages*

Wells (1986) suggests five stages in language development. In stage one, utterances communicate what is being referred to, and what is to be done about it. Both meaning and function are the focus. The functions are always expressed as call (to obtain somebody's attention), ostension (to direct attention to an object or event), and want (to obtain some object or service). Utterances are limited to one or two word phrases.

Stage two, according to Wells (1986), is characterized by questions. The first are usually "where" and "what" questions. Other developments are the onset of meanings that have to do with changing location, as well as the emergence of grammatical structure.

In stage three, questions are well established, although still signaled only by rising intonation rather than grammatical structure. Words or phrases are used as imperatives that elicit an action—*mend it*, for example. Also appearing are verbs that refer to people's mental states, such as *know* and *listen*. There will be references to events in the past and occasionally to the future.

In stage four, interrogative and negative sentences appear, requiring the integration of auxiliary verbs. *Do* is the first auxiliary verb to be used followed by *can* and *will*. Further grammatical developments include complements to psychological verbs like *know*, and the qualification of noun phrases by relative phrases or clauses such as *the pen that he gave me*.

By stage five, the major linguistic systems are in place. The child can create conditional or hypothetical statements, and make utterances such as *you got to do...* that formulate the action to be performed. There is deeper understanding of time frames,

using certain times or events as points of reference (*before dinner, until bedtime*).

Aspectual distinctions become commonplace, habitual (*Daddy's always late*), repetitive (*He kept on banging on the door*), and inceptive (*The snow's beginning to melt*). While at previous developmental stages adding length to utterances was typical, in stage five there is evidence of greater economy of expression and cohesion.

#### *Strickland and Morrow: Age and Stages*

Strickland and Morrow (1989) advocate a developmentally-based stage theory based on the chronological age of the child. In the birth to one-year stage, babies play with sounds, then begin to eliminate those that are not recognized as important. *Da Da*, for example, will remain because it elicits a reward. At nine months, single words, sounds, or several sounds are used to express whole ideas. Common daily words become part of children's vocabularies.

The stage represented by ages one and two is characterized by a year of language growth. The words and gestures of caregivers are imitated. Single words are joined together, spoken in a telegram format, which is referred to as "telegraphic language"

By the two to three year old stage, children can use up to 1000 words and understand even more. More traditional and complex forms of oral language are used, evolving out of the telegraphic stage. Children begin to use many words to describe one object or idea.

In the three to four year old stage, complex sentences are used regularly. Rule governed language generalizations become apparent (*I wanted to the zoo on my birthday*). At this age children have a 1500 word oral vocabulary.

In the four to five year old stage, children's language contains most of the elements of adult language, using a vocabulary of about 3000 words. A child will begin to share about her life, speaking as if words and their connected behaviours were as one. And by ages five to six, adult and child language are very similar. Language is creative and sometimes humorous.

For all intents and purposes, children learn language because they are immersed in it, supported in it, and encouraged in it. It is accepted that language is learned "naturally", not by any formal instruction. Efforts are encouraged and gradual development accepted as being intrinsic to how children learn to talk.

Parents talk with their children continually, and anticipate meaning in all utterances. Parents talk while dressing the baby, feeding and bathing her. They fill every waking moment with the sound of language. Most believe that the child doesn't understand, but continue to talk anyway. From that model babies learn that sounds have meaning, and that language makes things happen. Children's first attempts at language, imitating parental models, sound quite different than utterances in the adult word, but efforts are praised and positively reinforced. Children pick up on the rewards of producing sounds (Cullinan, 1992). Their language develops within a social context. There are parallels with reading acquisition.

### *Language and Reading Development*

Reading development can not be separated easily or completely from language development. The development of oral language is related to the development of thought processes and cognition, whether, as Piaget says, cognition allows for oral language, or, as Vygotsky says, language facilitates cognitive growth (Pflaum, 1974). The

development of oral language and cognitive growth facilitate the development of reading and writing. The former acts as a complement to the latter. Children “who explain, explore, argue, and play with language and ideas...grow as writer and readers” (Diaute, 1993, p. 12).

Phonemic awareness is a further vital link in the process of language to literacy development. Phonemes are the smallest units that make up spoken language. They combine to form words. “Most words consist of a blend of phonemes, such as *go* with two phonemes, *stop* with four phonemes, or *check* with three phonemes” (Ehri & Nunes, 2002, p. 110). Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to focus on and manipulate phonemes into spoken words. The skill requires children to be able to isolate, identify, categorize, blend, segment and delete sounds (Ehri & Nunes, 2002). Oral language development and phonemic awareness work together in helping support literacy development. There is a positive correlation between language and future success in reading (Stickland & Shanahan, 2004).

### *Emergent Literacy*

How children move from only speaking to speaking and reading and writing is not clear to many people. Although the perception that reading ability develops spontaneously is not widespread, there is an element of truth to it. Many children learn reading and writing without much formal instruction, much like they learn to speak. What is not consciously understood is that it is this social interaction that fosters reading development. Parents and other caregivers shape and mould learning during the preschool years.

As Cullinan (1992) suggests, "Put simply, reading is getting meaning from print. There is really nothing simple about the process, however, but [this definition] makes it easier [to] understand how it happens and where [it is] headed" (Cullinan, 1992, p. 9). Reading is a complicated process that is carried out in a variety of ways depending on the reading material, or the situation. The process is very complex. There is fluidity, a non-linear process, as words are identified and ideas understood. Ideas are grouped and readers make overall sense of the text.

Rummelhart (1994) suggests that readers use a whole set of knowledge sources to facilitate word recognition; syntactical, semantic, orthographic, and lexical. The brain continually scans this input in relation to what is already known to predict upcoming words, confirm meaning and interpret text.

What is astounding is that children already possess all the skills they need to learn to read before they actually begin (Smith, 1985, p. 13). "Learning to read involves no learning ability that children have not already exercised in order to understand the language spoken at home or to make sense of the visual world around them" (Smith, 1985, p. 13). Early sensory stimulation lays the basis for language and later literacy. The brain does not build new centers at age five or six solely for the skill of reading (McCain & Mustard, 1999). As suggested by Clay (1989) and Vellutino and Scanlan (2002), the difficulties of most beginning readers are influenced by experiential and instructional deficits, not neuro-developmental problems.

Written language must be meaningful and useful to children striving to learn. "We have learned that we need to use whole words, not just sounds to teach reading, so that it makes sense to the child" (Cullinan, 1992, p. 10). Formal instruction or reading

programs designed to teach reading by breaking reading into small tasks, using sounds and letters, often just get in the way of learners. Such programs view reading as different and separate from speaking. Many have the perception that reading is a skill that is taught in school, not at home, that learning to read requires an educator, a textbook, and a reading program. Surprising to some, however, is that if parents did the same things they did when teaching their children to talk, their children would learn to read and write naturally, too (Cullinan, 1992). As suggested, parents speak to their children immediately after birth, surrounding them with language, even though they are too young to understand or respond. Parents provide the models that enable infants to attach meaning to words they hear. When young children try to imitate parents' words, the efforts and approximations are praised and rewarded. The same can be true with reading. If we surround children with books to demonstrate the importance of print, model reading by reading to them, and encourage their attempts to read, reading can come as naturally as language. Children begin to talk because of the need to communicate, to manipulate their environment, to understand and be understood. Children will also want to read if they see it as meaningful, necessary and helpful in making better sense of their world (Lenhart & Roskos, 2003).

The elements critical to the development of reading abilities are the same as the ones needed for language. Reading, like language, evolves in stages. Early stages of reading, like young children's efforts to talk, resemble mature reading only in limited ways. Also, just as children learn language with guidance and modeling from adults, reading is learned through regular exposure to literacy activities modeled by and shared with family members (Lenhart & Roskos, 2003). Long before children are ready to focus

on the print in books, they may possess large amounts of knowledge about books.

Learning how to hold a book, start from the beginning, read from left to right and top to bottom, turn pages, look at illustrations, and make the appropriate sounds are skills that children can learn, long before they recognize the letters, words, and sentences on the page. Their attention spans develop and they realize that print has meaning (Doake, 1988).

Weinberger, Hannon, and Nutbrown (1990) have identified these and several other positive emergent literacy activities in which emergent readers engage. Parents might encourage or watch for their children engaging in these activities, such as making up and down, side to side, or circular marks on paper, holding a pen like a writer, moving a pen across paper, 'writing' frequently, saying 'I'm writing', giving meaning to marks, writing letters from their own names, drawing simple human figures, asking for meaning of environmental print, asking questions during a story, telling 'stories' about pictures, knowing that books have authors and titles, and recognizing environmental print found on food containers, advertisements and signs.

Children do not learn language by being introduced to individual sounds and words until they gradually build up enough to put together into sentences, and then stories. "It makes more sense to describe children's language in terms of the ideas they seem to be expressing, rather than in terms of the inadequate structural devices which they employ" (Harris, 1990, p. 30). Why then, would some think that we should teach reading this way? It takes the purpose out of language. Children speak to communicate, and make meaning. Reading and writing are there for the same purpose. If we remove the functionality of literacy, what motivation is there to learn it?

As indicated in the preceding sections, literacy develops in supportive family environments, long before formal schooling. The question is what characterizes a supportive home environment?

### *Family Literacy*

According to Taylor (1983) most adult literacy programs, or parent education programs stress specific activities and practices to assist reading, for themselves or for their children. Taylor (1983) suggests that more education is needed in teaching parents about “family literacy”, an idea which encompasses all the ways parents, children, and extended family members develop and use literacy to accomplish day-to-day tasks and activities, at home and in their community.

Parents may not know how their child learned to read, but there are common characteristics in the lives and homes of most early readers; experiences and environments that serve as the encouragement needed to allow children to learn to read.

Strickland and Morrow (1989) show that early readers come from homes where diverse oral language is used. Literacy is a functional component of daily life; speaking, reading and writing are associated with daily activities. Activities are talked about, parents and children read together, and family members write notes to one another. When parents read aloud to their children, they demonstrate the connection between oral language and reading and writing.

In studying six families with a child considered to be a successful reader by parents, Taylor (1983) points to five home attributes that contribute to successful reading and writing. These elements include, talking with and listening to children; perceiving

pre-reading children as readers; not accepting the possibility of failure; using print functionally in life and reading to children

### *Conversation*

Taylor's first point, talking and listening, has obvious connections with oral language development, but also contributes to literacy development. Parents give children the confidence to communicate, developing vocabulary and elaborating to facilitate understanding. The talking and listening that was observed by Taylor (1983) often revolved around literacy events. Parents would share an interesting newspaper article with a child, displaying the value of reading the news. Extended discussion occurred during storybook reading, about the illustrations, how the story related to the child's life, and making predictions about story events. This added further meaning to the reading itself, the conversations facilitating both language and cognitive development. When parents listened to what their children wanted to say, they also modeled good listening skills, thereby strengthening the ability to attend and leading ultimately to better emotional control (Stanley, 2004). Again, listening confirms to children their self-worth and fosters the feeling that their contributions are valuable and meaningful.

### *Perception of the Child*

The second attribute associated with the homes of successful readers also contributes to confidence and positive self-perception. Parents who perceive their pre-reading children as readers include them in the world of literacy rather than separating them from this "bigger person" activity. The children are not afraid to try reading because they are readers, as they have been told by their parents. These children are in the beginning stages of reading development. They know how to hold a book, look from

left to right, focus on the print and pictures, and compose a story as they proceed (Sulzby, 1994). Their efforts are praised and encouraged, which empowers them to delve even deeper into the world of reading.

### *Attitude*

Because reading was an essential, vital part of the homes of successful readers, failure to read was not an option. The parents in Taylor's (1983) families had not even considered, let alone accepted the possibility that one of their children might not learn to read. To them, reading was like eating and sleeping, necessary for survival (Morrow, 2001; Stainthorp & Hughes, 1999). The value of this attitude can be seen in a situation where the opposite message was sent:

Jack (an eleven year old boy, brought to Taylor in a clinical teaching situation) was eager to learn and made surprising progress during the first four weeks of lessons--and then he quit. He came each week, but showed no interest in the activities.... At the final meeting, Jack's father came with him and we talked. Not knowing the circumstances, I spoke of Jack's sudden change of heart. His father leaned forward and said he had told Jack not to get so excited if he could not read, and then he added that Jack was like him, and that he could not read either. His father told him that he could not learn to read and so he gave up (Taylor, 1983, p. 82).

### *Functional Literacy*

All the children in the six families Taylor (1983) studied were readers, usually avid readers. This was, no doubt, because they saw reading and print as a necessary part of life. They had no choice but to read in order to live with their families. Print was used functionally in many areas. Notes and messages were left with instructions or information, telephone numbers and calendar dates were recorded, game instructions had to be read, magazines and newspapers were always available and shared. Being made aware of print in this way carried over to the children's play, where they made signs,

menus, advertisements, organized clubs and imitated real life. Print was always meaningfully integrated rather than separated from daily life. Parents of early readers didn't often view the literacy experiences they offered their children as attempts to promote reading, but rather thought of them in terms of social objectives such as running the household smoothly, promoting positive interpersonal relationships, and teaching responsibility or manners (Morrow, 2001). Neuman & Roskos (1998) contend that it is important for parents to interact with their children in authentic literacy tasks in which they can make a meaningful contribution such as "adding their 'writing' to a greeting card or selecting shopping items by brand name". (p. 129)

### *Reading to Children*

The last of the attributes of successful reading in the home identified by Taylor (1983) was reading to children. In these families, children were read to consistently and continuously. Some parents began even before the child was born, others as soon as the baby could focus her eyes. The children learned about story format and the mechanics of reading a book very quickly, moving from left to right across the page, knowing front from back, and turning pages. Reading aloud continued long after the children learned to read themselves. Storybook reading had become a time of family or parental closeness, security and safety. Children learned that reading was an enjoyable, fun activity, not drudgery or work. Great benefit was derived from reading aloud, for both children and parents (Oglan, 2000).

Reading aloud to children is by far, the most important point taken from Taylor. So many benefits are derived from parents reading aloud to their children. The closeness, security and positive feelings between parent and child are only some of those many

benefits. Talk connected to the story is also critical. Cullinan (1992) states that the most important thing you can do to make your child a reader is to read aloud stories and poems -- the more the better!" Strickland and Taylor (1986) maintain that children who come from homes in which storybook reading takes place have an educational advantage. They are more likely to read before formal instruction, or will learn to read with ease when instruction is received. "Reading aloud to a child is the single most important factor in raising a reader" (Paratore, 2002, p. 50). Children can and will learn to read "naturally", as they learned to speak, but only if the same conditions that were applied to the speaking situation are applied to the reading situation.

This is not new research. In an article published in 1898, Harriet Iredell described how children seem to make the same natural progression in learning written language as they did in learning oral language, provided similar conditions were present (Doake, 1988). Later in 1908, Edmund Huey stated that the secret of children learning to read as naturally as they learned to speak lies in the parents reading to and with the child (Doake, 1988). Doake (1988) himself said that children need to be surrounded with books to increase the likelihood that books will become a natural part of living. Despite the complexities of the reading process, helping our children learn to read is as simple as reading to them every day.

A secure environment allows many other benefits to occur. Within a safe situation, children will take more risks with reading, therefore developing and acquiring more skills than they might in a more uncertain situation. Their efforts to read and understand print, or later, understand new concepts and words are encouraged and praised by supportive parents (Taylor, 1983).

Reading with children opens the door to discussions and questions on topics or issues that may not come up naturally otherwise (Cullinan, 1992). For example, books about different races or cultures can be a springboard for discussions on differences, respect, the child's own historical background, or the new family on the block. "There is a backward and forward flow between books and what happens in real life. Children use real life experiences to help them understand books and books help them to understand real life" (Cullinan, 1992, p.15).

Children need to see that reading books with their family is part of the family's fun, part of their leisure activities. One parent in Taylor's study talked about "reading stories silly".

You change the words around. You pick a story they're familiar with and, you know, "It was the night before Christmas and all through the house the elephants were tramping." And they howl. They think this is absolutely great. And you know, "I ran to the window, threw up the sash and fell out." They think this is absolutely ridiculous (Taylor, 1983, p. 70).

Learning that reading is fun and that there are exciting stories to be found in books builds the desire to read (Cullinan, 1992).

The academic and mental benefits that come from reading aloud are also numerous. Children absorb so much more than adults are aware of. When a child is sitting next to a parent, listening to a story, there are many more activities going on than simply enjoying the story.

As their language develops, children also learn that written language is different from spoken language. For most people, written and spoken are the two form of language they will know and use. Written language uses different words, different kinds of sentences, more structured and often more complicated, with different punctuation to

express meaning. Children become aware of this if parents read to them, especially if they can look at the book as it is read (Cullinan, 1992). They are exposed to richer language than the child who rarely experiences the language of books.

Beyond the differences between written and spoken language, are the differences within print. Being read aloud to from a variety of books and poems helps a child to learn the different uses of standard English in the written word. "[Children] will develop a sense of how stories are constructed" (Strickland & Taylor, 1986, p. 39) how fairy tales, poetry, fiction, newspapers, and non-fiction books all use written language differently to get the best meaning.

The perception that reading aloud to children stops when children reach the point of reading independently is incorrect. Children can listen on a much higher level than they can read. They can understand more sophisticated and complicated books than the books they can read alone. In doing this, parents can expose the children to vocabulary and concepts they would not understand on their own. If they don't understand a word or concept, the parent is present to clarify. Reading to children gives a preview of a book that they may then decide to read themselves later on. And reading books above the child's reading level encourages them to choose more complex books and stretch their own reading skills (Cullinan, 1992).

We begin speaking to our children as soon as they are born, or before. Despite the fact that they are unable to understand or respond, we continue to dialogue with them. They don't understand the language we speak for several months after birth, yet we talk. Yet many parents feel that reading storybooks is something to be left until the children can understand, or something to be restricted to the confines of school. "Most people

can't imagine reading to [young children]. And that's sad. If a child is old enough to talk to, she's old enough to be read to. It's the same language" (Cullinan, 1992, p. 28).

Opinion on when to begin reading to your child varies from person to person. The title of David Doake's book *Reading Begins at Birth* (1988) expresses his belief and tells the story of how he began reading to his son even a few months before he was born. In Taylor's study parents also spoke of reading right at birth, or beginning as soon as children could focus their eyes (Taylor, 1983). The common element underlying most expert opinion is that it is necessary to begin early, long before the child fully, or even remotely, understands the process of reading. If parents wait until the child is already walking and running, when the child just wants to move, it will be much more difficult to foster the closeness and comfort of reading aloud (Trelease, 2001).

It is important to read to children regularly and often. The amount of time is less important than the regularity (Kropp, 1993). Both Kropp (1993) and Cullinan (1992) recommend finding at least fifteen to thirty minutes a day to read with children. More time is always better, but any amount of time will derive benefits. If reading time is scheduled and given priority, children will not let parents forget (Cullinan, 1992).

While regular and routine reading is vital, spontaneous reading should also occur. Children need to see enthusiasm shared when they initiate a literacy event, whether that be asking for a new book to be read as soon as it comes home, or interrupting parental work or activities (Taylor, 1983).

The time to stop reading aloud to your child is never. The purpose of read-aloud-time changes as children become older, but the value remains the same. These older children still need to feel important, need guidance in making sense of their world, need

to talk about real life experiences and need to have questions they encounter in books answered. And they can still understand and listen to more than they can read themselves (Cullinan, 1992).

In 1985, a national commission issued a report, *Becoming a Nation of Readers*: “The commission found conclusive evidence to support the use of reading aloud not only in the home but also in the classroom: It is a practice that should continue throughout the grades” (Trelease, 2001, p. 3). The timing of reading to older children and adolescents needs to be considered, as does the length of the piece. Keep the piece short, unless there is an interest expressed in hearing more. Nonfiction, or excerpts from books parents are reading themselves can be shared easily with teenagers.

Many parents know that reading is important, but may misunderstand how to play their role in the reading experience, or are unsure of how to begin, and what to do. Reading aloud at home will not and should not replicate the reading experience in a preschool, library, or classroom. The purpose in the classroom is far different than that of parents trying to raise readers at home. The school environment is group oriented and structured, not close and cozy. Parents may also be unsure of how to choose reading material for their children.

Having books available where the children will usually be is important. Children should be able to find books in various rooms and places around the house. If there is not the space and money to own a lot of books, a library card and weekly trip will still ensure books are in the house.

The time set for reading to children at home needs to be a quiet time. Children cannot listen when they have to compete with television, loud voices of other family members, or music blaring (Kropp, 1993).

While the time needs to be focused and quiet, it is not to be drudgery. Reading at home is for enjoyment and fostering a love of reading. Forcing over-tired, excited, or disinterested children to sit and read will not provide any enjoyment, and if it happens too often, will completely inhibit them from reading (Bialstok, 1992).

The material chosen for at home read aloud varies widely depending on the age and interests of the child. But a variety of styles should be chosen and introduced. The singsong style of chanting nursery rhymes stimulates an infant's listening. Young children enjoy reading along with rhymes when they know them well. At the beginning, Trelease (2001) suggests parents start with wordless picture books, building to storybooks and novels. The stages can overlap, however, and are fluid. Even older children enjoy picture books and poems (Cullinan, 1992). While there are many books that are enjoyed by multi-ages, there are times that what one child in the family wants to read may bore another, or be above a younger child's understanding. "The solution is to read to them individually if there is more than three years' difference in their ages" (Trelease, 2001, p. 49)

There is so much behind every story that parents read. Discussion about the cover and title, author and illustrator, and making prediction about the content of the story are beneficial concepts for children (Morrow, 2001).

Children will ask for their favourite books to be read over and over again. Despite the frustration parents feel with reading a book for the hundredth time, this is a

valuable experience for the child. Children pick up on the words they hear and the symbols they see on the page. When doing a repeated reading, it is suggested that parents stop at a key word or phrase to allow the listener to fill in the word. This, along with letting the child turn the pages, encourages involvement in the reading process (Trelease, 2001).

Despite everything parents and teachers tell children, they will mostly learn from, and imitate what they see. Parents, then, need to lead by example. Children who see parents reading for their own pleasure at times other than read aloud, will take note and read for pleasure themselves, at times other than the read aloud period.

As previously indicated, literacy is fundamental to full participation in a literate society (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997). Literacy skills impact employment, income, health, and future education, employment, income and health. "Literacy is strongly associated with economic life changes and well being. It affects inter alia, employment stability, the incidence of unemployment and income" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development & Human Resources Development Canada, 1997, p. 17).

Without a doubt, literacy plays a significant role in the future abilities of a child. Literacy development cannot wait until a child enters school, but rather begins at birth, or even before. Parents play a critical role in literacy development. Developing a life-long commitment to reading must begin with reading. This simple act helps to establish a love of reading that benefits a child in all facets of life. Parents play a critical role in literacy development. Their perceptions about this role are critical.

## Chapter 3

### Research Perspective and Method

Literacy acquisition begins long before formal schooling. Parents and other caregivers are their child's first teachers, but not all families fully understand their role.

In this study I explored home and school relationships, especially parental perceptions regarding literacy before schooling. In particular I sought to identify gaps in parental understanding of emergent literacy activities and how parents can facilitate literacy development before formal schooling begins. A qualitative methodology was employed.

Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate choice in directly investigating the issue of how people view, understand, and carry out literacy activities in their homes. Such research relies on descriptive data, that is, the words and observable behaviour of the informants. Lincoln and Guba (1980) assert that there is no single reality but that "realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them" (p. 17). The researcher collects this information primarily through participant observation and in-depth interviews (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). In this study I conducted a series of in-depth interviews for data collection.

The goal of qualitative analysis is to identify themes and patterns that characterize the shared experience of a particular group of people. Equally important is to account for the depth and range of experiences represented in the data. The analysis process is inductive as the researcher makes efforts to identify and account for patterns that emerge from the data. The research findings closely represent the words and actions of the

informants and are said to be “grounded” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this respect, qualitative research is different from quantitative methodology that collects data and “tests” their fit with a predetermined hypothesis.

There are several distinct characteristics of qualitative design (McCracken, 1988). The first is the nature of the participants. This is the fundamental difference between qualitative and the quantitative processes. A small group is studied allowing for more detailed, richer information than can be accessed through a large-scale study. “The first principle is that ‘less is more’. It is important to work longer, and with greater care, with a few people than more superficially with many of them” (McCracken, 1988, p. 17).

Second, with qualitative methods, the researcher studies whole settings – people, their activities and points of view, together. The purpose of this effort is to understand individual histories and present circumstances from the participants’ own perspective. What is learned is also not reducible to a set of variables or statistical relationships. It is the meaning of a particular situation to a person who is enmeshed in it (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Further, “the qualitative researcher’s task often consists of describing and understanding people and groups’ particular situations, experiences, and meanings before developing and/or testing more general theories and explanations” (Frankel & Devers, 2000, p. 3). The research is a process, both ongoing and dynamic. Thus the researcher needs to follow the data, be open to changes in the nature and definition of categories of study (McCracken, 1988). In order to learn about the perspectives of others, the qualitative researcher uses a naturalistic approach. The researcher tries to enter the world of the informant, to “see it from the inside.” Efforts are

made by the researcher to develop a rapport with the informant, and to minimize the effect of the researcher upon the setting.

At the same time, the researcher knows that she will somehow influence the informants and continually tries to account for this during the collection and analysis of the data. This is a third characteristic of qualitative research. The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.

The qualitative researcher must hold her own biases, and beliefs in abeyance. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) call this procedure "bracketing." Qualitative researchers try to suspend their perspective and learn directly from the worldview of the informant. In asking questions, a qualitative researcher aspires at times to an intellectual naivete, in order to build rapport and encourage people to speak freely (Bogden & Biklen, 2003).

A fourth characteristic is fieldwork (Creswell, 1994). The researcher must attempt to go out to observe the actual setting and engage the people in their natural surroundings. It is through this authentic practice that real discoveries are made. While being mindful of these aspects of qualitative research, my primary data sources in this study were the parental interviews. The parents served as informants.

Easton, McComish, and Greenberg (2000) caution the investigator on the fifth characteristic, environmental hazards. They support multi-site studies as providing "rich data", but remind the researcher of the need for attention to detail when gathering information in unfamiliar settings. In this study, my preferred site was the family's home, although each participant was given the opportunity to choose the time and location that was most convenient for them.

Many aspects of the human condition can be studied with qualitative methods. Any and all human beings are perceived as valuable, as is their point of view. As qualitative research relies directly on the words and actions of others, it emphasizes validity. Taylor and Bogdan note that (1998), there is a "...close fit between the data and what people actually say and do" (p.9). In my study, attempts at ensuring validity will be carried out through follow up interviews to confirm participant perspectives.

Because the underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative research are fundamentally different, the language and methodologies of each culture of inquiry are not neatly transferable from one to the other. The approach used for standards of reliability and validity in quantitative research, do not apply when considering a qualitative study.

The soundness or trustworthiness of qualitative findings are best adjudicated using the criteria of credibility and fit. Credibility refers to the truth, value or believability of findings (Morse, 1994). Fit refers to the applicability of qualitative findings to situations outside the context of the study and the degree to which consumers consider the findings meaningful and representative of their own experience (Sandelowski, 1986).

Unlike quantitative studies that emphasize the need for research samples to be representative of the population of interest, qualitative samples are selected for their capacity to provide a range of rich data concerning the topic of interest, with some suggestion that the respondents may be the most accessible, articulate and consequently highest status members of the group, a phenomena referred to as the 'elite bias' (MacDonald & Sanger, 1982). Sandelowski (1986) suggests that the researcher address

the typicality or atypicality of data by including available data on all members of the group or instances of the phenomena of interest, thereby allowing consumers of the research to assess the relevance of the elite bias for themselves.

Because the qualitative approach is not hypothesis-restricted, it affords the possibility of discovering a range of unanticipated observations and interpretations and presumes that alternative theories and explanations will be considered in the analysis of the data. In order to manage this, the qualitative investigator must be able to conceptualize large amounts of data and consider the utility of a number of theoretical perspectives. The researcher needs to have a conceptually broad perspective to recognize and interpret the unexpected, and exercise a commitment to resisting the temptation to force data into a pre-selected theoretical framework (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This addresses a concern that Krefting (1991) refers to as the 'holistic fallacy' which is associated with the potential for researchers to make their data appear more patterned or congruent than it actually is.

One strategy to use in enhancing the credibility of qualitative findings involves the use of multiple approaches both to data gathering and analysis for confirmation and validation (Krefting, 1991). Krefting (1991) suggests that the credibility of findings from qualitative interviews can be accomplished by repeating, reframing and expanding on questions in order to ensure that the interviewer has attempted to confirm and tap the respondent's views from a variety of angles.

There is some concern regarding the potential for the investigator-subject relationship to become so enmeshed in qualitative research that the researcher's ability to separate her own experience and interpretations from those of the people she is studying

is threatened (Sandelowski, 1986). Respectfulness, empathy and sensitivity are invaluable to the qualitative interviewer, but these attributes must be accompanied by clarity and vigilance on the part of the researcher regarding her personal, professional and theoretical integrity. Walker (1985) states, "what is crucial is that researchers choose their actions with a self-conscious awareness of why they are making them, what the effects are likely to be upon the relationship and indeed whether their own theories and values are getting in the way of understanding those of the respondents" (p. 47).

### *The Study*

#### *Identifying Informants*

In an effort to uncover how much parents understand early literacy development, families of students in kindergarten, in which the kindergarten child was the oldest or only child, were chosen for this study. The school being used was an independent Christian school, with students enrolled from all over the city and outside of Winnipeg. The families came from varying economic levels, with some struggling to afford the tuition, often receiving supplementary funding from the school, while others were financially secure, providing their children with various luxuries in life. Overall, however, the participants would probably be considered middle to upper middle class. This group of participants, therefore, would not be characteristic of an inner city public school, nor extremely disadvantaged children.

Working in an elementary school, it is easy to identify many families with children in or just coming out of the emergent literacy stage. Specifically in this independent school environment, with limited spaces, parents often register their children anywhere from one to four years in advance to secure a place in kindergarten classes.

This early registration information allows for the identification of families with children in the emergent literacy stage. In order to understand parental perspectives regarding early literacy development, it is necessary to have informants with children at that stage. The concern was that parents are not receiving enough information about literacy at a critical time in their children's development, the first five years of life. Or, they were receiving the information, but did not or could not use it.

#### *Role of the Researcher*

As the Teacher-Librarian in the school, I do not have a formal or direct role in the evaluation or assessment of the students. My role is that of a consultant to provide instructional support to teachers. I do, however, teach literature appreciation and literature-based units, and engage in many collaborative projects with classroom teachers. Generally, student assignments are carried out under the direction of the classroom teacher. He or she evaluates the projects.

Further, I was on leave for the duration of the data collection, and therefore had no formal interaction with the informant families. Having taught at the school for ten years, my name was not unfamiliar, but as most of the informant families were new to the school, I was relatively unknown to most participants. My role was one of observer and researcher collecting data, not a teacher checking up on students and families.

#### *Design of the Study*

A study using qualitative research methods begins with a broad outline and directional approach rather than a hard and fast study design. In using a qualitative approach, the researcher does not start out with a working hypothesis or even a set of expectations to be "proved" or "disproved". The researcher does start with a question or

questions that she wants to learn about; in this case, parental awareness regarding early literacy development, as well as parental perspectives on their role in that development.

To gain an understanding of parental perceptions of literacy development at home, the parents interviewed were currently caring for children aged five and under. Their view of literacy, its definition, elements, place in the home, importance, and development were sought. The initial interview data were descriptive, and provided a narrative account of participant experiences. The interview subsequently became reflective in order to elicit parental understanding of early literacy development.

Six families, twelve informants, all from two parent families were interviewed during the course of this study. The intention was that this number of individuals would offer a wide range of backgrounds and personal characteristics. "In general, [in qualitative research] you will find that there is an inverse relationship between the number of informants and the depth to which you interview each (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 93). The interviews covered the following broad areas, knowledge about literacy, its importance, its elements and use in the home, parental confidence about guiding literacy development, and the value parents place on literacy development. Each interview was between one and two hours long.

Two interviews were conducted with each set of informants using some open-ended questions to cover the broad range of literacy in the home (Appendix A). Each informant family was interviewed at their convenience and in a location of their choice. A retrospective interview was offered to each family to review the transcription of the first interviews and provide opportunity to clarify or add in order to make their responses as representative of their perspectives as possible.

The research project commenced in the winter of 2002 upon completion and approval of an Ethics Protocol submission to the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board of the University of Manitoba (2002) (Appendix B, Attachment 1). A letter was sent to the board of the independent school, explaining the study, explaining the criteria for the selection of families and requesting permission to involve kindergarten families in the study (Appendix B, Attachment 2). The principal, on behalf of the board granted permission (Appendix B Attachment 3).

In January an informative letter was sent to all kindergarten families. (Appendix B, Attachment 4). The letter explained the study, the criteria for participation, (having a child in kindergarten that was the oldest child in the family), and that selected families would be contacted. This clearly addressed the potential questions of why some families would be involved in the study and some not.

A list of eligible families was generated with the help of the school office. The list was randomized, and letters of invitation (Appendix B, Attachment 5) sent to the first six families listed, because six families were required. After receiving the letter, each family was contacted in person by telephone, and invited to participate in the study. If a family indicated that they were not interested, then a letter of invitation was sent to the next family on the list. As it turned out, only one family declined to participate, not because of lack of interest but because it turned out they had older, adult children in the household, meaning they did not meet the selection criteria for the study. Thus, a seventh letter was mailed and this family, along with the first five contacted, agreed to participate.

All interviews were conducted according to the methodology described in Chapter three, after informed consent was obtained (Appendix B, Attachment 6). The first

interviews took place in January and February of 2003, and were arranged at the convenience of the participants. Some occurred late in the evening, after all children were in bed, some in early evening while the children were still around, while one was conducted in the morning. The majority of the families chose to be interviewed in their home, except one family, for whom it was most convenient to meet at my home prior to another appointment. Both parents were present for the first set of interviews with the exception of family two that requested a morning appointment, when only the father was present, while the mother was at work. The length of the interviews ranged from one hour to a little more than two hours taking into consideration time of day, the freedom with which parents spoke, and the presence or absence of children during the interview.

The interviews were all audio-taped and then transcribed. There was one technical difficulty in the first interview with family five resulting in a loss of a small portion of the interview. As soon as that became apparent, however, I summarized the notes taken during the interview and key points remembered into descriptive paragraphs, to keep data loss at a minimum.

After transcribing and reviewing the interviews, the second set of interviews were organized, occurring in May and June of 2003. Again parents were encouraged to choose both times and locations that were most convenient for them. The scenarios changed a bit with this second round as the researcher requested both parents for the family that had been interviewed with only the father the first time, moving the time of the interview to early evening, and one family that had both father and mother present for the first interview was now set in the morning, with only the mother present. The father had moved to another province working to set up his own business, with the rest of the family

anticipating joining him at the completion of the school year. These interviews tended to be shorter, ranging in time from around forty-five minutes again to about two hours.

### *Participant Profiles*

While the families interviewed were similar in their involvement with the school, and the ages of their oldest child, there were some differences in the backgrounds and basic information of the participants.

*Family one.* In family one, dad is a full-time secondary school teacher, and mom currently stays at home full-time. There are three children, all girls, ages five, four, and one, with the two youngest turning four and one during the time of the study.

*Family two.* Family two consisted of two working parents with mom working from about six o'clock in the morning to one o'clock in the afternoon, at which point dad leaves for work, and comes home shortly after six o'clock in the evening, when the family has supper together and spends the evening together. There are two boys, ages five and three in this family.

*Family three.* Family three has a similar approach to shared parenting. Dad is a full-time elementary school teacher, but takes over responsibilities for two daughters, aged five and three, after school most evenings, when mom teaches private music lessons. Mom also teaches lessons during the day twice a week at schools. On those days, the older daughter is at school, and the younger one is taken care of by mom's grandmother.

*Family four.* There are two boys in family four, aged five and two and a half. Dad works full-time, as an engineer and mom is an elementary school specialist, working

half-time. Mom works on the days the older son is at school and the younger son goes to an in-home babysitter in the neighborhood.

*Family five.* Family five consists of a father who runs his own construction business and a mother, who is a nurse. Mom works two weekends each month, just enough to keep up her nursing license, otherwise choosing to be at home with their two sons, aged five and three.

*Family six.* In family six, dad works at a furniture building company as a wood machinist, and mom stays at home, spending a small amount of time babysitting and selling jewelry out of her home. There are two children in the family, a son, aged five, and a daughter, aged three.

#### *Data Collection*

As indicated, the data for my study were collected through a series of audio taped in-depth interviews. After potential informants were identified and located through school records, permission to request the participation of school families was secured through letters to the executive board, the school principal, and vice-principal in charge of the elementary campus. The ethics guidelines of the University of Manitoba were followed. Each family then received a letter of invitation and upon agreeing to participate in the study, signed a voluntary consent form, which explained that they had agreed to participate voluntarily and could withdraw at any time without penalty (Appendix B, Attachment 6).

In depth interviews were chosen for various reasons. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggest reasons or situations where interviews are well suited. If the research interests are relatively clear and well defined, researchers have a clearer sense of their interests

and the kinds of questions developed. This study is more focused than general interest in life with preschoolers as it examined literacy in the preschool years, and parental ideas and understandings of early literacy development. The participants chosen had one child in kindergarten, who was nearing the end of the emergent literacy stage.

The participant observation for this study constituted an imposition on the families involved. Interviews, however, suit a situation where the researcher may have time constraints. "Whereas the participant observer's time can be taken up with waiting for someone to say or do something, the interviewer usually collects data throughout the period spent with informants" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p. 91).

### *Interview Questions*

The four basic questions that were the foundation for the interviews were worded or organized slightly differently than the research questions to be answered (Appendix A). This was done in part to: (a) make the questions more parent rather than educator-oriented, (b) group the ideas together in a way more in line with family life, as well as (c) prevent the questions from being leading or perceived as being judgmental.

### *Data Analysis*

One of the hallmarks of qualitative research is the ongoing process of data analysis. Analysis is carried out while data are being collected, although there is an intensive period of analysis towards the end of the study. Qualitative researchers differ on the final product of a study. Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest that generalizable sociological theory is a natural outcome of a qualitative study. Other fields, like anthropology, emphasize a more descriptive approach. In ethnographies, the goal is to describe a setting or group of people accurately and completely.

In the analysis process the researcher assumes the stance of the interpretive character. This first means that inquirers try to *account for* what they have been given an *account of* (Eisner, 1991). In the data analysis process the researcher is attempting to discover why something is taking place and the perspectives of the participants in the situation.

This role can lead to Eisner's (1991) fourth feature, expressive language or the author's personal voice, showing empathy and understanding as a result of personal life experiences. A contentious issue for many consumers of qualitative research is that the quantitative researcher "is often regarded as the enemy of cognition" (p.37). Eisner (1991) rejects such a view: "To read about people or places or events that are emotionally powerful, and to receive an eviscerated account is to read something of a lie. Why take the heart out of situations we are trying to help readers understand?" (p. 37)

For my study, the goal of the analysis was to understand the perspective of a specific phenomenon to people. Taylor and Bogdan (1984) advocate this in-depth understanding of how informants define their situation. Data analysis therefore occurred in three phases:

The first was an ongoing discovery phase during and immediately after the interviews to identify recurrent themes. The second phase occurred after the data had been collected, and entailed coding to organize the data by identifying examples that supported each theme. In the final phase, the findings were interpreted in the context in which they were collected (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Developing a coding system to sort and classify the data involves the determination of patterns and topics covered as well as developing coding categories

through words and phrases found in the data that represents those patterns and topics (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). In this study, I found that the patterns and themes began to emerge soon after the initial interviews when similarities were noted and connections made among the responses of some of the first families. Developing coding categories flowed easily out of those initial patterns once interviews were completed.

While it is difficult to lay out all the coding categories possible and the theoretical approaches that might be used to develop categories, Bogden and Biklen (2003) suggest several coding possibilities, as listed in the following chart.

*Families of Codes*

Code Family	Description
Setting and Context Codes	Most general information on setting, topic, or participants.
Definition of the Situation	Perspective of the participant on setting or specific topics.
Perspectives Held by Participants	More specific ways of thinking than overall definition of the situation.
Participants' Ways of Thinking	Participants' understanding of each other, outsiders, and objects that make up their world.
Process	Words and phrases that facilitate sequencing of events or time, or changes in status.
Activity	Regular occurring kinds of behaviour.
Event	Particular happenings that occur infrequently or only once.
Strategy	Tactics, methods, techniques, maneuvers, or ploys used to accomplish various things.
Relationship and Social Structure	Patterns of behaviour among people not officially defined such as cliques, friendships, romances, coalitions, enemies, and mentors/students.
Narrative	Description of the structure of talk itself or the way participants frame their own stories.
Methods	Isolation of material specifically pertinent to the research.

My codes emerged out of the responses, questions, and stories provided by the participants. After the data were collected and transcribed, I went through the interviews, one at a time, highlighting and marking comments and descriptions that parents emphasized or seemed to find important. Then I marked comments and responses that were similar in each interview with the same mark, to create a sort of legend or key as I began to group ideas and notice patterns. I found many topics that were discussed by all or most of the families. I also found areas where parental responses were minimal or lacking, or discussed by only one or two participants. After reading and rereading the data, I was gradually able to sort the responses, connecting similarities and dividing data into more than one topic. Categories were then developed from these responses in five major areas.

#### *Emerging Categories*

The first category emerged around the areas of parental perceptions of their role in the literacy development of their children, how they felt about their role and what they did as part of that role. Parental knowledge of literacy development at home formed the second category, encompassing areas in regard to how parents described literacy, its development in their children, what development took place at home, and development before age five. Third was parental knowledge of the characteristics of a literate home. The fourth category contained ideas on parental views of their own literacy knowledge, and their views of some of the characteristics of a literate home. The final category included the frequency and types of literacy activities that occurred in the homes. The specific groups of codes in each category are listed in the accompanying chart. These

coding categories were used to identify and describe patterns that emerged and these are elaborated on in Chapter four.

*Coding the Data*

Category	Codes
Parents and literacy	Parental impact. Parental activities.
Knowledge of literacy development	Understanding of literacy and literacy development. Understanding of emergent literacy. Parental confidence.
Knowledge of a literate home	Talking and listening. Perceiving children as readers. Expectation to read. Functional use of print. Independent reading. Storybook reading. Repetitive reading.
Parental perspectives	Storybook sharing. Accessibility of books. Reading environment. When to begin reading. Literacy activities.
Frequency of literacy activities	Reading aloud. Writing. Independent reading. Environmental print. Computer programs. Singing. Modeling reading. Engaging in talk. Playing games.

*Management vs. Analysis*

Qualitative researchers must develop systematic ways to keep their collected data organized and be able to retrieve specific instances to support findings. In order to manage the data gathered in this study, I transcribed the audiotapes and stored the data on a searchable file in the Microsoft Word program. All of the interview transcripts, field-notes and their accompanying “observer’s comments” were transcribed through word processing on the software. This first-hand information represented the “database” of the

study. As the term implies, the data remain unchanged throughout the course of the study. The original data were thus retained as they were gathered.

The collected data were available for viewing on the computer monitor and also available as a hard copy. Coding of the data and ongoing analysis were recorded in analytic memos. These analytic memos were then saved in a computer file as the “knowledge base” of the study. The knowledge base is a record of the researcher’s thoughts, speculations and analysis. Although grounded in the data, the knowledge base is developed on inferences drawn by the researcher.

## Chapter 4

### Data Analysis

The main focus of this study was to examine parental perspectives regarding their role in literacy development. Their children were just leaving the emergent literacy stage and beginning formal reading instruction in the school system. Interviews were conducted according to the qualitative method described in Chapter three. The data were sorted, coded and grouped to reflect key patterns and topics found in the words and phrases of the participants. These findings were interpreted in the context in which they were collected and I present them as themes.

#### *Themes*

##### *Parents and Literacy*

Parents speak to their children immediately after birth, surrounding them with language, even though they are too young to understand or respond. Parents provide the models that enable infants to attach meaning to words they hear. Likewise, reading can come as naturally as talking if, (a) children are surrounded with books to demonstrate the importance of print, (b) parents model reading by reading to children, and (c) parents encourage their children's attempts to read (Bettelheim & Zelan, 1982).

Awareness about the importance of parental involvement with the literacy development of their young children has begun to move out of academic circles and into mainstream life, and yet some of the answers I received suggested that parents have not yet developed a full understanding of the impact they can have on the development of their child's literacy.

*Parental impact.* Family one spoke of some of the activities their kindergarten daughter was to do, explaining that they try not to call it homework, don't push, but comments were very general, not seen as emphasized in the child's day, nor taken note of by the parents. "Well, you know, brain development and starting early. And he (a brother of the father) says make it fun. Don't stick them behind a desk and tell them 'you've got to do this now' but if they're moved to do it they will".

Family one also admitted that "I guess that we're waiting for (the kindergarten teacher). She's been helpful and she's told us, I guess, what we need to do so I guess, my thinking is that if there's something that we should do she'll tell us."

When probed about the youngest child, a nine-month-old daughter, it was made clear that she was not included in family reading times with the older girls. She was only given plastic, or cloth books to look at or play with. "I'm trying to keep her away from the books. All she wants to do is eat them—she has her fake books."

Family one suggested that reading to their children did not begin until somewhere between one and two years of age, and that the youngest child was still too young for reading activities. This would indicate that while they have begun to hear about brain development and the importance of starting early, the full understanding of what that means has not yet reached them.

While most parents in the study seemed to hold the view that they need to play a part in their child's literacy development, agreeing that it began before school started, many seemed to have a somewhat limited view of their role, as well as the process. They often commented that they believed they needed to read to their children, and teach them to love reading, but that, in their perception, the only other component of literacy, the

learning of letters and words, was the role of the school. Family one's comment was that they were still waiting for their oldest child to get what she needed to learn to read. "I'm still waiting for it to come... They learn it in school. I don't think I've taught them to read. I think the enjoyment is there and that's important, but I don't think I've heard them say 'I wish I could read this', that would be the next step."

In the first discussions with family two, dad's opinion was that the role of parents was "providing books, letters, and the opportunity to experiment with paper and markers". "I think the main thing is to have the materials available and keep the door open, so whenever they have the interest or wish, they'll have the opportunity." "The school would be responsible for proper letter formation. And the school kind of perfects the technical procedure." This view suggests that parents can simply provide physical materials associated with literacy and then sit back, and the development will come, whereas there really needs to be much more interaction, encouragement and guidance on the part of parents to guarantee the development and permanence of the neural connections in the brain.

*Parental activities.* Family three discussed their role partly as "trying to give her an advantage so that when she goes, she has a bit of an idea of what is going on." They spoke of helping their daughter learn some words to build prior knowledge and gain confidence to learn more when she entered school. This family also saw their responsibility as providing support for the school to "take it the rest of the way until they are actually reading. Their job is the technical part."

Family five talked about a lot of literacy going on in the home, and doing a lot of specific sound and letter activities with their older son. They saw their role as

introducing the activity of reading at an early age to make it easier to instruct in school, so that there would be no resistance when reading began in school. This family also mentioned that their own attitude was important in their children's reading development. Dad's view was that "if the mother and father both say they hate reading, they don't want to do anything dealing with reading, and say it's horrible, kids are going to have that same opinion. This family, more so than families one, two, and three, mentioned that reading every day was part of their role as parents. As a nurse, mom knew it was important to "stimulate, stimulate, stimulate for the first few years." But both parents felt that they may not have encouraged storybook reading and independent reading as much as they had, had it not been for grandma, who really encouraged them with books. "I probably made an extra effort with the books, because she (grandma) was really big on books, and then I saw how well that worked out, so I tried it with [the younger son] too."

It would appear that many activities are occurring that are beneficial to the development of reading, but parents are not fully aware of the potential of these activities. When connections are not made or pointed out to the learning child through language and literacy experiences neurons are not being stimulated, or are even being eliminated

Much can and needs to be done to ensure children's literacy success long before they enter kindergarten or grade one and receive formal reading instruction.

#### *Knowledge of Literacy Development*

From an emergent literacy perspective there is much children can learn about reading and writing before they begin direct instruction in school. The development of literacy is a fluid, continual process starting as early as birth, and includes much more than recognizing letters and words (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

*Understanding of literacy and literacy development.* In the first interview with family two, dad made several comments to suggest that he understood the development of literacy quite well. "It's a gradual, fade in thing...It's kind of like the picture of a TV gradually fading into view. So there is no magic point when the picture becomes visible. It's all tied in together. I think the whole process begins right from infancy, progressing from understanding the spoken word, to speaking on their own, and reading would tend to come after that."

Yet, despite some further probing and prompts the father in family two defined literacy only as "mainly, being able to read the written word. People that are said to be illiterate can speak and understand no problem, but they have trouble with reading." He perceived that the role of the home in reading development was simply providing exposure to things children could learn.

Discussion with parents regarding the development of literacy was often somewhat general and stopped at the ability of their child to recognize or form letters. Family one hadn't actually given much thought to the process of reading development. When asked about what skills need to be in place before the actual reading of words occurs, they pointed out a few skills "enjoyment, recognize what the letters are. Good question. My assumption is that it's going to start in grade one." They were surprised, but pleased, that the actual printing of letters had begun already in kindergarten. They did not however, discuss the sounds of letters, or refer to knowledge of how to hold books, and follow text from left to right. Dad, in family two also only listed "exposure to books, a parent reading to them, and it's also helpful to acquaint them with letters" as experiences necessary for a child to learn to read.

Family three's understanding seemed to go a little further, describing how their daughter loved to figure out the sounds of letters in words repeated to her. Dad referred to environmental print to find words for both girls to try and find the initial sound. "So I'd see a stop sign, and say 'stop'. And she'd say 'sssss—S!'" She'll do the sound first of all, then the letter." These parents also seemed to notice more and take note of activities that showed the development of literacy. For example mom described how the five year old began to copy the words off the cover page of a novel, and then ask what the words said, but noted that the words were copied down, instead of across. "That was interesting that she wouldn't write them across as well." Another example was a description of how the five year old had associated singing words with print in a book. "Oh, and that's another interesting thing she does. She'll open a book and sing. She sings through the pages. It'll have nothing to do necessarily [with the book]. Like, she'll sing 'Jesus Loves Me' to a Disney book."

Family three has had some experience with speech therapy for their younger daughter, who, at three, had some speech delays. They spent time working on making specific sounds and practising speech therapy daily. This may account for a heightened awareness and interest in sounds, and may explain the difference from the first two families in some of the initial sound activities that they were engaged in with both girls. Similarly, family five had their oldest son in speech therapy, and felt the connection between being able to say the sounds the letters made would have a great impact on being able to read the letters in a word. "I said llook (original emphasis), and he'll say "wook". He's got to straighten that out before he can read. That seems to make sense to me." The difference between the two families without a child taking speech therapy and

the two with a child in speech therapy, suggests that outside influences are still needed for most parents to become more aware of the major aspects of literacy development in their children.

*Understanding emergent literacy.* There were also a few instances where the parents in family one described their children's book activity as "not really reading", "well, they don't read, they look at books", "she's not reading, she's just memorized the words", or "should we choose books with just a few words so she can read to us, or is that just going to be memorization? It's the same book, and she'll know 'the car is red'". This kind of perspective demonstrates a gap in the knowledge surrounding emergent literacy and reading behaviours that are part of the reading acquisition process, just the beginning of the development, where like speaking, the behaviours are approximations of the final stage of development. Reading, like language, evolves in stages. Early stages of reading, like young children's efforts in talking, resemble mature reading only in limited ways (Gibson, 1989).

Family three, again, seemed a little more in tune with these emergent literacy activities, referring to the girls reading to their dolls, but also restated a couple of times that this was not really reading, "she says, "'Look I'm reading!' She's memorized what we've read already", or corrected the researcher when she said "when you watch them read on their own"—"she just looks at the pictures." While these comments show some misunderstanding about the stages of literacy development, they also show a lack of awareness of some of the characteristics of a literate home.

*Parental confidence.* When parents were asked about their feelings regarding helping their children with literacy development, some expressed quite a bit of

confidence about their abilities, others were satisfied with their efforts but acknowledged that there may have been more to do, "I've tried. I don't know if I've done it perfect. I guess every mother will say, 'I could have done more'". Another family felt that the school would indicate if there was more that needed doing. "I don't know if there's something more, if we're supposed to be taking another step in helping her. I don't know...But I guess that's where I'm at. I think I've done what I should and can and if there's something else I should be doing—they'll let me know." Two or three families mentioned that they felt a little lost when it came to providing specific reading instruction for their kindergarten-aged children and that more information would have been helpful, "Are we supposed to start going back to books with a few words on a page, and have her read to us, or is that just going to be memorization?" "Sometimes I don't know what to show him first, like how to explain the rules of reading. I wish there was some little pamphlet to show how to go through it. Because I was never a good reader or speller, I am always afraid that I am going to tell him something wrong."

There were additional comments that sometimes parents felt they were catching up rather than being proactive. They would receive a report card, and work on areas that were weak, but wished they knew what was coming up so they could better prepare their child for it. Family Three described it as falling behind, "Term two I wrote up a little list based on what came home in the report card, but, I kind of felt bad because now I am working on last term's stuff. I am not even working on this term, I am behind. It felt like I was always working to catch up. What have I not been doing with her that I could have been doing all term and gotten a better mark?"

Most families put their trust in the school not only to teach their child to read successfully, but also to let them know when they needed to be adding or changing activities. The general belief was that the parental role became one of reinforcing what the school was teaching. Family one felt the teacher had been helpful, and “she’s told us what we need to do, so I guess my thinking is that if there’s something that we should do, she’ll tell us.”

One parent in family five suggested that while she believed it is the parents’ role to reinforce what children learn in school and add things they are not getting, she would probably not notice if the school were falling short. “I don’t compare with other parents what they are doing in their school. I am sure they are doing what they should be.”

#### *Knowledge of a Literate Home*

Among the attributes that Taylor (1983) identified as characterizing a literate home were talking with and listening to children; perceiving pre-reading children as readers; not accepting the possibility of failure; using print functionally in life, and finally, reading to children. The responses of the participants included these as well as other areas that were a part of literacy in their homes.

*Talking and listening.* Families interviewed all seemed to understand the potential and value of conversation in their homes, describing family meals as times for discussions with their children. “Helping children develop a wide variety of oral language capabilities is a crucial precursor to literacy development” (Spodek & Saracho, 1993, p. 14). Strickland and Shanahan (2004) also show that language correlates with future success in reading. Parents give children confidence to communicate, develop vocabulary and syntax, and understand conversation. Bedtime reading was one of the

times described as a good time for conversation also. Family five said of their older son's bedtime reading and conversation, "it's one of his favourite things. He likes the one-on-one too, I think."

Whether or not the conversations occurred as they were described can not be assessed without observation of the activities in the home. It's also not clear whether or not the conversations revolved around literacy activities as described in Chapter two, such as sharing a newspaper article, discussing stories and illustrations, relating a story to real life, or making predictions (Taylor, 1983).

*Perceiving children as readers.* Perceiving children as readers, and ascribing meaning to reading activities in which young children engage is another key to a literate home. As mentioned above, several of the families made comments implying that they felt emergent literacy activities were not really reading, pointing out that their children only looked at books, memorized passages in stories, and weren't really reading. Unlike the parents observed by Denny Taylor (1983) none of the parents in this study, either consciously or unconsciously, said their children were *readers*, or liked to *read* books. It was always referred to as "they love to read, or I should say they love looking at pictures" (family one), "looking at a stack of books" (family five), the child would "sit down and tell his stories", "they look at books quite a bit on their own, just looking at them. But, of course, they can't really read." (family six), or "she flips the pages and tells stories" (family six). It may seem to be a minor point, but could speak to a general belief, perception, or attitude that could be influencing some of the behaviours or implicit messages that children could be receiving regarding their literacy development.

*Expectation to read.* Not accepting the possibility of failure is the third of Taylor's (1983) attributes of a home of a successful reader. This attitude may not be specifically at play in the homes of the participants, given that many of them believe reading is a skill that is still coming, and that their children are still in the early stages of reading. It was interesting to note, however, that while many of the firstborn children in the families interviewed were described as being interested in books, and enjoying looking at them, often the second child did not share this interest and was seen as being interested in different things, or being too young for reading activities.

Rather than seeing reading and literacy as a universal, vital skill, many of these parents almost seemed to categorize reading with interests, or talents, like music, or drawing. They might describe it as one child liking dinosaurs and reading, but the other preferring to watch TV and play sports. Family two said, "well since [the older child] was about one, we'd regularly sit and read to him. He'd get into Dr. Seuss, and a number of kid books. And [their second son] enjoys some of the same, but unlike the first, [the second child] has much greater interest in television, and cartoons that [the older] didn't have. So consequently he tends to spend more time doing that, because that's what he wants to do." Family five mentioned how grandma really encouraged reading, but that "[the younger son] likes to do his own thing, he's independent. If he's watching a movie, my mom'll read [the older child] some books. She could read for a couple of hours to him." It would almost seem that in the future these children could be set up for failure, simply because of a parental belief that, "well, he's more active, he's not a reader".

In some of these families, the older children seemed to have a more quiet, calm nature, perhaps more conducive to quiet activities like looking at books. Family four

describes their two boys as being quite different in personality, and “as much as we want [our 2 ½ year old son] to take a part in it, he’s just too playful and turns it into this big fun thing. He’s so playful he’ll take the book and throw it. He’ll just laugh and giggle. Then he gets keyed up and you are trying to wind him down.”

When asked about the boys’ knowledge of reading, there was only discussion of the five and a half-year-old son, not usually the younger one. However, all children need to be successful readers. It is not an optional skill. Even active, energetic children need to be readers, enjoy reading, and be successful at it. While age and developmental differences impact literacy activities that different children can handle, the second child in these families were experiencing significantly less literate activity than their older siblings had at a similar or younger age. It would be interesting to see if families with an active firstborn child use a different manner of developing the interest in reading.

*Functional use of print.* The fourth characteristic of literate homes is the functional use of print in daily life. Some might think that this characteristic also, would become evident in these families, as children grew older. But using print functionally can already occur when children are in the emergent stages of literacy. Making cards or gifts for a loved one, and signing his/her own name is one way for a child to see the meaning in print. Other possibilities are making lists, writing letters, making cards with a brief printed message of thank you or happy birthday, making signs, reading labels, words on the microwave, light switches, the taps, as well as noting stop and railroad crossing signs. Even if the words are not readable or completely accurate, they do send the message to the child that part of the purpose of the printed word is to convey meaning. Also, parents can encourage this by leaving notes for their preschool children, reading the notes for

them, sending them mail, and explaining their own writing to a child, such as the grocery list.

Again, reinforcing the thought that perhaps while parents and children are engaging in many of these activities characteristic of literate homes, parents in this study seemed not to have assigned importance to them.

When asked generally about literacy in the home, most parents in the participant families did not voluntarily, or immediately include writing activities or functional activities involving print. They mentioned books and read-alouds, but writing was not immediately described when asked about engaging their children in literacy activities. Family two described reading to their sons and playing with a set of wooden letters. Family one described their two older daughters sitting and looking at a stack of books for an hour, and having a story read to them every night. Some of the families, when asked specifically about writing activities would recall the use, perhaps, of a recipe, or writing their names on a piece of paper. Family six included ideas that were similar to those identified by families one and two, as well as following a recipe, "He and his dad make pancakes together every Saturday, so he would have seen a recipe being used then", as did family four, "We bake. We do an awful lot of baking together". Generally, however, the discussion did not go much further than that. It is possible that the children were engaging in meaningful writing activities, such as making lists, writing letters, taking orders when playing restaurant, filling in birthday and Christmas cards, but perhaps the parents don't view those activities as part of literacy development. Or, those types of behaviours are not occurring. To fully determine which, if either, scenario is true, a study involving more observations would be necessary.

Some print activities that occurred were shared but those, while potentially very valuable, were usually, for lack of a better word, contrived, as opposed to authentic, functional, and purposeful. These events were often in conjunction with an activity sent home by the classroom teacher, or an activity purchased for specific letter/word practice. All the children had begun practicing forming the letters of the alphabet by the time of the first interview, doing what was called "rainbow letters" as family one explained, where the child was to write the letter out three times, each time in a different colour. On their own initiative, some families had spent time practicing printing letters, to reinforce school activities. Others, such as family five, had used store-bought workbooks aimed at preschool-aged children to practice letters and sounds. Family four had bought games such as a variation of 'Go Fish', where players need to match upper and lower case letters of the alphabet. They also had flash cards with a word and picture on the front, and other words in the same word family on the reverse such as hill, then bill, dill, fill, gill, mill, pill, and still.

*Independent reading.* Parents spoke with an awareness of the importance of providing easy accessibility to books, which would often facilitate and encourage their children to reach for books on their own. Family four described their home as being filled with books. Their children could find books "under the bed, on the book shelf...in our bedroom there's always a stack and then in the living room there's always a stack. In the dining room...and they're all shoved in the magazine rack. In the basement there's always a stack." These two boys, as a result, often spent time looking at books on their own.

Family six said, “they might sit there quite a while. Our daughter might be as long as a half an hour. At night sometimes I put our son to bed early, I leave the light on, and let him look at books, so he’ll look for a half hour, or fifteen minutes”.

Family five spoke of how their son would often sit with a whole stack of books, and look through them. Family four also suggested that this was a serious time for their older son, “then he goes off on his own and closes the door. He kind of does that in privacy. Behind the door I can hear it, and occasionally he’s come out but it’s more something that he does on his own.” They could hear him talking as he read the books, but didn’t often get to watch exactly what he did. Mom, from family one talked about how, before their third baby arrived, she had been able to get in some reading of her own, pulling out her own book, while the two older girls would sit for about an hour looking at their books. In fact, all six families spoke of how their children really enjoyed looking at books on their own, often for remarkably long periods of time.

*Storybook reading.* It was encouraging to learn that most of the parents interviewed had some level of understanding of the importance of reading to their children. All families described reading to their children as a family activity, and believed that reading aloud at home was part of the parental role in the development of reading. The responses varied, however, in the time, place and length of the reading. Family six had the flexibility to read whenever the children wanted, throughout the day, or whenever mom suggested it. “If I say, let’s sit down and read this book, they come running. If I’m reading to one, I’ve seen the other one, still playing but listening. But nine times out of ten, they’ll both come and sit. Then it’s “read this one, read that one.” In the second interview she reiterated, “I could easily sit for an hour or more and they

would keep me reading books if I let them, but currently it is about ten minutes as there are some days that we don't read and other days we read more."

Family five was quite certain that their older son was read to for 30 minutes a day, and that the younger son probably also received 30 minutes of reading added up throughout the day. Family four mentioned stopping their own activities to read at the child's request. Mom described reading the weekly school note and how "he'll see me reading and he'll come with a book. And we put the note aside and read the book quickly." "He likes it at bedtime, but I also have to find incidental moments, If he asks a question, I make sure I am right there to stop everything so I can help." Reading in family four lasted anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. Family one had a regular story time at bedtime for their two older daughters, usually one, maybe two books, as well as right after school on library day when the daughter in kindergarten came home with two new books for the week. Family five indicated that they read every day, usually at bedtime. Grandma also played a huge role, taking the older son to the library regularly, spending a half a day reading together at the library, and regularly reading to her grandchildren when visiting or providing care.

Only families two and three did not suggest a regular reading time. Both did read to their children, it was just a little harder to pinpoint an amount of time, as either the children dictated when the reading occurred as in family two, "It tends to be night time, before bed. A story or two, it depends on their mood, and what they're interested in at the time. And whether there's a cartoon or something they'd rather do at the time." Family three also suggested that reading did not occur every night, that their daughters preferred to play before bed. Reading might happen in large chunks of time when mom

would read a whole stack of books, or when the book form needed to be filled in for the school reading program. But storybook reading did not usually happen daily for a regular period of time.

*Repetitive reading.* One of the valuable aspects of sharing stories with children is the learning that occurs from listening to the same story repeatedly. Morrow (2001) found that not only did repetitive readings offer familiarity and pleasure, as well as helping develop concepts about words, print and books, but that it significantly increased the number and kind of responses children made after hearing a story three times. Their responses “became more interpretive, and they began to predict outcomes and make associations, judgments, and elaborative comments” (Morrow, 2001, p. 112). Repeated readings also seemed to encourage first attempts at reading as children began to narrate stories along with an adult, and focused on the names of letters and words (Morrow, 2001). Most families interviewed did not highlight this as a valuable activity, except family five who described how their oldest son “gets hooked on a certain book for a while. He knew *Are You my Mother?* by heart”. Family one, however, expressed the frustration, acknowledged by Trelease (2001), that parents experience when asked to read a book for the hundredth time. However, instead of reading the book again, anyway, because of the value of the activity, also described by Trelease (2001), family one suggested that they try to steer their children away from the same stories over and over again, choosing the book themselves, or refusing to read. Other families felt their children did not choose the same stories over and over, and that they encouraged a variety.

Parents then, know that reading to their children is a valuable activity. Some knowledge may be lacking, however, in the value and weight placed on reading aloud to children. Parents need to see the importance of an accumulation of 15-30 minutes of reading a day, depending on the age and attention span of the child (Kropp, 1993). While still allowing for spontaneous reading, parents need to be aware of the value of choosing a regular storybook time and sticking to it, so that the activity becomes a welcome part of the routine instead of an interruption; trying to make reading regular, aiming for every day, so that book sharing happens at least four to five times a week; and making it a quiet, focused, but still enjoyable, child-directed activity.

All families gave their children free access to the books in their homes, and cited reading to their children as an important part of their role as parents. What was interesting to note was the difference in perspective on the amount of books in the home, at what age to begin reading aloud to children, and the reading to the children that took place.

### *Parental Perspectives*

Parents and caregivers have huge influence over the development, elimination or stabilization of neural connections. Literacy begins in the family, and parents and caregivers are each child's first and most important teachers (Thomas, Fazio & Stiefelmeyer, 1999). Reading with a child at home is a big part of a child's success with language and reading later in life (Honig, 1996). The critical years for language and cognitive skill development start before age one and begin to wane by age four (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Leaving literacy development up to the school, when a child is almost

at the end of those early intensive brain development years, can make learning to read a difficult, painful, maybe even impossible process for a child.

There was a wide spectrum in the kinds and frequency of literacy activities in the homes of each of the six families interviewed. And yet, at the same time, for some aspects of these activities there was a general similarity in parental opinions and perspectives on the literacy that occurred in their homes.

*Storybook sharing.* For example, reports of reading aloud to children varied from a couple of times a week, or ten minutes a day, to regularly 30 minutes a day, with occasional occurrences of an hour or more. Yet all comments suggested that parents felt they were providing an appropriate amount or even more read-aloud time than necessary for their children. Parents may need more specific suggestions or guidelines for carrying out reading activities with their children, to reduce ambiguity regarding the amount of time spent reading aloud.

*Accessibility of books.* Paul Kropp (1993) says having books available where the children will usually be is a way to start developing a love of reading. In searching for a toy in the toy box, they may come across a book, and ask you to read. A stack next to the big easy chair makes cuddling the perfect opportunity to read. Books in the bedroom send the message that reading is a part of the bedtime routine. If there is not the space and money to own a lot of books, a library card and weekly trip will still ensure books are in the home. All of the families felt their children had plenty of free access to books, but this was also described in different ways, suggesting that just telling parents children need access to books is not specific enough. Perhaps parents need to hear what Paul Kropp (1993) has to say about the placement of books.

Most families mentioned two or three rooms with books available for their children, the bedroom and living room being the most frequently described locations. Some of the younger children in the families, ranging in age from nine months to three years, did not yet have books in their rooms. One or two families could think of several places in the house where books were stored, from several stacks in the living room or dining room to book shelves in the bedrooms and in recreation rooms in the basement. One family very quickly listed:

...in the living room there's always a stack, they're shoved in the magazine rack, beside the green chair in the living room I've got a huge shoebox with board books, ...the stack in the basement, and on the bookshelf in the basement, and you can find them under the couch in the basement, ...in the dining room...he's got a bookshelf in his room with six shelves in it. It's loaded. It's actually awful. They're all over the place. Even under my bed, but that's off limits. Those are new books that he might ask for occasionally."

In connection with the variations in the location of books, there appeared to be some discrepancy in the number of books that parents believed constituted an appropriate number. The descriptions ranged from "at least fifty books, if not more" to what would seem to be hundreds and hundreds based on the descriptions of stacks of books around the house. There are potential concerns with access to fewer books, such as fifty. Children need good quality literature; a variety of styles, lengths, reading levels, and topics; and new books introduced periodically (Kropp, 1993). There is a greater chance of this in a larger collection, or one that changes regularly through use of the library. There is not necessarily a "correct" number of books that a family should have, but the parental perspectives that lots of books could mean anywhere from fifty to hundreds shows a wide range in the interpretations of information surrounding literacy development. More information would allow parents to make a more educated decision

regarding their children's access to enough books, quality literature, a variety of genres, and new books, as literacy development progresses.

*Reading environment.* Participants all agreed that a large part of their role as parents was to make reading enjoyable for their children. Parents felt that it should never be forced, and that pushing read-alouds too hard could result in a dislike of reading. "As a rule, temptation is more effective than trying to get them to read when they're not interested." Family two agreed, "I don't think we've ever really forced them on reading. We want it to be something that they enjoy, that they choose to do. I don't want to say, 'No, we're reading a book now. We have to do this.'" Virtually every participant listed enjoyment first as one of the elements necessary for their children to become successful readers. These opinions are in keeping with advice from the literature. While the time needs to be focused and quiet, it is not to be drudgery. Reading at home with family should be fun. It is an excellent time and opportunity for discussions, sparked by the reading, on thoughts, hopes, fears and discoveries. But parents need to be careful not to turn these discussions into quizzes or ways of prying interpretations from the child. Children will have plenty of required reading and work at school. Reading at home is for enjoyment and fostering a love of reading. Forcing an over tired, excited, or disinterested child to sit and read will not give them any enjoyment, and if it happens too often, will turn them off of reading completely (Bialstok, 1992).

Family one extended that viewpoint to reading and printing that came home from school. "We don't want to stress the idea that this is homework, we don't want her to shy away from it. Don't stick them behind a desk and "you've got to this now" but if they're moved to do it they will." Other parents concurred, describing how they made efforts to

complete the take home activities, but did not push if the child was resistant, waiting to work until the child was in the mood.

*When to begin reading.* There was some variation among parents on when to begin reading to their children, with some remembering starting when their children were just days old, others between three and six months, and some starting between one and two years of age. Family five, when asked how old their children were when they began reading to them said, “days old. We would sit and read to them right away. Little short books. I would mostly talk about [what was on the page]. I would not necessarily read, but stay on a page.” But all parents read to their children long before school began, and long before their children would have been able to follow the print on the page.

*Literacy activities.* Differences became apparent in perspective and descriptions of the types of literacy activities occurring in the home. Some parents essentially pointed to the read aloud as the major or even only type of literacy to occur in the home. This does not necessarily mean that there was less literacy in these homes, in some cases, it meant a lot of literacy, sometimes hours of reading books. It did suggest, however, that there was a view that reading to children is mostly what parents are expected to do to carry out their role in literacy. Other families leaned more to the other end of the spectrum, providing school-like workbooks for their children to do activities with sounds, phonics, letters, and word building. No one suggested that this was a forced, or required activity for their children, but rather that they tried to use it like a game, fun activity, or one-on-one time with a parent in an effort to help literacy development. One family’s response described activities that spanned the spectrum from informal reading aloud, to more structured, formal reading instruction. The read aloud was a staple in the house, as

were some specific skill development activities: “reading is one [activity done as a family], that’s a big one...before bed they always get a story, or he whittles two or three out of me”. But literacy development, in addition to reading to children, in this family, was mostly done through games, songs, nursery rhymes, functional activities, and toys. Mom sang to the children, sometimes doing songs with actions. She often recited nursery rhymes to the children, played games with a literacy focus similar to ‘Go Fish’ but substituting cards with upper and lower case letters, used magnetic letters to practice sounds and identify sounds, and followed recipes while cooking or baking to identify letters, and/or sounds. There was some direct literacy activity in this family using flash cards of word families, for example, but this activity was only carried out voluntarily, with fun in mind, and at the child’s request.

One other difference was evident when parents were asked to list or describe the kinds of literacy that occurred in their homes. The general perspective seemed to be that only activities involving books or letters constituted literacy activities. Before prompting, parents’ responses usually included children looking at books, reading stories to their children, and possibly writing or printing letters. After some further questioning or prompts, parents might also include their reading in which they served as models, following recipes, or drawing attention to print in the environment. These activities were mostly what came to mind when parents thought about literacy in their home. Only one family was able, independently, to point to all kinds of activities as literacy enriching for their children. “They always see us reading. It’s amazing how cramped for time we are and yet we take the time to read. And I think that’s helped that they just see that.”

These parents also discussed the use of the computer, learning the words and actions to songs, making up stories or doing puppet plays, reading bible stories after supper, following recipes, sticking to bedtime reading routines, using nursery rhymes and songs to help develop a sense of rhyme, making reading fun by changing the words around in well known stories, encouraging independent reading or copying letters, and playing with magnetic letters, and flash cards. Again, this does not mean that these and other valuable literacy enriching activities were not happening the other homes, rather that parents may not have realized the influence and impact that all kinds of activities can have on literacy development.

#### *Frequency of Literacy Events*

Many of the responses regarding the kinds and frequency of literacy activities occurring in the homes of families interviewed overlap with responses in previous categories. However, it is helpful to list and describe the specific literacy activities that appear to be occurring in participant homes, even if parents did not perceive the importance of such events for literacy development. It is also valuable to take note of the frequency of some of the literacy activities, as frequency can often have an impact on the effectiveness of literacy development.

*Reading aloud.* All parents included reading to their children as a literacy activity that was common in their homes. Many described bedtime reading as a regular occurrence in their families, although the length of time ranged from five to forty five minutes of reading. Most families read every day, but some families reported that reading to their children occurred three to four times a week, or that reading might happen in large blocks of time, reading a stack of books for as long as an hour.

Several parents noted a change in reading patterns after their child started school. For some families, attending school meant an increase in bedtime reading, since there was less time for reading during the day. This, of course, also indicated a longer single time period devoted to reading. Before age five, either before the oldest child went to school, or as a description of the differences between the older and younger children, parents suggested that reading added up over the day, a story here and there, changing to a longer time, but perhaps only once a day for the older child. "Our older son is guaranteed a half hour at bedtime, and our younger son is probably half an hour added up over the day. Sometimes more." For others, it meant a decrease in reading to their children. "This year has been one of the worst for books. Just because of our older daughter being at school, she doesn't like that structure at home. She likes more free play."

*Writing.* All spoke of writing letters, whether through school initiated activities, or home initiated as literacy. The majority of the families referred to a school activity that was sent home called "rainbow letters", where the children were to practice printing a letter three times, in three different colours. Other writing was more spontaneous. Family three described how their five year old would take a book that belonged to mom, and copy all the words from the cover. Family one remembered the writing in which their daughter would engage. "One time she got a diary, a pretend diary, and she was drawing letters in there. I was doing work (at the table) and she wanted to know how to spell words." Only family five mentioned printing practice as an initiative to enhance reading development, using preschool workbooks that they purchased themselves. Most families talked about writing or colouring with markers and crayons, but only family four

referred to that specifically as a home literacy activity. Family one had a little table set up and a storage container with pencils and crayons that their children could access whenever they wanted. Family six mentioned a similar arrangement, but kept an eye on the use of the markers and pens so that they were not used on inappropriate surfaces. Family two had reduced the use of markers and pens because of the potential mess, but did provide each of their sons with a magnetic drawing and writing board that both boys enjoyed.

*Independent reading.* Children spending time alone looking at books was an activity that appeared to be universal. Every family told of one or all of their children enjoying looking at books independently. Most families, such as family one, observed their children sitting quietly and going through a stack of books. In the case of family one it was a joint activity involving the two older children, as it was for family three's two daughters, whereas it was a solitary activity in family six, mainly to avoid disagreements over books. "It's, 'I can't see! He won't share!' So we try to discourage it in a way. It's, 'here's a book for you, then you can trade.'" Family four also described independent reading as a time their oldest son used to be alone. "He goes off on his own and closes the door. That's something he does on his own. Those are serious moments for him." Family two noticed their younger son looking at books on his own, but did not mention the older son engaging in that activity. Books on tape were also a way that some of the children were able to read books on their own. In this way, children could hear, and perhaps follow the story independently. The audiotape indicated the appropriate time to turn the page. Families one and three both found that their children enjoyed these, and had some for each of their children. "Those kits work well. If you put a tape on, they'll

sit down, share the book, read it together, look at the pictures, and wait for the 'ding' to turn the pages."

*Environmental print.* Fewer families thought of environmental print as a way to engage in literacy. Three or four of the families referred to environmental print, pointing out letters on signs, and buildings as literacy, but it did not come up as a response, even with prompting, for the remainder of the participants. Family six said that "the children might see us going through flyers, or if we're driving in the car, I'll point out signs. It's mostly directed by me, it's getting a little better with him", and family four did the same. "What I do a lot in the car now is read anything we see on trucks and signs. And now he is the one picking it out." Family three used environmental print for practice with sounds. Dad would "see a stop sign and say 'Stop. What does that start with?' And she'd (the older child) say 'sssssss—S!'"

*Computer programs.* Three families mentioned computer activities as literacy, whether that was just using the drawing or writing program on the computer, or CD ROMs with games of an educational nature.

*Singing.* Families one, three and four talked about singing as a way for literacy to occur. The girls in family one enjoyed singing together, and in family four it was tied together often with swinging on swings attached to the basement ceiling. Singing and nursery rhymes were connected in describing how they were used to practice rhythm and rhyme. Family three, while also indicating that their daughters, especially the older one, loved to sing, suggested a tie to print awareness. "That's another interesting thing she does. She'll open a book and sing. She sings through the pages. It'll have nothing to do with—like she'll sing 'Jesus Loves Me' to a Disney book. But she's put together the idea

of songs and words in a book.” The older son in family two was also interested in music, although the parents did not make a verbal connection between music and literacy.

*Modeling reading.* Despite everything parents and teachers tell children, they will mostly learn from, and imitate, what they see. Parents, then, need to lead by example. Children who see parents reading for their own pleasure at times other than the read aloud period, will take note and read for pleasure themselves.

Some families indicated that their children did not see them read often. In the case of family six, it was because of the children that mom did not feel she had time to read, but had enjoyed reading in the past. Family two felt watching parents read would be boring for children, and tended to do their own reading and writing after their children were in bed.

The children in the other families would see their parents reading, in some cases it was occasionally, in others it was quite regular. The reading material ranged from following recipes while cooking, to reading magazines and newspapers, books, and work-related material.

In family three, mom described a great deal of reading on her part “I read about three novels a week. I know. It’s crazy. On the couch, and I just, like if they’re playing dollhouse, I snag twenty minutes there. Or if I’m cooking at the stove, I’ve got a book in one hand. I’ve now started doing all my long tones [on the flute], which takes about a half-hour a day, and play all my scales. And I sit with a book the whole time.”

Mom in family one had often enjoyed reading her own books while her two older daughters went through theirs, but was currently finding that harder with the baby added to the family.

In family one dad was often seen reading the paper, and would engage the children by reading the comics with them. The other distinctive mention of a father reading for pleasure was in family four where both parents were described as reading for enjoyment, as well as reading material that was work-related. In family three, dad could be seen doing reading and writing related to school work, marking, and planning, but did not tend to read as much for pleasure as mom.

Some suggest that children need to see enthusiasm shared when they initiate a literacy event, whether that be asking for a new book to be read as soon as it comes home, or taking a break from parental work to read to a toddler who's been tugging and shoving a book under a parent's nose all afternoon (Taylor, 1983). Two families mentioned allowing their children to interrupt their daily activities to read when the child initiated the event. Family four was very deliberate about ensuring that this happened. It could happen when the parent was engaged in reading a note from school, for example. This triggered an interest of the child's, who would then bring a book and ask to hear the story. Mom's response was always "okay, I'll put that aside, and we'll do this quickly." "I have to find these incidental moments. If he is doing his colouring or looking at books and he asks me a question, I make sure I am right there to stop everything so I can help".

*Engaging in talk.* Conversation was an important part of daily life for most families, either over dinner, or bedtime. It might have been just to learn about the child's day, or in some cases, it was to figure out a concern, such as a possible problem the child was having at school.

*Playing games.* Playing games, whether for specific literacy purposes, or general did not come up often during the interviews. Only family four mentioned playing 'Go

Fish', 'Trouble', 'I Spy', and similar activities to help in literacy development, and games like chess and checkers for related skill development such as learning strategy and carrying on conversations.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

Based on the themes that emerged, the following summarize the level of parental understanding of literacy development and center on reading aloud; providing books; a general view of literacy and all that the word encompasses; a lack of understanding or misunderstanding about the process of literacy development, specifically, early literacy behaviours; a general reliance on the school to carry out and guide parents regarding what is required for literacy acquisition both in school and at home; and the influence that personality or disposition has on literacy development.

### *Reading Aloud*

Of the five characteristics of literate homes described by Taylor (1983), reading aloud to children was the greatest factor, and was more encompassing than the first four. This is simply because there are so many aspects to it. Storybook reading can become an important part of a child's life and a child's interactions with his/her parents. In the six participant families, all seemed to understand the concept of reading aloud to children, and incorporated storybook reading in some shape or form into their lives. Many engaged in book reading as a bedtime routine, reading anywhere from one to four stories, spending from five minutes to 45 minutes on this activity. Many also made room for reading together throughout the day, especially before children enrolled in school. Reading occurred both at the initiation of the children and of the parents. All families indicated that their children enjoyed being read to, and most children would welcome an

invitation from parents to sit and listen to a story being read. Many children were also reported as bringing books to parents and asking to have them read. The read-aloud was a key component in daily life for these families with young children.

However, not all parents appeared to be aware of the more specific advice found in the literature regarding reading to children. There were differences noted in when to start reading, what type of reading material was appropriate for different children, and how often it was necessary to read to children.

Some parents reported reading board or cloth books to children in infancy, one family mentioned days after birth. At the same time, however, there were parents who did not begin to read to their children until between the ages of one and two. If parents wait until the child is already walking and running, it will be much more difficult to foster the closeness and comfort of reading aloud, later, when the child just wants to move (Trelease, 2001).

Babies can sit and listen to voices for long periods of time. Listening to an entire picture book is very possible with a small infant, even though the understanding of the language may not be there yet. Listening to mom or dad's voice can be very calming and soothing in the early days, weeks, and months. Longer picture books do not have to be stored away in favour of shorter, wordless books, or board books. In fact, babies can learn to enjoy a story early, and then are better able to sit and enjoy stories after they have become more mobile and interested in moving. At that point, parents may need to almost revert back to wordless books, and short board books, when attention spans are short.

Of those families that indicated reading to their babies began before one year of age, the reading materials described were mostly cloth books, wordless picture books, or

board books, books with only one or two words on the page. Many children, then, may be missing out on early story experiences, when early neuron connections need to be established.

How often to read to a child also resulted in a wide range of ideas. It is important to read to children regularly and often. The amount of time is less important than the regularity. Planning to read to a child everyday will ensure that he or she hears a story at least four times a week, since even the best laid plans do not always come true (Kropp, 1993). Understanding the busy lives led by most families today, the challenges of two working parents, as well as the ones faced by single working parents, both Kropp (1993) and Cullinan (1992) recommend finding at least fifteen to thirty minutes a day to read with your child. Obviously this is a message that not all parents are internalizing. While there were parents who reported reading for 20-45 minutes every day, others read for five or ten minutes. To be a successful reader and develop both receptive and expressive language, children need more.

The other aspect of the read-aloud is time. Storybook reading needs to be happening regularly (Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1995). There were families who did not read with their preschoolers every day. While reading to children did occur, and sometimes for long periods of time, the literature suggests that every day is important, and aiming for every day will guarantee four to five times a week (Kropp, 1993). Making reading a part of daily routines ensures a greater chance that reading will take place.

Parents in this study were aware of the value of reading to their children, but perhaps need more clarity regarding scope and dimension. Information regarding starting

to read to children at birth or before, plus the importance of reading for 15-30 minutes every day needs to reach new parents and families earlier and more emphatically.

### *Accessibility of Books*

Having books available wherever children might find them is a good start to ensure that read-alouds are a successful endeavour. Again, book accessibility emerged as an area that parents were, for the most part, fulfilling, with a few small missing pieces.

All parents felt that their children had free access to books in their homes, and all felt that there were plenty of books for their children to read. The differences became apparent when more detailed descriptions were given. In some homes, books were only found in the living or family rooms, preventing children from looking at books on their own, after having been put to bed. Some families had more book locations, but Kropp (1993) suggests books need to be all over the house so that whenever the desire to hear a story arises, a book can be located. In searching for a toy in the toy box, children may come across a book, and ask that it be read. A stack next to a big easy chair makes cuddling the perfect opportunity to read. Books in the bedroom send the message that reading is a part of the bedtime routine. Family four seemed to have a complete understanding of the need to make books available, listing seven or eight places where their children had full access to books. This stock was replenished often, new books being brought out periodically from a special collection under the parents' bed.

This description of books in the house also suggests that children need access both to large numbers of books, plus variety. Again, the descriptions that most parents gave suggested hundreds of books, with books found in places ranging from bookshelves in bedrooms and recreation rooms, to stacks in living, dining, and family rooms, or in all

of these places. Responses to this question also showed that perhaps parents need more specific guidelines to know what is appropriate. One family reported “at least fifty books” and felt that was sufficient. While possible, it would be unusual to find quality literature and a balance of styles, topics and levels in a collection of that size. At the same time, parents could feel overwhelmed if given the understanding that children need stacks of 40-50 books in every room in the house. If cost is a factor, Kropp (1993) reminds parents that if there is not the space and money to own a lot of books, a library card and weekly trip will still ensure a variety of books are in the home.

### *Literacy and What it Means*

Part of helping a child become a successful reader is understanding all the components and facets of literacy. To limit the meaning of literacy to decoding the printed word also limits the value given to all the literate activities in which young children engage. Literacy involves diverse meaning-making, expanding one’s world view, and becoming familiar with both oral and more formal written language structures. Literacy is a functional component of daily life; speaking, reading, and writing are associated with daily activities. All parts of literacy have purpose and meaning.

When parents view literacy only as the ability to decode the written word, they can be missing out on all kinds of potential learning opportunities in their young emergent reader children.

Most parents in this study defined literacy as being able to read the printed word. By using this narrow definition, many activities that children engage in may be going by unnoticed and untapped. If parents do not see literacy as trying to make sense with print, they could miss opportunities to inquire about a letter that a young child may be writing.

They may miss the chance to teach that words have meaning through demonstrating writing a note, either to the child, or to someone else. When meaning is given to literate activities, like reading the paper, making a list, or reading instructions, children carry over these activities to their make-believe play, and ultimately internalize the idea that print is a necessary part of life. Play involving literacy seems much more valuable than practising letters on a page or a completing a workbook activity, primarily because such play is child-initiated.

Parents need to see literacy as all kinds of reading, writing, and speaking activities. They need to help stimulate and build neural connections and language by reading aloud to their children, and connecting the story to similar events in the child's life. Parents need to add purpose to literacy by writing notes, and sending cards to their children. They need to show the function of literacy by asking what is on the 'list' that the child just wrote, or have the child retell the story they composed on a piece of scrap paper.

The children in the families studied may well be writing stories, making lists and signs, or trying to understand some of the adult print in their world. These activities need to be pointed out as meaningful to literacy development, so that parents can discuss them, expand on them, and praise children's efforts.

#### *Emergent Literacy Characteristics*

Literacy is a constantly developing skill that begins long before a child can segment words into letter clusters and sounds. The early stages of literacy, or emergent literacy, like early attempts at speaking are often approximations of the actual word or phrase (Gibson, 1989). In learning to speak, efforts are given meaning, and are praised

and encouraged. Similarly, efforts in the early stages of reading need to be viewed as reading, a part of a whole process, and not as separate from a skill that has not yet begun to develop. Children need to be supported, praised and encouraged in their early efforts.

There are many emergent literacy behaviours that need to be perceived as reading to help instill a belief in a child that s/he is a reader. However, the participant families did not view many of these behaviours as reading. They viewed story recitations as only memorizing.

Very small children can have very short attention spans. Sometimes they can not sit through a long story, or even a short story. Just because they can't sit, however, does not mean they can't listen. Parents can keep reading even if a small child slides down off their laps to play. A lot of listening can still be going on. But some parents perceived moving away from the reading event as an inability to listen, and often stopped the reading, thinking that the child was too young, or too playful or active to appreciate listening to a story.

When very young children sit and go through a stack of books, they are learning how to hold a book, how to turn pages, maybe even how text moves from left to right and top to bottom. These skills are practiced and reinforced when small children read books alone. Many of the parents interviewed described how their children enjoyed looking at stacks of books. They were quick to point out, however, that "well, they're not really reading, they're just looking at the books."

After hearing a story many times, some children can tell the whole story on their own. Being able to follow text from left to right, turn pages, and tell a story are key early literacy behaviours that are a part of the process of literacy development. It is not just

memorization, nor is it to be dismissed. Developing a sense of story, and learning a story through repetition is a valuable part of reading development. Parents need to encourage this by first, allowing as much repetition of a story as a child might request, as difficult as that may be for the parent, and second, by ascribing value to a child's story.

Likewise with writing, parents can encourage the early stages of development by encouraging children to make marks on paper, and then to assign meaning to those marks, so children learn that writing has a purpose, that it is to communicate. Taylor (1983) suggests that "scribbling" be honoured by posting it on the fridge. Parents can encourage children to include writing in their play, to share with children the understanding that literacy is in every part of life, making menus, writing lists, sending letters, signing cards, or putting up signs.

Understanding that literacy begins long before a child can read a sentence on a page, and that there are so many emergent literacy behaviours that develop and need to be supported and strengthened before a child is able to read a sentence on a page is an important part of a parent's role in literacy development.

#### *Letting the School Take the Lead*

McCain & Mustard (1999), in *The Early Years Study*, emphasize how important the first five years are to the development of the brain. Neural pathways have the potential to develop, strengthen, and be made permanent from stimulation and early interactions with primary caregivers. Conversely, neural pathways also have the potential to be weakened and possibly eliminated from a lack of that interaction and stimulation. Much of this intense development goes on before most children reach age

five. In terms of language development and laying the foundation for literacy development, the first four to five years are vital to the success of a child.

And yet, there appear to be many families who wait for a child's first teacher, in kindergarten, to inform them of activities they should be doing at home, or elements of literacy development they may have missed. By that time the critical years for language and cognitive skill development have begun to wane, the child is almost at the end of those early intensive brain development years (McCain & Mustard, 1999).

Educators may be grateful to learn that parents are confident about what teachers know and do, like family five, who stated that "I am sure they are doing what they should be". They may also be flattered that families believe in them, and rely on them for guidance and instruction, like family one who said, "my thinking is that if there's something that we should do she'll tell us." But, at the same time, educators should be somewhat alarmed that parents are waiting for this information until their children have already begun school, when perhaps it is getting close to being too late.

There are also parents who feel unsure of their ability to help their child become literate. They are afraid they might explain a concept incorrectly, and perhaps confuse their child. Other parents find themselves in reading situations where they are unsure of the development process and what information, or in what order they should provide it.

Parents care deeply for their children, and want to do all they can to help their children develop to their full potential. But waiting until their children reach five years of age to receive early literacy information could slow down the development, or worse, even preventing it.

### *Personality and Literacy Development*

In Taylor's (1983) discussion of the elements of a literate home, she found that parents of successful readers did not accept the possibility of failure in terms of learning to read. To them, reading was like eating and sleeping, necessary for survival. Reading and all aspects of literacy were made an integral part of life for each member of the family, sending the message that reading is for everybody and everybody needs reading. In some of the families interviewed, reading was perceived as something for older children or older people. Very young children or babies were thought of as being unable to handle literacy activities with books, papers, pens and pencils removed from their grasp, or young children were viewed as in the way when older children or adults were engaging in literate activities.

All children need to read, and read successfully to succeed in life. Therefore, suggesting that a child has a personality that is in conflict with reading is cause for concern. All children can learn to read and enjoy reading, not just those who enjoy quiet activities, are not as interested in sports, or have longer attention spans. While most of the first born children in the participant families had a well developed interest in reading, and enjoyed both looking at books independently and having stories read to them, often the second child in several of these families did not engage in much literate activity. Reasons given for this were that the second child was "more independent", "more interested in sports and gross motor activities", "too playful to sit", "more active", "had interests in other areas like TV", or "was not ready for that yet."

In many of the participant families, the divergent personalities of these children, to some extent, influenced both the type and amount of reading that occurred. The older

children enjoyed sitting and looking at books alone and listening to stories read to them at bedtime, sometimes long stories that might take more than one sitting to read. The other children, ranging in ages from nine months to three years were given plastic, cloth, or board books, but kept away from standard hardcover or soft cover picture books with literary merit. Markers and other writing tools were moved out of their reach. They did not participate in bedtime read-aloud times, and did not often have books in their bedroom.

Whether it is personality or birth order that causes such a difference in literacy activities cannot be determined from this study alone. However, somehow the understanding needs to be conveyed that it is imperative that all children be successful in literacy development, in whatever way suits their needs, regardless of their age, learning style, or personality.

## Chapter 5

### Considerations

As a result of the analysis of the findings of this study, the following considerations and questions are presented.

#### *Areas of Consideration for Schools and Educators*

While the focus of this study was literacy in the home, specifically in the early years, or the emergent literacy stage, the discussion with parents of kindergarten aged children does have some considerations for educators, both within the school that was the base for the study, and for schools and educators in general.

The following considerations for schools are suggestions based on the findings from the six participant families. Schools may need to:

1. Enhance efforts for early communication with member families regarding literacy development. If parents better understand the process, they will feel better equipped to support and encourage literacy development.
2. Define literacy as speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing, more all-encompassing than just being able to read the printed word.
3. Continue to emphasize the importance and value of literacy and family literacy in enhancing a child's chances for becoming a successful reader, and achieving a greater quality of life.
4. Teach parents what types of behaviours in young children are a part of literacy development, so that parents, being more aware, can highlight, reinforce, and extend the meaning of activities such as scribbling on paper, looking at books, noticing environmental print, repeating nursery rhymes, making up silly words that rhyme, and

connecting books to real life. A child's ability to express her ideas is related to future success in school (Strickland & Shanahan, 2004).

5. Increase early communication to highlight all the experiences that can be influential in literacy development such as playing games, engaging in talk, giving meaning to print, singing, rhyming, acting out rhythms, writing notes and letters, reading signs, and regular book sharing.
6. Try to reach parents one to four years before children come to school to explain specific literacy activities that can be included on a regular basis at home, such as engaging in conversation, incorporating reading and writing into play, writing notes and thank you cards, repeatedly reading books, making trips to the public library, pointing out the title, author, illustrator, front and back when sharing a story, and providing specific guidelines on frequency and length of storybook sharing and making books accessible.
7. Proactively provide more general, and more specific information on the process of literacy development as children move from the emergent stage to the early reading stage so that parents know how they can support and reinforce school efforts. Parents can then feel more confident about providing additional instruction to their children as they begin formal reading instruction.
8. Provide information ahead of time on skills and concepts to be taught during each month or term so that instead of feeling behind as they work on areas of weakness identified in a report card, parents can support classroom learning and provide additional help in areas where their child may be struggling, or delayed.

The independent school that was the focus of this study may need to:

9. Investigate the viability of accessing support from Healthy Child Manitoba (Government of Manitoba, 2000) to develop an early literacy program in order to connect with families prior to their children starting kindergarten.

*Areas for Further Investigation in Government Agencies and Institutions*

Whereas the time to lay the foundation for literacy is in the first five years of life, schools may be limited in their ability to share information about emergent literacy development with parents prior to students entering kindergarten or grade one. The critical years for language and cognitive skill development start before age one and begin to wane by age four. There are concerns, then, that if only the schools are given the mandate to provide parents with early literacy information, this information and education is received too late. Current community programs rely heavily or solely on grant funding and volunteers to maintain programming levels, and are limited in their ability to reach large numbers of families. Perhaps using those agencies that have access to and connection with caregivers of children from birth to four years of age would increase the chances of parents receiving the message of early literacy and its impact in time to carry it out effectively.

The following are for the consideration of governmental or publicly funded organizations:

1. Prenatal education classes could develop and include a literacy component as part of prenatal, postnatal, and early infant care.
2. Literacy, specifically information regarding accessibility to books and reading to children as soon as possible after birth as a part of brain development could be a part of the education and information provided by the Public Health Nurses on home visits

to families with new babies. The Manitoba government Baby First and Early Start programs that provide an aspect of this to a limited number of qualifying families could be expanded to reach more than families identified from 'outside' as at risk.

3. Pediatricians or family doctors could include literacy education as a part of early infant checkups and immunization visits.
4. Community and media efforts regarding literacy could be expanded and increased to emphasize current information on early years learning, including specific guidelines and suggestions regarding storybook sharing. Information could be provided on strategies for sharing books with very small children, for making books accessible in the home, and for other activities that comprise or support literacy development such as writing notes, memos, and grocer lists, playing games, speaking and dramatizing stories, following recipes, reading instructions, reciting nursery rhymes, and engaging in rhyming activities.

#### *Questions to Consider for Further Exploration*

The following are potential areas for further exploration, areas in which participants in this study raised questions:

1. Are these perspectives the same for parents in other schools or situations? Further similar studies could be employed to confirm findings, either with similar size samples for consistency or larger samples to gain a broader perspective. To maintain comparability of findings, studies would need to be controlled for participant differences, such as economic disadvantage, developmental delays, and learning disorders.

2. Will the children experiencing more literacy in the home be more successful readers in school? The reading levels of the children in the participant families could be assessed in successive grades to look for correlations with these findings. The research questions could include: (a) Are there any statistically significant relationships between the amount of home literacy activities reported by parents in the preschool years and future success in reading? (b) Are there any statistically significant relationships between parental perceptions about literacy development and future success in reading?
3. As parents learn more about literacy development through interactions with the school, will their activities or perspectives change? An extended study could be employed to learn differences and changes in parental perceptions as children progress further into the school system, as well as changes in parental perceptions and activities with subsequent children.
4. Are literacy activities occurring in the home? Observation of literacy activities in the home could be carried out, either through checklists given to families or through participant observation. This could determine if various literacy activities are occurring or not occurring, and whether parents are viewing them as related to literacy development.
5. What are important books to have, and is there an appropriate amount to have in the home? Information could be sought regarding an average amount or range of books needed in the home to promote successful literacy development, after controlling for other factors such as parent involvement, and the quality of home literacy experiences.

6. Do different children require different approaches to engagement in literacy? Further study could be carried out to learn more about how different literacy activities engage different children, and what the determining factors might be that account for differences, whether it be the personality, disposition, or temperament of the children, birth order, or increased household activity as more children are born into the family.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

There are limitations to this study. The findings are limited because of the small number of participants. There may be similarities and parallels with more parents from more than one school, but the perspectives of the six participant families may not reflect the experiences and views of a larger group from a wider sampling of schools.

Participants also reflect a rather homogenous group of parents, not only in terms of educational and religious backgrounds, but also in terms of socio-cultural and economic standing. The similarities in their backgrounds may have resulted in a narrower view of parental roles in literacy and literacy experiences in the home.

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## Appendix A

### *Questions*

There are a few basic questions that will be used to gain information from the parents. However, they are only a guide and parents will be encouraged to express the ideas they feel are important. Other questions may arise as a result of parental answers or to provide clarifications.

1. Tell me about your child's interest in and knowledge about reading.
2. What kind of reading or literacy does your child see and experience at home, or with you, as a family?
3. What experiences do you believe are necessary for your child to learn to read successfully? Where and when do you believe reading development will take place?
4. Do you feel that you have or have been able to provide your child with all the experiences and materials that he/she will need to be a reader? If not, what information do you feel would be of benefit or is needed?

## Appendix B

### Attachment 1

#### *Ethics Protocol Submission Form*

##### 1. Summary of Project

###### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to learn more about parental understanding of literacy development and their role in fostering early literacy before formal instruction takes place. I plan to interview parents of kindergarten and preschool children and infants. The questions for parents will cover two major areas, the first being parental understanding of how children become readers and how reading develops. The second area will examine the use of literacy in the home and the literacy experiences parents provide for their children.

###### Methodology

Qualitative research methodology will be used to investigate the issue of how people view, understand, and carry out literacy activities in their homes. I will collect this information primarily through in-depth interviews and observation.

The purpose of this effort is to understand individual histories in regard to fostering early literacy development in the home and to allow individuals to present circumstances from their own perspective. What is learned is not reducible to a set of variables or statistical relationships. In order to learn about the perspective of others, I will use a "naturalistic" approach, endeavoring to enter the world of the informant, to "see it from the inside". Efforts will be made to develop a rapport with the informant, and to minimize the effect of the research upon the setting.

At the same time, I know that I may influence the informants and will continually try to account for this during the collection and analysis of the data. I will attempt to hold my own biases and beliefs in abeyance. Bogden and Biklen, (1982) call this procedure "bracketing." Qualitative researchers try to suspend their perspective and learn directly from the worldview of the informant. In asking questions, a qualitative researcher aspires at times to an intellectual naivete.

###### Procedure

To gain an appreciation of parental understanding of literacy development, I will attempt to learn the perspective and knowledge of parents currently caring for children aged five and under. Their view of literacy, its definition, elements, role in the home, its importance, and how it is enacted will be determined. The initial data will be descriptive, in the informants' words, narrative accounts of their experiences and then reflective to try to understand/elicit the parental understanding of early literacy and the role they play in its development.

Two interviews of one to one and one half-hours will be conducted. Open-ended questions will cover the broad range of literacy in the home (see 2. Research Instruments). If necessary, a third interview will be conducted to clarify and confirm initial findings. A retrospective interview will be offered to each family to review the content of the first interview for accuracy.

Permission will be secured to interview five or six families (10-12 informants, assuming two parent families) during the course of this study. This number of individuals should offer a wide range of backgrounds and personal characteristics. Additional informants, if necessary, will be sought as the study progresses. The interviews will attempt to cover the broad areas mentioned, knowledge about literacy, its importance, its elements and use in the home, parental understanding of and confidence about guiding the development of literacy, and the value they place on its development.

Parents of each informant family will be interviewed together in their homes. The interview as well as observation of the home and evidence of literacy will constitute the data.

## 2. Research Instruments

### Interview Questions

There are a few basic questions that will begin the conversations and obtain information from the parents. However, the questions are only a guide and parents will be encouraged to express their own viewpoints. Other questions may arise as a follow-up to parental responses or to provide clarification.

1. Tell me about your child's interest in and knowledge about reading.
2. What kind of reading or writing does your child see and experience at home, or with you, as a family?
3. What childhood experiences do you believe are necessary for your child to learn to read successfully? Where and when do you believe reading development will take place?
4. Do you feel that you have or have been able to provide your child with all the experiences and materials that he/she will need to be a reader? If not, what information do you feel would be of benefit or is needed?

## 3. Study Subjects

To discover parental perspectives about early literacy development, I will choose families of students in kindergarten, or those who have children registered for kindergarten where the kindergarten child is the oldest or only child.

The names of all families enrolled in kindergarten in the school in which I teach will constitute the general population for the study. From that population, those families in which the child enrolled in kindergarten is the oldest child will be considered for inclusion in the study. Six participating families is the minimum goal. If too many families qualify than are needed for the study, random selection will be employed until the desired number of families have committed to be interviewed.

#### 4. Informed Consent

Participants will be invited to sign the accompanying letter of consent, a copy of which will be provided to the administration of the school. The researcher will arrange a mutually convenient time to conduct the interviews with the families.

#### 5. Deception

No deception is involved in this study.

#### 6. Feedback/Debriefing

Families will be given the option of a third interview to verify the contents of the first two interview transcripts. A copy of the completed study will be available at the school.

#### 7. Risks and Benefits

There are not risks to participants in this study nor to any third party.

#### 10. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants will be identified by pseudonyms, and the data will be stored on one database that is password protected. Data will be destroyed upon completion of the research.

#### 9. Compensation

No subjects will be compensated for participating in this study.

## Attachment 2

### *Letter of Request to Undertake the Research Study*

Mr. Al Koop  
Chairperson  
Board of Directors  
Calvin Christian School  
245 Sutton Ave.  
Wpg., MB  
R2G 0T1

Dear Mr. Koop,

I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba, and I have completed all my coursework towards a Master's degree in Education with a major in Curriculum, Humanities and Social Sciences. My research interests lie in parental support of early literacy.

I am requesting permission of the board to undertake my master's thesis in this area. My thesis is being carried out under the direction of Dr. Beverley Zakaluk, as chair, and Drs. Sheldon Rosenstock, and Zana Lutfiyya as members of the thesis committee. Research and ethics guidelines as prescribed by the University of Manitoba will be followed in all aspects of my research.

The study, in brief, will involve obtaining the names of all of the families enrolled in kindergarten and from that list, identifying families in which the child enrolled in kindergarten is the eldest. All potential families will be contacted, and a random selection of five to seven of the families agreeing to participate will be chosen.

Two interview sessions of one to one and one half hours will be conducted and recorded. These interviews will form the data for the study. At any time families can withdraw from the study without penalty or fear of repercussion.

The interviews will consist of broadly worded questions with appropriate prompting. (see attached). Questions will focus on parents' understanding of the role they play in the development of children's literacy, knowledge of literacy and characteristics of a literate home, experience, successes and problems their child might have achieving literacy, and information or supports required from educators to achieve greater levels of literacy success.

Confidentiality of all participants in the study will be maintained. All forms and interview data will be identified by number to ensure anonymity. Sessions will be

audiotaped and tapes will be destroyed when the study is completed. Fictitious names will be used in reporting.

Gathered information will then be summarized with emerging patterns identified and accounted for. Analysis is inferential on the part of the researcher, who attempts to understand the data in the context in which they were collected. The purpose of my study is to learn how we might change and improve our parent forums, and reading evenings at Calvin Christian School.

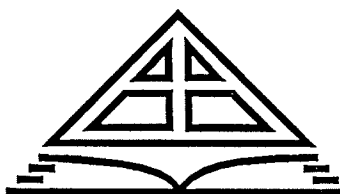
I thank you for your anticipated support in this important research area, and your approval to proceed with my study. I would be pleased to answer any additional questions you may have. Please contact me at \_\_\_\_\_ or my advisor, Dr. Beverley Zakaluk at 474-9028.

Sincerely,

Maureen Vaags-Nyhof  
Teacher-Librarian

Attachment 3

*Letter of Permission Granted*



**Calvin Christian School**

245 Sutton Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba R2G 0T1 (204) 338-7981 Fax: 339-3280

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Maureen Vaags-Nyhof

, MB R.

Dear Maureen:

At the Board meeting last night we unanimously endorsed your request to conduct your research within the Calvin Christian School families. We are pleased to be able to support you in your research.

If you would like a letter of endorsement and introduction that you could give to the subjects of the study we would be pleased to provide one. For such a letter would appreciate your suggestions regarding appropriate wording.

We wish you success in you ongoing academic work and look forward to hearing about your findings.

On behalf of the Board of Directors,

David Taylor  
Principal

Attachment 4

*Letter of Explanation About the Research Study*

Dear Parents,

Maureen Vaags-Nyhof, our teacher-librarian, is a graduate student in the Master of Education degree program at the University of Manitoba. As part of the requirements for her Master's Thesis, she is conducting a study to investigate your thoughts and ideas about your children's reading development.

The purpose of the study is to gather information about children and reading based on their experiences and activities at home before they come to school. We will be using what we learn to improve communication between parents and the school and to better support your children's reading development.

Participation in this study is voluntary, with selected families being contacted by Maureen. Participating families will be interviewed in two or three sessions of approximately one to one and one half hours in duration.

Confidentiality of all participants in the study will be maintained. All forms and interview data will be identified by number to ensure anonymity. Sessions will be audiotaped and tapes will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Fictitious names will be used in reporting. Participants will be allowed to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

The general findings of the study will be made available to participants upon request. Additionally, overall results will be shared with the board or Education Committee, and resource and classroom teachers.

You may contact Maureen at \_\_\_\_\_, or her advisor, Dr. Beverley Zakaluk at 474-9028.

Yours truly,

Dave Taylor  
Principal

## Attachment 5

### *Letter of Invitation to Participants*

Dear Parents,

I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. As part of the requirements for my Master's Thesis, I am conducting a study to learn about reading development in children based on their experience at home before they come to school and your role in helping them as they become readers.

The purpose of the study is to learn about reading development in children and identify those areas where greater support is required from educators.

You are invited to participate in this research study. For the study, parent(s) will participate in two or three interview sessions of approximately one to one and one half hours in duration, scheduled when mutually convenient. Participation is voluntary, and participants can withdraw at any time without penalty. Participating, or being unable or unwilling to participate in this study will in no way affect you or your child's standing in the classroom or school.

The confidentiality of all participants in the study will be maintained. All forms and interview data will be identified by number to ensure anonymity. Sessions will be audiotaped and the tapes will be destroyed when the study is completed. Fictitious names will be used in reporting.

The general findings of the study will be made available to the participants upon request. Additionally, overall results will be shared with the school's principal, resource and classroom teachers.

I will be contacting you in the near future to determine your interest in participating in this study. If, in the meantime, you have questions or require further information, you can contact me at . You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Beverley Zakaluk at 474-9028.

Sincerely,

Maureen Vaags-Nyhof

Attachment 6

*Letter of Consent for Participation in the Research Study*

Perceptions of Early Literacy in the Home Among Parents

Maureen Vaags-Nyhof

Dear \_\_\_\_\_  
(name of parents)

You are invited to participate in my research. I hope to gain an understanding of parental perspectives on literacy development and literacy activities that children participate in at home before they attend school. I will attempt to determine if there is a gap between the information teachers and parent have regarding early literacy learning at home. This information is provided to help you make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

I am a graduate student at the University of Manitoba. For my thesis I am doing a qualitative study on early literacy and the perceptions of parents surrounding early literacy, specifically the literacy that takes place in the home before children receive direct instruction in school. My thesis will be published by the university, and will be available for review at Calvin Christian School. My advisor, Dr. Beverley Zakaluk can be contacted if there are any questions that I am unable to answer.

You are eligible subjects for this study because of the age and grade level of your child enrolled at Calvin Christian School. Only parents of children in kindergarten who are the oldest or only child in their family are invited to participate.

If you decide to participate in this research study, I will arrange for 2 interviews with you at your convenience, which will last approximately one to one and one half-hours each. The interviews will be audio taped, and will be available for your review and clarification. The tapes will be transcribed to written form and themes and results will be compiled.

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. All audiotapes will be destroyed after the completion of the study. All names will be changed to ensure confidentiality. No deceptions will take place during the study, and no one will be placed at risk for participating. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would

like more detail about any information mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully.

Your signatures below indicate that you have voluntarily decided to participate in this research project as a subject and that you have read and understand the information regarding participation. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be informed as your initial consent, so you may feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. I may be reached by telephone at 669-8679.

The Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board has approved this research. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact Lorna Guse or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122. A copy of this consent form has been given to you keep for your records and reference.

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### CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study on early literacy and the perceptions of parents surrounding early literacy development.

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(Participant's Name – please print)	(Participant's Signature)	(Date)
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(Participant's Name – please print)	(Participant's Signature)	(Date)
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