EXPLORING EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN VCCS EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS ACROSS THE STATE

A Capstone Project

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by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

Children begin learning foundational early literacy skills from birth and make rapid progress during infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015; Justice, 2006). During this critical time of rapid growth, children are often being cared for by early childcare providers who are often inadequately prepared to provide effective, developmentally appropriate instruction in the area of early literacy (Isenburg, 2000; Laughlin, 2013). Community colleges across the country offer early childhood programs that provide instruction in child development and effective teaching practices in hopes of increasing the quality of childcare currently provided (Early & Winston, 2001; NAEYC, 2010). In the Commonwealth of Virginia, community college programs offer two courses that specifically address early literacy instruction: CHD 118 Language Arts for Young Children and CHD 119 Introduction to Reading Methods. This capstone study explores the extent to which instructors of these courses at five community colleges address the five areas of early literacy development, which include phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, early writing, concepts of print, and oral language (National Early Literacy Panel (2008).

Purpose

The goal of this capstone study was to analyze and describe the early literacy instruction provided in five Virginia Community College early childhood programs and compare that instruction to the evidence base regarding early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy. Results add insight into the content provided in five Virginia Community College early childhood programs by providing descriptive evidence of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy. The results can potentially add to existing research on early childhood associate degree programs, guide future research, provide needed knowledge to inform changes in college curriculum, and guide professional development opportunities for current early childhood teachers.

Methodology

To explore the content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy presented in early literacy courses, I used document analysis of course textbooks, PowerPoints, and syllabi, along with semi-structured instructor interviews, and class observations. For solely online courses that I could not observe face-to-face meetings, I was granted access to the course blackboard site to further explore class materials provided to students. Data analysis involved a three step, cyclical process including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification.

Findings

Data analysis yielded strong evidence of early literacy instruction across all five participating sites; however, there were three main areas that could be enhanced. First, the areas of early writing and oral language could include a broader content focus. Second, as the content taught in each of these two areas is broadened, discussions around learning trajectories could address the skills surrounding composition (ideation) and handwriting (letter formation) in early writing as well as the pragmatics of oral language. Third, specific informal and formal assessments that relate to the five areas of early literacy development could be addressed more consistently across the five sites.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of the findings led to the following three recommendations.

1. The results of this study should be shared at the next early childhood peer group conference to ensure participating instructors as well as other instructors across the state have access to this information.
2. The blackboard site where early childhood instructors across the state can share resources and ideas should include a space for instructors to share resources related to early literacy in general as well as specific areas related to this study's findings.
3. Instructors should consider adding readings or other course materials related to broader, more inclusive definitions of early writing and oral language

as well as specific early literacy assessments. These materials could be discussed in detail throughout community college early literacy courses, and instructors could consider adding specific assignments where students would apply their knowledge.

4. Instructors should consider how early literacy instruction can fit into the larger early childhood program. For example, early literacy assessments and field application could be integrated into courses focused on assessment and pragmatics of oral language could be discussed in courses related to working with families.

5. In this study, instructors provided a strong foundational knowledge of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate instruction. To strengthen application from the classroom to a real-life classroom, instructors should consider adding field application activities into the lab portion of early literacy courses in order to discuss real-life examples within the college course.

In an effort to provide recommendations for participating community college instructors as well as early childhood instructors across the state, recommendations address ways to share knowledge and resources that might improve current early literacy instruction provided to future early childhood providers and potentially to the children they serve.

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APPROVAL OF THE CAPSTONE PROJECT

This capstone project, ("Exploring Early Literacy Instruction in VCCS Early Childhood Programs Across the State"), has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

_____
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_____Date

DEDICATION PAGE

This capstone is dedicated to my husband and mom who both provided endless support, patience, and a listening ear throughout this journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey to earning a doctoral degree has been filled with ups and downs. There are many people who came alongside me to provide encouragement, advice, and a helping hand. I want to take time to thank those people here.

I want to start by thanking my amazing husband. Dale, you supported me at every twist and turn tackling anything I needed from cooking and cleaning to adjusting your work schedule to keeping Clark busy while I wrote endless papers. None of those things went unnoticed, and I will forever appreciate all you do to cheer me on and make my dreams possible, even when it's a strain on yours. Now that this chapter is closing, I look forward to cheering you on towards your next endeavor.

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As I look back at this journey, I am so grateful for all the people in my life who valued this accomplishment, cheered me on without hesitation, and held me together to the end!

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Chapter I: Introduction

Often, learning to read is viewed as a process that begins when a child enters kindergarten. Research on the reading development and behaviors of children from birth to preschool, however, identifies an important part of learning to read that occurs long before school begins with no clear line separating reading and prereading (National Research Council [NRC], 2001). Infants and toddlers demonstrate early language skills through scribbling, manipulating books, and playing with sounds (Justice, 2006). Between birth and kindergarten, children are rapidly learning words and their meanings as well as early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, how books work, and basic comprehension skills (Institute of Medicine [IOM] and National Research Council [NRC], 2015). During these ages of rapid development, many children are now being cared for by adults other than family. In 2011, 61% of children under the age of five were being cared for by a non-relative (Laughlin, 2013). This causes early childcare providers to play an important role in a young child's language and literacy development.

According to data compiled by Child Care Aware of America, in 2016 there were over 4,000 regulated childcare centers or family day homes providing childcare services in the Commonwealth of Virginia ("Child Care in America," 2016). The quality of instruction and responsive care provided by staff employed at these centers will affect our youngest children well into their school age years, especially in the area of early literacy. The abundance or lack of rich early literacy experiences, quality adult-child interactions,

and strong models of literate behavior will ultimately affect a child's later success with reading and comprehension skills (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010; Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsch-Pasek, 2011; Morrow & Rand, 1991; National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2008; National Institute of Child Health and Development Early Child Care Research Network [NICHD ECCRN], 2005; Paratore, Cassano, & Schickedanz, 2011; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Hart and Risley (2003) explain language development in three year olds predicts skill levels in both vocabulary and reading comprehension in third grade. The original study, as well as follow up data, clearly demonstrates a crucial window for building language for children ages birth to four. Children who experience a lower amount of exposure to language during this age begin formal schooling behind their peers who received more exposure to language. This gap remains in effect through later grades, which emphasizes the importance of providing rich language development early in a child's life.

While there is decades of research supporting the importance of early childhood education, early childhood teachers have historically not been prepared to provide quality, effective, research-based instruction and care (Isenberg, 2000; NRC, 2001). In Virginia, public school preschool teachers are required to earn their bachelor's degree and teaching license. Private childcare providers across the state, however, are not held to the same educational requirements (Virginia Department of Social Services [VDSS], 2016). The Virginia Department of Social Services oversees several types of childcare environments such as child day centers, family day homes, and religious exempt centers. Each of these centers has a range of educational requirements to be a lead teacher when working with children from birth to preschool.

To begin working as an aide at a child day center, the only requirement is the applicant be sixteen years old. To become lead teacher, there are several options that include combinations of experience, training, and completing coursework in early childhood education. Often, childcare providers start out as an aide and receive on the job training and experience that allows them to be promoted to lead teacher. When running a family day home, the childcare provider must have successfully completed high school and have three months of experience, which could have occurred in a variety of settings and does not have to be a paid or supervised position. Religious exempt centers must employ childcare providers who are at least eighteen years of age; however, each center decides the qualifications required for their specific center. These varied requirements throughout Virginia lead to many childcare providers having little to no college level background in early childhood education.

Several research studies have investigated the value and effect of earning a degree in early childhood education or a related field on the quality of education provided (Bauml, 2011; Flint, Maloch, & Leland, 2010; Grisham, 2000; Helfrich & Bean, 2011; Kosnik & Beck, 2008; Maloch et al., 2003; Smith, 2009; Wong, Chong, Choy, and Lim, 2011). Whitebook (2003) reviewed research connecting teacher education level to child outcomes. Again and again she found that higher levels of teacher education led to increased child outcomes on cognitive testing, positive teacher-child relationships, and more patience as well as understanding of children's needs from the teacher. Much of Whitebook's review focused on teachers with bachelor's degrees having the highest quality programs. Tout, Zaslow, and Berry (2005) agreed that education and quality are related, however, the research does not clearly identify how specific levels of education

alter the quality of care provided causing questions about the effects of associate degree or technical programs. While many research studies highlight benefits of childcare providers earning a degree, the results are mixed and likely affected by other factors such as the quality of the teacher preparation program and ongoing professional development (Early et al., 2007).

In addition to mixed results on higher levels of teacher education leading to higher student outcomes, Whitebook and Ryan (2011) argued that the majority of research has focused on the quantity of education and not enough is known about the quality of content taught in early childhood higher education programs. Many studies cite that bachelor's degrees should be the requirement for early childhood teachers both in public school and private childcare settings; however, this claim may not be considering the quality of content provided in associate degree programs versus bachelor's (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). The course content required can vary widely from college to college; however, most include: education and care of children from birth to third grade, including dual language learners and young children with disabilities; interactions with children and families from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds; assessment/observation of young children; literacy, language, and numeracy instructional strategies; social and emotional development; physical health and motor development; and classroom and behavioral management (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006).

Gaining content knowledge relating to early childhood is not sufficient to ensure early childhood teachers understand the why and how behind effective instruction and

care for our youngest learners. According to research compiled by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council,

> effective instruction in subject areas (such as reading and math) results from a combination of knowledge of the subject; of the learning trajectories necessary for children to gain proficiency in the subject's major concepts, themes, and topics; and of developmentally appropriate pedagogy and content knowledge for teaching, that is, how to represent and convey specific content and how to design learning experiences to support children's progression along the learning trajectories in the subject. (2015, p. 335-336)

Early childhood teachers need to acquire knowledge and skills in each of these areas as well as knowledge about assessments, student engagement, and adapting lesson plans to fit students' needs in order to provide quality early literacy instruction in a supportive learning environment (Chhabra, Kapinus, & McCardle, 2008; International Reading Association [IRA], 2010; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2010).

Knowledge of Early Literacy

Early literacy is a complex learning process that begins as early as the first few months of life (Justice, 2006; Strickland, 1990; Teale & Sulzby, 1989). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) describe early literacy as the "skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are presumed to be developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing and the environments that support these developments" (p. 849). This is further broken down by the type of skill. Inside-out skills, which children need in order to decode text include knowledge of letters and sounds, punctuation, sentence grammar, and the cognitive ability needed to organize and apply that knowledge. Children also need outside-in skills such as contextual and semantic knowledge to gain meaning from the text. Similarly, Storch and Whitehurst (2002) separated literacy learning into two distinct

domains: oral language and code-related skills. Oral language skills included semantic, syntactic, narrative, and conceptual knowledge while code-related skills focused on conventions of print, alphabet knowledge, and phonological awareness. Although these skills are both needed for reading success, Storch and Whitehurst believed the emphasis placed on each domain changes with the age of the child. For early learners, both domains played an important role in learning to read.

When building the foundations of literacy, children tackle a variety of skills related to phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, early writing, concepts of print, and oral language (NELP, 2008; Paratore, et al., 2011; Roskos, Christie, & Richgels, 2003). Phonological awareness refers to the ability to attend to the sounds of spoken language separate from focusing on the meaning (Lesaux & Geva, 2006). A continuum of phonological awareness tasks require students to identify rhymes and syllables as well as blend, segment, and manipulate phonemes or sounds in words (NELP, 2008; Paratore et al., 2011). Research underscores the importance of phonological awareness skills to later reading success (Adams, 1990; Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; Lonigan, 2006; Snow et al., 2008).

Alphabet knowledge includes naming letters as well as identifying their sounds. This ability is a crucial foundational skill that leads to later success with decoding, spelling, and conventional reading tasks (Hammill, 2004; Piasta, 2014; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). As children grasp the alphabetic principle, that knowledge is reflected in their writing; however, early writing begins with scribbles before moving to letter like forms and on to conventional written text. While many early childhood educators focus on handwriting, letter formation, and name writing, Gerde,

Bingham, and Wasik (2012) emphasize what early writing is all about. Practicing the activity of forming letters is important, but writing is about expressing and communicating ideas and opinions in print. Even young children should begin to see that their writing has meaning and is not merely a handwriting exercise.

Concepts of print refer to how books work such as how to hold the book right side up, which way to turn the pages, reading from left to right and top to bottom, and the difference between letters, words, and spaces (Reutzel, 2015). Knowledge of these skills can be taught through interactive shared reading experiences and have been connected to later reading success (Lomax & McGee, 1987; Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003; NELP, 2008; Reutzel, Fawson, Young, Morrison, & Wilcox, 2003). Oral language refers to a child's expressive language or ability to verbally produce spoken language as well as receptive language, which is the ability to understand what is heard (NELP, 2008). This skill begins at birth when infants react to sounds and conversation around them through eye contact, smiling, and cooing. Infants listen to streams of sounds, noticing stress patterns, syllables, and words commonly used by adults around them (Harris et al., 2011). By 10-to-14 months, infants connect these sounds to meanings and begin producing a few words (Fernald & Weisleder, 2011). This process starts children's long and intricate journey to building oral language skills. Over time, the focus of oral language shifts from words to sentences to elaborate descriptions of events (Rowe, 2012). The level of a child's language skills has been connected to later reading and comprehension development (Harris et al., 2001; Hart & Risley, 2003).

Learning Trajectory of Early Literacy

Historically, perspectives of early literacy development emphasize different areas of influence (Rhyner, Haebig, & West, 2009). Developmental perspectives are concerned with a progression of knowledge children begin learning from birth. Each new skill learned is seen as a building block for the next skill towards success with conventional literacy. Component perspectives target knowledge and skills in the areas of print meaning and form. Literacy is viewed as more of a checklist of skills students need to master than a continuum of knowledge children move through. Finally, child and environment perspectives focus on family influences and literacy practices occurring within the child's home. Each perspective has a specific focus; however, researchers advocate a combined, comprehensive approach to early literacy development (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Rhyner et al., 2009; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; van Kleeck & Schuele, 2010; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). This combined view guides this study and demonstrates multiple influences early childhood teachers should consider when planning effective early literacy instruction. Components of early literacy were described in the above section detailing knowledge of early literacy. The following sections detail aspects of developmental and environmental views of early literacy.

Developmental Trajectory

Theories outlining language and literacy learning as a developmental progression can guide the timing of early literacy instruction. Van Kleeck (1998) identified two stages children move through when learning to read. During the first stage, children from birth to ages three and four focus on print being meaningful. Infants explore how to hold a book, turn the pages, and pay attention to illustrations. Hopefully, the infant receives

positive attention from adults reading aloud, which leads to enjoyment during the reading experience. Toddlers and preschoolers begin participating in the reading process by pointing to and labeling pictures, asking and answering questions, and talking about events in the story. During story discussions, adults can model advanced vocabulary and comprehension skills such as inferencing or making connections between story events and real life.

Another focus included in stage one is exposure to the alphabet through songs, books, and games. During storybook reading and early writing experiences, children can learn print directionality and story structure. These early exposures to print meaning provide foundational reading skills children will apply as they learn to read texts on their own.

Around the age of three or four, children transition into stage two where print forms and early comprehension skills become the focus. Literacy activities shift from hearing and singing letters to recognizing printed letters and learning their sounds. This knowledge is then applied to identifying beginning sounds in words, priming children for decoding work when tackling unfamiliar words. Along with alphabet knowledge, stage two includes a focus on building vocabulary and early comprehension skills such as predicting and story retells.

Strommen and Mates (2000) found similar evidence to support characteristics of the developmental perspective, including viewing literacy as a social activity and focusing on the meaning of text before aspects of print. Strommen and Mates explored children's ideas about reading through open discussion about books and literacy related activities. Eighteen three year olds participated in the study and were followed through

age five or six. Through discussions with these preschoolers, Strommen and Mates found developmental patterns in how young children view and approach reading. One of the first patterns identified reading as a social activity. Here the focus was on a routine shared by the adult and child, which included the adult's actions of turning the page, looking at the pictures, or putting the child to bed. During this time, the social interaction outweighed aspects of the book being included in the child's view of the reading process.

As children progressed in their ideas about reading, they began focusing more on the book and the idea of telling a story through a sequence of events. Children began pretend reading using pictures or memory of the story. Children associated reading with something adults or older children could do, and did not connect the ability to decode words or connect letter sounds to print as part of the reading process. Towards the end of this study, Strommen and Mates noticed children beginning to understand reading involved focusing on the print; however, many of the preschoolers did not know how to decode and understand the text. Two children reached an understanding of using strategies to read words and began to apply their alphabet knowledge as well as early comprehension skills. Between the ages of three and five, children moved through these ideas about reading at different paces; however, they progressed through each set of ideas, which provided evidence to support the developmental perspective of early literacy skills and abilities.

Influence of Environment

An alternate perspective on early literacy development includes factors related to the child and his/her environment that may positively or negatively affect development. Research on family dynamics emphasized biological as well as environmental factors

affected a child's overall development and academic growth (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1995; Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). Supporters of this perspective placed importance on the interactions children have with parents and family members as well as outside influences including the family's culture and socioeconomic status. Teachers and/or childcare providers were also seen as an important influence on the child's development.

Wasik and Hendrickson (2004) outlined four variables that should be considered in the literacy development process: parental characteristics, child characteristics, the home environment, and parent-child relationships. Parental characteristics influencing a child's literacy development included culture and ethnicity, parental beliefs, and socioeconomic status. Across many studies, researchers observed differences in how cultures integrated literacy into everyday situations, the amount of book reading occurring in the home, and the quality of language and literacy activities (Anderson-Yokel & Haynes, 1994; Gadsden, 2004; Gee, 2001; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001). These differences affected a child's success in a preschool program where the teacher may or may not approach literacy tasks in the same way, causing confusion for the child and the family. Children growing up in homes where less time is spent on book reading and quality activities started school at a disadvantage academically.

Parental beliefs also affected a child's early literacy development. While parents across backgrounds and socioeconomic status emphasized the importance of being literate, their personal beliefs and experiences often guided how they approached literacy learning in their home (Chansa-Kabali & Westerholm, 2014; Fitzgerald, Spiegel, & Cunningham, 1991). Some parents viewed literacy as something children learned in school while others began exposing their child to literacy activities long before the

children entered school. The type of activities carried out in the home also differed. Some families focused on skills development such as learning the alphabet while other families viewed reading as a social activity that is modeled by adults and the child is encouraged to participate. Parental beliefs affected adult-child interactions, the amount of literacy materials in the home, and the child's understanding about the concept of literacy (Bus, 2001).

The final parental characteristic that affected a child's literacy development is socioeconomic status. Children in low- and high-SES homes often had different experiences with the type of reading they saw in their home, the amount of literacy materials in the home, and the amount as well as quality of literacy interactions between adult and child (Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2001). Research linked children's varied home experiences to later school success (Hart & Risley, 2003; Stuart, Dixon, Masterton, & Quinlan, 1998). Children that experienced a higher amount of quality literacy interactions with adults performed better on letter-sound knowledge assessments as well as oral language knowledge.

The second variable outlined by Wasik and Hendrickson (2004) focused on child characteristics. A child's engagement and sustained attention with literacy activities affected how often parents carried out these activities within the home (Lonigan et al., 1999; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). The child's language proficiency and health also affected literacy development. Preschoolers diagnosed with a language impairment were more at risk for developing reading disabilities (Scarborough, 2001). One cause of a language impairment was related to recurring or prolonged ear infections that caused a temporary loss of hearing (Roberts & Burchinal, 2001). When a child's

hearing was diminished or muffled, he or she lost the ability to clearly discriminate sounds in words and accurately learn letter-sound associations.

A third variable affecting a child's literacy development was the home literacy environment. As previously explained, the amount of shared book reading, literacy materials in the home, and the presence of quality adult-child interactions each affected a child's literacy knowledge and skills, as well as his or her conceptual knowledge about literacy. The fourth and final characteristic described by Wasik and Hendrickson (2004) revolved around parent-child relationships. Here, the social and emotional support provided in the home was considered. Researchers connected positive, warm, nurturing relationships between parent and child to enhanced literacy skills for the child (Berlin, Brooks-Gunn, Spiker, & Zaslow, 1995; Britto & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; Bus, 2001; Foster, 1997).

Pedagogical Practices in Early Literacy

Children develop their literacy knowledge through play, social interactions, shared reading, hands-on activities, and connecting literacy to other content areas. From an early age, children interact with literacy through toys, play, and books. For example, an infant may play with soft alphabet blocks, toddlers may imitate making a grocery list, and parents may read books to their children. During play and exploration, children begin to practice and improve a variety of literacy skills (Morrow & Rand, 1991). When a child observes or participates in a wide variety of everyday literacy activities such as following a recipe, making a card, and reading a magazine or newspaper, literacy becomes a more meaningful activity (Morrow & Rand, 1991; Strickland, 1990; Teale &

Sulzby, 1989). These activities actively involve children, allowing them to construct their own understanding of how literacy works.

Throughout a typical day in an early childhood education environment, there are multiple opportunities for teachers and caregivers to encourage and improve children's language skills. Depending on the child's age and developmental level, teachers can use play and everyday activities to build a child's basic vocabulary, foster meaning connections, model diverse and sophisticated vocabulary, and discuss past and future events (Rowe, 2012). As children participate in activities such as story time, free play, learning centers, and mealtimes, teachers can be intentional about using adult-child interactions to prompt language development. What children see as having fun playing with blocks, playdough, sensory items, or arts and crafts can become a rich language experience centered on the child's interests and conversation (Colker, 2008; Doorley, n.d.; Ford & Opitz, 2015; Kwon, Bingham, Lewsader, Jeon, & Elicker, 2013; Swartz, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study is depicted in Figure 1. This framework suggests early childhood teachers need information about a combination of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy to build a strong knowledge base on the what, why, and how of early literacy instruction. This framework aligns with early childhood research, which demonstrates having one or two of these elements is not enough for teachers to effectively provide quality instruction to our youngest learners (IRA, 2010; NAEYC, 2010; NCATE, 2010; NIM, 2015; NRC, 2001). Having content knowledge is not sufficient if the teacher does not also understand

how to appropriately teach that content. Similarly, knowledge of content and teaching strategies is not sufficient if the teacher does not also understand learning trajectories explaining the progression at which children learn literacy skills.

While a plethora of research supports what early childhood educators need to know, little research exists on the content of courses taught within early childhood education programs, especially associate degree programs (Burchinal, et al., 2002; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). Each section of the framework will be evaluated within community college early literacy courses to determine the extent they are or are not included in the course curriculum.

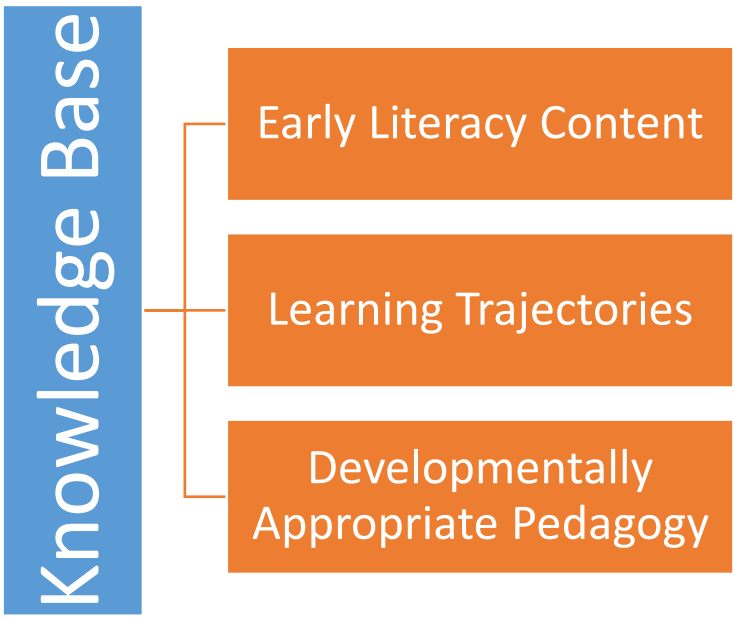

Figure 1.1. Conceptual framework for the capstone project.

Statement of the Problem

In my current position as an Assistant Professor of Education and Early Childhood at a rural community college in Southside Virginia, I have opportunities to work with childcare providers and directors in the college's service region. During my

first year at the college, one director in the area was working towards earning her certificate in early childhood education and enrolled in several of my classes. In conversations with her, she expressed concerns about the lack of adult-child interactions and effective instruction occurring in classrooms at her center. She talked with me at length on how to prompt the teachers at her center to interact more with the children and create more engaging lessons. I was reaching a point in my doctoral program of completing a required internship to investigate a problem of practice. My conversations with this director opened a door to complete my degree requirements while also attempting to improve instruction at a local childcare center.

To explore more about how caregivers at this specific center encouraged early language and literacy development, I spent more than one hundred hours observing and working with infant through preschool teachers. During this time, I observed minimal interactions and instruction that were both poor in quality and developmentally inappropriate. In each classroom, the day mostly included meeting the basic needs of the children and keeping them under control. Adult-child interaction across classrooms consisted mainly of providing directions for an activity or giving commands. For example, I observed teachers saying, "Sit down. Come here. Be quiet. Color your paper. Glue this here." I noted a range of instructional practices that included a minimal focus on literacy instruction and teaching skills through worksheets or whole class discussion. There were small amounts of teaching through play, writing, fine arts activities, and lessons including books or shared reading opportunities.

When reflecting on the low quality of early literacy instruction occurring at this center, I quickly assumed that the childcare providers had not received instruction or

training in this area; therefore, I could not expect them to know about developmental reading and research-based instructional strategies. When learning about the teachers' backgrounds, however, I discovered that three out of the four had earned associate degrees in early childhood education from the local community college. Being familiar with the curriculum in the program, I knew that students are required to take two early literacy courses. In conversations with the director, she also shared with me several attempts she had tried to improve instruction within the center. For example, she has enrolled in the Virginia Quality Initiative through Smart Beginnings. This program is voluntary and free for childcare center providers. The aim is to assess the center's current program and provide goals for improvement in the areas of staff education levels, professional development, curriculum, assessment, environment, and interactions (Virginia Quality, n.d.). Also, the director reached out to the region's infant/toddler specialist who came in to observe the teachers and provide suggestions for improvement. Finally, she participates in a director's group where they take turns visiting each other's centers to receive and/or provide suggestions.

The director hoped interactions with each of these outside agencies would provide crucial mentoring experiences for her employees. Researchers have reported several benefits of mentoring programs for beginning teachers including increased morale and job satisfaction along with improved classroom and time management (Bullough, 2005; Lindgren, 2005). The best mentoring programs provide opportunities for beginning teachers to be active participants in observing, questioning, conferencing, and setting goals to improve aspects of good teaching (Clark & Byrnes, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2004; Kahrs & Wells, 2013; Schwille, 2008; Womack-Wynne, 2011). While this could

be an area of improvement within this childcare center, more research would have to be done on current and past mentoring practices to determine areas of strengths and weaknesses.

When reflecting on my internship experience, I became interested in the curriculum taught in the community college's early childhood program specifically related to early literacy and whether or not it was the same at community colleges across the state. I wondered if students are learning about developmental reading instruction and research-based strategies to teach skills such as phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. This capstone study stemmed from my internship experience and reflections as well as my current position in an early childhood community college program. I used qualitative elements to investigate and describe early literacy instruction provided across five Virginia Community College's early childhood programs. Understanding current instruction can lead to identifying inconsistent or absent practices across colleges, which can spark a conversation on how to align programs as well as ensure instructors are providing all crucial aspects early childhood teachers need to provide effective early literacy instruction to their students.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Decades of research-based evidence underscores that the foundational skills and abilities needed for conventional reading begin at birth (Justice, 2006; IOM & NRC, 2015; Lonigan, 2006; NICHD ECCRN, 2005; NELP, 2008; NRC, 2001). The years between birth and preschool are a critical time for literacy and language development, and the abundance or lack of effective instruction will affect children's later reading success (Dickinson et al., 2010; Harris et al., 2011; Hart & Risley, 2003; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Paratore et al., 2011; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 2001; Snow et al., 1998). During this time of rapid language and literacy development, many children are cared for by someone other than a parent or relative, which places the importance of early literacy instruction on child care providers who historically have been unprepared to provide quality, effective, research-based instruction ("Child Care in America," 2016; Isenberg, 2000; NRC, 2001).

Earning a degree in early childhood education has been shown to increase the effectiveness of teachers along with the quality of their instruction; however, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, qualifications for early childcare providers vary based on the type of center where they are employed (VDSS, 2016; Whitebook, 2003). In addition, Virginia regulations require child care providers to attend sixteen hours of training a year. These hours, however, can be done on any topic from behavior management to working with parents to administering medication to children. The training available is also limited to what is being offered in the center's geographic area. This causes teachers to

not always have access to quality training on topics they are most interested in improving, and there is often no follow-up to ensure teachers are implementing the ideas discussed.

Effective literacy and language instruction stems from a combination of a teacher's knowledge of early literacy content, learning trajectories detailing the order children naturally learn that content, and developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategies that have been proven to be successful in teaching early literacy skills (IOM & NRC, 2015). In this capstone study, I analyzed and described early literacy instruction provided in Virginia Community College early childhood programs across the state. I specifically investigated the content, learning trajectories, and pedagogical strategies taught to college students who are planning to or currently are working in the field of early childhood education.

The conceptual framework as discussed in chapter one and depicted in Figure 1, guided a review of the relevant research. In this chapter, I will first discuss the content, learning trajectory, and pedagogical practices within each area of early literacy. Those areas include phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, early writing, concepts of print, and oral language (NELP, 2008). Second, I will compare what is known about those areas to the knowledge and competencies of early childhood professionals as described nationally as well as in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Finally, I will describe the content offered in literacy courses taught within the early childhood programs offered through Virginia Community Colleges.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is one critical cornerstone of early literacy development. Decades of research prove the interrelatedness of phonological awareness and reading development and highlight phonological awareness as one of the best predictors of later reading success (Cunningham, Zibulsky, & Callahan, 2009; Kozminsky & Kozminsky, 1995; MacDonald and Cornwall, 1995; NELP, 2008; Scarborough, 2001; Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998). Weak phonological skills have also been connected to reading disabilities including dyslexia (Fletcher et al., 1994; Shankweiler et al., 1995; Snowling, 2012; Stanovich & Siegel, 1994; Tamboer, Vorst, & Oort, 2016; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling, & Scanlon, 2004; Vellutino & Fletcher, 2008; Vellutino and Scanlon, 1987). Providing research-based, developmentally appropriate instruction in the area of phonological awareness can ensure students master foundational skills necessary for reading success (Hulme & Snowling, 2015; Snow et al., 1998). Assessing students appropriately and providing intensive instruction as needed can also prevent delays from becoming disabilities (Scanlon, Gelzheiser, Vellutino, Schatschneider, & Sweeney, 2008; Schneider, Ennemoser, Roth, & Küspert, 1999; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006).

Phonological Awareness Content

Effective instruction in the area of phonological awareness begins with teachers' knowledge of phonological awareness content (McCutchen & Berninger, 1999; McCutchen et al., 2002; O'Connor, 1999). Over the past several decades, there has been some debate on which tasks are included under the umbrella of phonological awareness and which should be viewed as separate skills. For example, one view argued separating

rhyme and phonemic skills such as segmenting individual sounds (Muter, Hulme, Snowling, & Taylor, 1997; Yopp, 1988). Another view emphasized the inclusion of phonemic units such as onset, rimes, and vowel sounds while also focusing on word and syllable awareness skills (Treiman, 1992; Treiman & Zukowski, 1991). A much broader view includes rhyme, word, syllable, and phoneme level skills that all relate to the larger concept of phonological awareness and range in levels of difficulty or complexity (Adams, 1990; Bryant, MacLean, Bradley, & Crossland, 1990; Liberman, Shankweiler, Fischer, & Carter, 1974; Treiman, 2000). This more inclusive view guided phonological awareness content analysis completed in this capstone study.

The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) defined phonological awareness as "the ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, or phonemes), independent of meaning" (p. vii). Tasks subsumed under phonological awareness include recognizing rhyme and alliteration; identifying large phonological units such as words and syllables; identifying smaller units including beginning, middle, and ending sounds in words; and manipulating sounds to make new words through deletion and substitution (Adams, 1990; Stahl & Murray, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Each task varies in complexity, which affects children's developmental learning trajectory as discussed in the next section.

Learning Trajectory

Phonological awareness tasks fall along a continuum beginning with a focus on large units such as words and syllables and moving towards more complex skills such as manipulating smaller units, which include individual sounds or phonemes (Anthony &

Lonigan, 2004; Lonigan, 2006; NELP, 2008). Research studies have resulted in a clear hierarchy of skills within the area of phonological awareness. In a study conducted by Anthony, Lonigan, Driscoll, Phillips, and Burgess (2003), "children generally mastered word-level skills before they mastered syllable-level skills, syllable-level skills before onset/rime-level skills, and onset/rime-level skills before phoneme-level skills, controlling for task complexity" (p. 481). In addition, certain tasks within each skill level were easier than others. For example, it was less challenging for students to identify rhymes than produce them. Similarly, tasks requiring students to delete or blend phonemes were less challenging than manipulating and segmenting phonemes. These results support previous research emphasizing phonological awareness as a developmental continuum with tasks ranging from less difficult (larger speech sound units such as syllables or rhyme) to more challenging (small speech sound units such as initial phonemes) (Adams, 1990; Schatschneider, Francis, Foorman, Fletcher, & Mehta,1999; Stahl & Murray, 1994; Stanovich, Cunningham, & Cramer, 1984; Wagner et al., 1997).

Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

When providing instruction in the area of phonological awareness, it's crucial to keep in mind that children are developing skills along a continuum, not static stages where one skill is mastered before the next (Anthony, Lonigan, Burgess, Driscoll, Phillips, & Cantor, 2002; Paratore et al., 2011). Instead of teaching isolated skills such as focusing only on developing rhyming skills before moving to identifying beginning sounds, researchers recommend that educators assess children's progression of skills along the continuum to ensure they are moving towards mastery of manipulating smaller

and smaller units of speech sounds (NELP, 2008). Assessments can be broken into three phases: preassessments to plan instruction, formative assessments to guide instruction, and summative assessments to evaluate instruction. Tomlinson (2007) explained it is crucial to not only assess students from a teacher perspective, but also to share the information with students so they can become a part of their learning journey. Assessments given before and during learning are prime avenues to provide students feedback, which will help them grow as learners.

When assessing phonological awareness, as well as other early literacy skills, many teachers utilize informal assessments such as observations, checklists, anecdotal notes, or portfolios (Lonigan, 2006). These quick, easy-to-use tools, however, may not be enough to obtain a firm understanding of children's knowledge. Standardized measures can be used to ensure children's skills are being measured uniformly. Examples of standardized tests available for phonological awareness skills include the Preschool-Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing, Phonological Awareness and Literacy Screenings-PreK, and the Developing Skills Checklist. A combination of informal and formal assessments can be used to ensure accurate data collection and guide instructional decisions.

Once teachers have identified clear learning goals and completed assessments, they can begin to proactively plan effective instruction that will meet students where they are and move them forward. When choosing appropriate instructional activities, teachers must consider both the students and the curriculum topic being taught. Tomlinson and Eidson (2003) discussed three student characteristics that teachers may choose to modify: readiness, interest, and learning profile.

Readiness refers to a student's knowledge and capabilities in relation to a specific topic—in this case early literacy. It is crucial to identify where students are performing in this area so they can be given moderately challenging tasks that are not too easy or too hard to complete. *Interest* is whatever a student is passionate about or finds motivating. These ideas can be intertwined with the content area to grasp students' attention and allow them to see how their lives and school subjects fit together. *Learning profile* refers to a student's learning preferences, which encompasses learning style, gender, and culture. For example, a student may enjoy working with background noise, learn best through visuals, or prefer to work with a group.

When differentiating by curriculum, teachers can alter the lesson's content, process, or product. A lesson's *content* is what students need to know, understand, and be able to do, which should match the previously identified learning goals. Based on assessment information, students may need to take a step back to review foundational information before being able to grasp the current goals. If students are advanced in the topic area, they can be given tasks that require more in depth exploration to stretch their learning. Teachers can also choose to give students varied materials such as leveled books to teach the content. The major objective is all students are working towards the same learning goals but may require different materials and supports to get there.

Process refers to the activities students complete throughout their learning journey. Similar to content, each activity is focused on the same learning goal but may hit a different learning preference or readiness level. *Product*s are how students demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do. Assessment information gathered

continuously will guide the teacher to differentiate content, process, and/or product based on student readiness, interest, or learning profile.

Vygotsky (1978) echoes the importance of using assessment to develop engaging, developmentally appropriate instruction. His theory explains the importance of identifying as well as teaching within a child's zone of proximal development and the idea that learning should occur through social interactions. According to Vygotsky, children have two levels of development. The first level, actual developmental level, refers to what a child already knows, has mastered, and can complete independently. The second level, the level of potential development, refers to what a child cannot complete or understand independently; however, the child can successfully complete the task after given support by an adult. The distance between these two levels is called the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Using assessment tools, teachers can pinpoint a child's ZPD and provide instruction that is appropriately challenging. As the child masters new skills, the teacher must use continuous assessment to determine the next steps for instruction.

Vygotsky also emphasized that "learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 35). This conclusion stems from the idea that communication begins between children and people in their environment. After this first step, ideas become organized into mental thoughts. Following this line of thinking, students learn from talking and listening to adults or peers in the environment. This new knowledge is then internalized and becomes part of the child's actual developmental level.

There are a range of instructional activities teachers can use to meet students' needs. Instruction may be given whole-group, small-group, or individually. When teaching phonological awareness tasks, teachers can capitalize on a child's natural inclination to play with language (Yopp & Yopp, 2009). Studies resulting in phonological gains in young children focused on teaching skills using a variety of strategies. Teachers utilized games, picture cues, creating stories emphasizing specific sounds being studied, songs, poems, nursery rhymes, clapping or stomping parts of words, using concrete markers to represent phonological units, and comparing units being studied to children's first names (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1995; Justice, Chow, Capellini, Flanigan, & Colton, 2003; Lundberg, Frost, & Peterson, 1988; O'Connor, Jenkins, & Slocum, 1995). It should be noted that educators in each of these studies had extensive training and support in the phonological awareness intervention used. In addition, explicit instruction focused on phonological awareness skills was utilized through play activities, motor movements, and dance within the children's natural environment and routines.

Alphabet Knowledge

Alphabet knowledge is another strong predictor of later reading success (Hammill, 2004; NELP, 2008; Schatschneider et al., 2004; Snow et al., 1998; Stevenson & Neuman, 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Similar to phonological awareness, children demonstrating weaknesses in connecting written letters to their sounds, especially by the kindergarten year, are more likely to struggle in other areas of reading development and are at a higher risk of developing reading disabilities (Gallagher, Frith, & Snowling, 2000; Gough & Hillinger, 1980; Huang, Tortorelli, & Invernizzi, 2014;

Liberman & Shankweiler, 1979; Torgesen, 2002; Torppa, Poikkeus, Laakso, Eklund, & Lyytinen, 2006; Vellutino & Scalon, 1987). The results of research in the area of alphabet knowledge underscore the importance of this early literacy skill. In order for children to develop alphabet knowledge, early childhood educators must understand the necessary content, learning trajectory, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Content

The area of alphabet knowledge includes "children's familiarity with letter forms, names, and corresponding sounds, as measured by recognition, production, and writing tasks" (Piasta & Wagner, p. 8, 2010). This foundational knowledge leads to a firm understanding of the alphabetic principle, decoding strategies, and spelling patterns (Huang et al., 2014). *Alphabetic principle* refers to the insight that spoken words can be divided into smaller units of speech sounds and matched systematically to letters of the alphabet, which aids in decoding, or sounding out, unknown words during conventional reading tasks. This knowledge lays the ground work for developmental phonics or spelling instruction.

The foundational importance of alphabet knowledge and the sequence in which these skills build can be seen in word learning and developmental spelling theories. Ehri & McCormick (2013) explained a developmental model of word learning that also included specific components in each phase. The five phases of word learning are centered on children's knowledge and application of the alphabetic system. Children who have limited knowledge of letters and sounds are working in the pre-alphabetic phase. During this phase, children may be memorizing word shapes found in their environments such as McDonalds or a stop sign. At this phase, students rely on their

memory and context while reading since they do not have enough alphabet knowledge to decode new words. For example, Masonheimer, Drum, & Ehri (1984) presented preschoolers with familiar logos that had been altered by changing an initial, medial, or final letter with another letter having different features (e.g. Xepsi for Pepsi). Children were asked what they saw and what the logo said. Overwhelmingly, the children did not notice any alphabetic errors even when pointed out by the researcher. In addition, when the contextual clues surrounding the text of the logo were removed, the children were not able to identify the word.

As children gain knowledge of letters and sounds, they move into what Ehri calls the partial-alphabetic phase (Ehri & McCormick, 2013). During this phase, children begin applying known letter sounds to decoding unknown words, often focusing on the beginning and ending sounds for pronunciation clues. Repeated exposure to high frequency words aids children in increasing automaticity as well as connecting words to their meanings. Once children master the alphabetic principle, they move into the full-alphabetic phase. During this phase, children are able to automatically recognize a larger number of words and accurately decode unfamiliar words. Now children can focus less energy on decoding each word they see and put more energy into deciphering the meaning of the text.

According to Ehri, during the fourth phase, consolidated-alphabetic, children further their decoding skills through knowledge of more complex letter patterns such as vowel teams, blends, digraphs, and word parts such as base words and affixes. Knowledge of these patterns allows children to more readily apply them to unknown words, leading to faster, more fluent readers. This growing understanding of letters,

patterns, and words leads children to the final phase, automatic-alphabetic, in which word learning skills have become instinctive. Children now tackle unknown words quickly and read with a high level of automaticity and speed.

Similar to Ehri's phases of developmental word learning, developmental spelling theory begins with learning letter sounds before moving into studying word unit patterns and how parts of words connect to meaning. The alphabet layer provides the first level of information children work through when acquiring spelling knowledge (Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2012). Here, students focus on the relationship between letters and sounds. This spelling technique works well for consonants representing only one sound; however, many letters in the English alphabet do not have a clear corresponding sound or may have more than one sound (Invernizzi & Hayes, 2004).

The pattern layer of developmental spelling theory provides students with tools to tackle the shift from direct letter sound correspondence to more complex letter combinations. Bear et al. (2012) explained there are 42 to 44 sounds and only 26 letters in English, resulting in some single sounds being represented with more than one letter. When looking for patterns, however, consistencies can be found that help students make sense of how letters are grouped to create specific sounds. For example, when combining two vowels together, the first vowel often says its name and the second one is silent (e.g. dr*ea*m, r*ai*n, and t*oa*st).

The final layer of developmental spelling focuses on how small units of words affect meaning. Prefixes, suffixes, and Greek and Latin roots can change the foundational meaning of the word (e.g., *un*tie, friend*ly*, and *ab*normal) (Bear et al., 2012). At this phase, correct pronunciation of the word is insufficient. The student must also

understand its meaning. Knowledge of word units and their meanings gives students the tools needed to accomplish that task. As students mature, interaction occurs between these three layers as students determine a word's spelling, pronunciation, and meaning.

Learning Trajectory

The alphabet song children often learn to sing can imply that children learn letters in alphabetical order starting from the beginning and working towards the end. Letters, however, are not all equal in difficulty level; therefore, some letters are easier to learn than others (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012; Justice, Pence, Bowles, & Wiggins, 2006; Phillips, Piasta, Anthony, Lonigan, & Francis, 2012). Differences in letters can be attributed to alphabetical order, frequency the letter appears in print, connection between the letter name and its sound, visual similarity, ease of pronunciation, and whether or not the letter makes more than one sound (Piasta, 2014). A child's phonological awareness ability as well as the letters represented in their first name can also affect the ease with which a child learns letters (Huang et al., 2014).

Several hypotheses have been tested concerning the difficulty level of how children learn letters. Two leading hypotheses will be discussed here. The first hypothesis considers the influence of the letters in a child's first name. Treiman and Broderick (1998) found that children's knowledge of their first name, especially the first letter in their name, facilitates their learning of identifying those letters in print. Often, young children see their name spelled out throughout a classroom setting such as on their cubbies, folders, name tags, and job charts. They also may have heard their name spelt aloud as an adult wrote it on their work. These exposures to their name bridge the connection to identification of letters in print. Research studies testing this theory have

supported the link between children's names and acquisition of letter knowledge as well as producing letter sounds (Bloodgood, 1999; Huang et al., 2014; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012; Justice et al., 2006). However, a child's ability to write the letters in his/her first name is not always connected to knowledge of letter and sounds. Drouin & Harmon (2009) found inconsistencies when matching the letters children could write and ones they could recognize. Thirteen percent of preschool children were able to write all the letters in their first name; however, they could not recognize those letters in isolation. Similarly, 15% of children could recognize all the letters in their first name but not write them. Young children often see their first name written on their cubbies, a name tag, or a class job chart. Early childhood teachers encourage independence by helping children find their names when it's time to hang up their back pack or find their seat at the table. This exposure helps children recognize the letters in their name long before developing the fine motor skills needed to write letters as well as the understanding of how to print words on paper (Bloodgood, 1999). The learning trajectory of writing letters will be discussed further within the section on early writing.

Another leading theory affecting the implementation of alphabet instruction examines the order in which consonants are learned. How a letter sound is articulated can affect the ease or difficulty of its pronunciation and ultimately how long it takes to master the letter-sound association. Researchers have identified a typical developmental trajectory connecting the order in which letter sounds are mastered during speech production to alphabet learning. These results indicate B, M, N, H, P, and W are more easily mastered than, for example, D, G, K, and T (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012; Justice et al., 2006; Sander, 1972). Researchers support the idea that orally producing sounds

during phonological instruction combined with explicit alphabet instruction leads to stronger later literacy success (Huang et al., 2014; Lerner & Lonigan, 2016; NELP, 2008; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Share, 2004). This instructional combination as well as other effective alphabet instruction practices will be described further in the next section on developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

For decades, many early childhood teachers have used a one-size-fits-all letter of the week approach to teach children letters and sounds (McGee & Richgels, 1989; Newman, 2006; Piasta, 2014). In this approach, all children are focusing on the same letter throughout the week and complete various activities identifying the letter, naming objects that start with the associated sound, and tracing or making the letter with various materials such as sand or playdough. Research previously discussed emphasizes that all letters are different and children's knowledge of letters and sounds is based on a variety of factors. Teaching using a whole-class undifferentiated approach does not consider differences in children's existing alphabetic knowledge or the difficulty level of the letter being taught (Piasta, 2014). In a typical classroom, children will range in having no alphabet knowledge to already knowing several letters. Teaching all the children the same letter week to week is not an effective use of instructional time and is not developmentally appropriate instruction (Huang et al., 2012; Jones & Reutzel, 2012).

To teach alphabet knowledge in a developmentally appropriate way, teachers must begin by assessing the children's current knowledge. Piasta (2014) explained various formal and informal assessments early childhood teachers can utilize. Informally, teachers can show children individual letters on paper or by using letter tiles

or magnets. The child is asked to identify the letter and/or its sound while the teacher records the child's answers. A formal assessment commonly used in Virginia is the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening which assesses a child's letter identification knowledge as well as sounds.

Once the teacher has collected assessment data on each student, he or she can identify what the students already know and identify patterns of knowledge throughout the class. When choosing which letters to study, teachers should consider comparing what students know to something unknown as well as comparing letters and sounds that are not visually or phonetically similar to create obvious contrasts (Bear et al., 2012). Students can sort based on sound as well as letter identification and connect them to familiar stories and writing activities. Based on what is known about the ease or difficulty of letters and the current knowledge of the students, the teacher can use small group instruction to focus on letters that students are developmentally ready to learn. Unfortunately, small group instruction is often underused in early childhood classrooms even though it has been found to be more effective than whole group or one-on-one instruction in the area of early literacy (Connor, Morrison, & Slominski, 2006; Wasik, 2008).

Intentional alphabet instruction can be embedded throughout the day using activities such as shared reading, games, movement, and play (Piasta, 2014). Hands-on strategies such as writing letters in sand or shaving cream, creating letters with clay or playdough, and sorting objects by beginning sound can also increase alphabet knowledge (Huang et al., 2014; McGee & Richgels, 1989). Children can identify sounds and letters in their environment whether inside the classroom, on the playground, or on walks

around the neighborhood. Successful interventions resulting in improvement of alphabet knowledge combine identification of both the sound and the letter instead of focusing on one or the other in isolation (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002). Overall, it is crucial to use assessment to create engaging, developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Early Writing

Early writing skills are another important area of early literacy development and are connected to later reading success. Children's ability to write letters as well as their name significantly predicted later success with decoding as well as comprehension skills (Bloodgood, 1999; NELP, 2008). In addition, researchers found writing ability to be predictive of phonological awareness skills, print concepts, and alphabet knowledge (Blair & Savage, 2006; Diamond, Gerde, & Powell, 2008). Analysis of children's growth over time resulted in overlap of growth in each of these early literacy skills. For example, as knowledge of print directionality increased, that skill was seen in children's writing. This connection is captured by Bear et al.'s (2012) literacy braid, which combines multiple elements of early literacy to strengthen a child's overall reading growth. These elements include orthography, reading, oral language, stories, and writing.

Although early writing has been emphasized as a crucial part of early literacy, researchers have found little explicit writing instruction occurring in early childhood classrooms (Dickinson & Sprague, 2011; Gerde, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2015). While classrooms contained materials to encourage early writing, teachers were rarely observed including writing in routines and play as well as supporting writing instruction through modeling and scaffolding. It is important for early childhood teachers to understand what

is included in early writing, the developmental progression of skills, and how to effectively teach children to continuously improve their writing.

Content

The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) defined writing as "the ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one's own name" (p. vii). This capstone proposal used a much broader definition of early writing which includes composition, handwriting, and spelling (Kaderavek, Cabell, & Justice, 2009). *Composition* focuses on the process of generating topics to write about and working through the writing process to successfully put those ideas on paper. *Handwriting* refers to letter formation, and *spelling* connects letter sound knowledge to letter forms leading to a child's ability to write the sounds they hear with logical phonetic choices, even if those choices are not 100 percent correct. For example, early writers may write *BB* for baby or *S* for sun. A child's spelling will match their developmental spelling level and the most salient sounds heard or felt when pronouncing the word.

Learning Trajectory

Children's writing development begins with attempting to communicate a message or idea by drawing pictures, making random marks on the page, or scribbling well before starting to look like conventional writing (Gerde et al., 2012). While the writing alone may be indecipherable at first, children often ask an adult to read what it says, which indicates that they understand that writing has meaning (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). As the child's writing and alphabet knowledge progress, the scribbles take on a more consistent shape with zig zags and loops that begin to resemble letter-like forms. During this prephonetic stage, children's writing does not show a clear

connection between letter sounds and their symbols; however, they are beginning to notice directionality of writing as well as the process of matching speech to print (Bear et al., 2012).

The first conventional letters to appear are often ones found in the child's first name (Bloodgood, 1999; Puranik & Apel, 2010; Puranik, Lonigan, & Kim, 2011; Welsch, Sullivan, & Justice, 2003). Some letters, however, are harder to write than others. Children often encounter difficulties with letters that are visually similar (e.g., *b* and *d*), have directional shifts (e.g., *z* and *s*), and occur less frequently (e.g., *q* and *w*) (Pollo, Kessler, & Treiman, 2009; Ritchey, 2008). Puranik, Petscher, and Lonigan (2013) echoed findings of previous researchers when they ranked letters from the easiest to produce to the most difficult. "The 10 easiest letters for preschool children to write were: O, L, A, B, X, T, H, I, E, and P, whereas the 10 hardest letters to write were: J, K, Z, G, Q, V, U, Y, R, and N" (p. 138). The easiest letters are unique in design and consist mostly of a combination of straight lines, which would make the letter easier to write. The hardest letters contain curves, take multiple steps to form, or are not seen as frequently in a young child's environment. Knowledge of letter formation and children's first names along with their progress in other areas of early literacy can help early childhood teachers decide which letters to teach.

Chapman (1996) explained the development of content children write about as well as how they put ideas together—the compositional elements of early writing. Young children tend to write about actions or events as well as descriptions of objects or pictures. The writing often connects to their real lives, however, less frequently children write an imaginative story. Opinions and emotions are often included throughout the

writing, which usually starts as one word labeling a picture or one phrase about an action or event. The next phase usually includes a list of actions or events before the child begins adding more detail to the writing and representing conventional narrative elements.

While the formation of letters and content of writing is developing, a child's spelling knowledge is also improving. In the 1970s, Charles Read made an exciting discovery that would change how educators viewed children's spelling instruction (Invernizzi, Abouzeid, & Gill, 1994). Read found that children's invented spelling provided crucial information about their overall literacy development. "Children's mistakes were not random errors made in wanton ignorance; they were, rather, rule-governed attempts to apply the alphabetic principle to the sounds of the English language" (Invernizzi et al., 1994, p. 157). This development motivated researchers to analyze students' spelling for developmental patterns. Out of this work came *developmental spelling theory*, which described English orthography in three conceptual categories: sound, pattern, and meaning. The three categories were separated further into stages students work through as their spelling skills develop.

Students writing continues to develop as they focus on sounds. Bear, Templeton, Helman, and Baren (2003) explained this layer of learning relates to the emergent and beginning stages of reading and spelling development. In the emergent stage, students are developing the alphabetic principle and beginning to manipulate sounds in words but cannot reread texts or track accurately. Children may use both letters and numbers, also known as a symbol salad, as well as writing letters backwards or upside down. Since early writers do not have knowledge of many letters and sounds, they often copy letters in

their environment and use the letters of their first name as stand-ins throughout their writing (Levin, Both-de Vries, Aram, & Bus, 2005). In addition, early writers often do not use clear spacing between words further demonstrating a lack of *concept of word*, or accurate speech to print match.

Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

The first step to supporting early writing development is creating an environment that encourages children to engage in varied writing opportunities. Writing centers can include a variety of writing tools such as pencils, markers, crayons, stencils, and different types of paper (Gerde et al., 2012). These same materials can be included in play centers to encourage children to make a grocery list in the kitchen center, write down someone's order while playing restaurant, or make someone a card (Gerde et al., 2015). Teachers can label objects around the room and display posters or signs that relate to activities children complete in the classroom (Mayer, 2007). Creating this environment alone, however, is not sufficient to improve early writing development (Diamond et al., 2008). Guidance and instruction from an adult is also necessary for children to make forward progress.

Before providing effective instruction, teachers must assess children's knowledge of early writing skills to determine what is known and which areas need improvement. The assessment data as well as developmental progressions mentioned above can guide instructional decisions (Puranik et al., 2013). Children understand and improve their writing through observations of and social interactions with more advanced writers (Bodrova & Leong, 2007; Chapman, 1996; Morrow & Sharkey, 1993; Schickedanz & Collins, 2013). These interactions can happen through discussions of story ideas or

including writing in play activities with peers and adults. Teachers can also model expectations for student writing using an interactive process, discussion, and open-ended questions (Mayer, 2007). Most important is understanding the content of early writing along with the developmental progression of skills, and using assessment data to target where the child is currently performing in order to plan effective lessons to move the child forward.

Cabell, Tortorelli, and Gerde (2013) explained specific ways to scaffold early writing skills based on a student's current knowledge and development. When children are at the beginning stages of using drawings and scribbles to communicate, teachers can use strategies to help them have clear separation between drawing and writing as well as writing any letters or sounds they may know. This can be done through sign in sheets, transcribing the child's story dictation, and modeling writing during classroom routines. As children begin to connect letters and sounds, they will start representing salient sounds in words as well as what is heard at the beginning and end. At this stage, teachers can encourage children to write during play activities and assist them in stretching out the sounds in words to write each sound they hear. Children can also attend to beginning sounds during picture sorts, observing teacher modeling, and sharing the pen as appropriate during activities such as morning message.

Concepts of Print

Children's knowledge about how books work, such as directionality, parts of a book, and the difference between words and spaces, is a moderate to strong predictor of later reading success (Morris et al., 2003; NELP, 2008; Reutzel et al., 2003; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Children pick up on these skills by observing print being used for a

variety of purposes as well as seeing print in their environment (Hiebert, 1981). Between birth and preschool, children have a range of experiences and models of reading. This leads to some children acquiring more hours of storybook reading and guidance about concepts of print than others (Adams, 1990). This range of exposure underscores the importance of intentional instruction about concepts of print based on assessment data identifying areas of improvement for each child.

Content

Concepts of print begins with an understanding that print has meaning as well as a variety of functions (Purcell-Gates, 1996). For example, children may observe the difference between a street sign, restaurant menu, and their favorite book. When looking at books, children begin to differentiate between various parts of the book including the cover and pages as well as the picture and the print (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). As knowledge of print concepts progresses, children understand print is read from left to right then top to bottom and print is filled with letters, words, spaces, and punctuation (Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Morris et al., 2003; Treiman, Cohen, Mulqueeny, Kessler, & Schechtman, 2007).

Learning Trajectory

While there is not a developmental sequence children progress through at a defined pace, there are levels of skills children move between when mastering concepts of print (Hiebert, 1981). Mason (1980) described three reading levels based on the types of words preschool children could read as well as strategies they utilized when tackling text. In the first level, *context dependency*, children were able to read environmental print such as signs and food labels that were seen frequently. They were also able to

identify letters and demonstrated a high interest in print, words, and stories. This group, however, did not differentiate pictures from words and only recognized words in a specific context, which led to the name context dependency. At this level, heavy emphasis on context can be connected to a lack of alphabetic knowledge. Children have not yet mastered the alphabetic principle, or the ability to match letters to their corresponding sounds. Until that goal is met, children often read based on memory of frequently seen print instead of focusing on decoding unknown words.

In the next level, *visual recognition*, children solidify writing and reciting the alphabet. They could also read three letter words both in context and some out of context. In this level, children are strengthening their knowledge of the alphabetic principle, leading to improved spelling with beginning sounds being represented accurately. In the final level, *letter-sound analysis*, children were reading stories with multisyllabic words at a relatively rapid pace. They could successfully sound out unknown words as well as apply letter sounds accurately to their spelling. This shift from recognizing what is physically and frequently seen in the environment to a focus on the letters, words, and spaces that make up the text has been noted in later research as well (Ehri & McCormick, 2013; Masonheimer et al., 1984; McGee & Richgels, 1989; Reutzel et al., 2003; Treiman et al., 2007).

Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

Effective concepts of print instruction with young children begins with exposing them to a variety of print. Creating literacy-rich play centers filled with signs, menus, posters, and familiar foods with labels is one way to encourage children to incorporate print concepts into their play (Neuman & Roskos, 1997). Repeated exposure to

environmental print, however, is not enough and often does not lead children to focus on the print itself (Ehri & Sweet, 1991; Masonheimer et al., 1984). Children's awareness of print concepts increases when adults engage and interact with them while drawing attention to how print works (Purcell-Gates, 1996; Mason, 1980). During play activities, shared reading, and open ended discussions, adults can emphasize the letters that make up a word, provide word meanings as well as model directionality and tracking. Shared reading experiences specifically lend themselves to opportunities for modeling fingerpoint-reading, drawing attention to printed words and spaces, recognizing familiar words in print, and connecting letters to their corresponding sound (Reutzel, 1995). Memorizing short, engaging texts such as nursery rhymes is often recommended to encourage these skills as well; however, to increase children's recognition of print concepts during rereadings of familiar texts, adults should engage in reading the memorized rhymes in order to model necessary skills (Ehri & Sweet, 1991).

Oral Language

In simplistic terms, oral language includes a child's ability to verbally express ideas as well as receptively understand language heard from others. In a broader sense, for children to increase their oral language skills, they must also have a strong grasp of vocabulary knowledge, grammar, phonology, and pragmatic skills (Lesaux & Geva, 2006; NELP, 2008). Evidence on the magnitude of the effect oral language development has on later reading success is mixed. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) found oral language to be weak predictor of later literacy success when looking strictly at the predictability of simple vocabulary knowledge; however, this area of early literacy plays a bigger role when grammar, word meanings, and listening comprehension are

considered. Several other studies, however, ranked oral language as a significant or important predictor of later reading success as well as identified weaknesses in oral language as a risk factor for reading disabilities (Aram & Nation, 1980; Bishop & Adams, 1990; Catts, 1993; Catts & Hogan, 2003; Hart & Risley, 2003; Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Roth, Speece, Cooper, & De La Paz, 1996; Scarborough, 1990; Storch & Whitehurst, 2002; Wise, Sevcik, Morris, Lovett, & Wolf, 2007). Research has also linked the growth of vocabulary knowledge to cognitive development and acquiring the necessary skills for reading success (Anderson & Freebody, 1981; Nagy & Herman, 1987; Stanovich, 1986). Based on this evidence, building foundational oral language skills is an important piece of early literacy development.

Content

This capstone study utilized the broad definition of oral language described above. In this view, *grammar* refers to how speakers construct sentences that are meaningful and accurate. Structural language includes semantic and syntactic knowledge that allows children to communicate meaning by grammatically connecting ideas, demonstrating relationships, and appropriately building on social conversations (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Snow, 1983). For example, children learn to use past tense verbs to refer to something that has already happened and future tense for events that will occur. An understanding develops of how contextual dependencies change the words used in a sentence such as saying *a man sleeps* instead of *a man sleep*. *Pragmatic skills* are unique to the culture and social conversational style children are exposed to on a daily basis. This could include how to ask questions, responding to others appropriately, and contributing to the topic being discussed. This broader definition of oral language

emphasizes a view of literacy as a braid where skills in phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and exposure to how language works come together to form strong early literacy development (Bear et al, 2012). One area supports another and all are needed to provide the crucial foundation for later literacy success.

Learning Trajectory

Fenson et al. (1994) conducted a longitudinal study analyzing the expressive and receptive language trajectory in young children and explained the path for an average child. Expressive language is minimal in children younger than one year of age; however, it quickly begins to grow between one year and 16 months. On average, one year olds can verbally express fewer than 10 words. Just a few months later, children are verbally expressing about 40 words. Only one or two words are spoken at a time and are not put together in a grammatically correct way. For example, a young child may say "my toy" or "cookie". During this time, infants are able to understand much more than they can express. By 10 months old, lower achieving children understood around 11 words while higher achieving children understood 154 or more words. By 16 months, this range increased to between 92 and 321 words.

Toddlers participating in Fenson et al.'s (1994) study continued to experience rapid expressive language development between 16 and 30 months. By 30 months, the top percentile of children maxed out the assessment scale, which included 680 words. During this age range, toddlers also began to demonstrate knowledge of developing grammatical structures. For example, toddlers used plurals, possessives, and past tense in their daily language. They also improved their sentence length and complexity, which increased from using one and two word phrases. By three years of age, most typically

developing children had mastered the basic structures of their language. The rate at which children move from expressing short phrases to more complex grammatically accurate sentences varies from one child to the next (Fenson et al., 1994; Goldfield & Reznick, 1990; Labrell et al., 2014). Variability in the amount of words children understand at a given age also varies widely (Anglin, Miller, & Wakefield, 1993; Biemiller & Slonim, 2001; Chall, 1987; Goldfied & Reznick, 1990).

Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

Throughout a typical day in an early childhood education environment, children ages birth to four participate in activities such as story time, free play, learning centers, and mealtimes. Each of these activities provide an opportunity for teachers and caregivers to encourage and improve children's oral language skills. Depending on the child's age and developmental level, teachers can use play and everyday activities to build a child's basic vocabulary, foster meaning connections, model diverse and sophisticated vocabulary, and discuss past and future events (Rowe, 2012). Play is both complex and difficult to define, yet is essential to academic growth as well as physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development (Milteer et al., 2012). For the purpose of this capstone study, *play* was defined as unstructured, free play that occurs in a child's regular daily routines. Activities may include both indoor and outdoor play as well as the use of traditional toys and nontraditional objects such as boxes, sticks, and rocks. This type of unstructured play can lead to use of higher level thinking, a relaxed environment for conversations, and more complex as well as diverse language use (Kwon et al., 2013).

Piaget's widely accepted theory of how children learn emphasizes sensory learning experiences for infants and toddlers (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). Infants

and toddlers have limited language to express what they are hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, and feeling; however, adults can provide a rich vocabulary foundation by providing words during exploratory experiences (Doorley, n.d.). As children explore toys, objects, and materials in the classroom, teachers can label and describe the child's play. For example, as a child plays with a rattle, the teacher can describe the sounds and actions using words such as *loud, soft, shake, hit, tap*, or *bang*. The rattle's physical features can be described such as the rattle's shape(s) and color(s) as well as whether it has a hard or soft feel.

Other sensory activities may include tasting new foods, touching objects with different textures and temperatures, and experimenting with smells such as flowers or cookies baking. Teachers may integrate items such as rice, sand, beans, and shaving cream as well as basic bowls, spoons, and boxes. During play, teachers can emphasize words such as *sweet, salty, sour, hot, cold, fluffy, rough, bumpy*, and *smooth.* Early childhood teachers can purposefully place a variety of sensory items in a child's environment and while the child playfully interacts with new materials, the teacher can lay the foundation for the child's oral language development by providing supportive vocabulary.

Other play areas of interest include blocks and playdough. As children build and create with blocks, teachers can join in and begin providing rich vocabulary to match the children's efforts. For example, teachers can identify what the children are building such as a *tower, house, road*, or *bridge*. As these basic terms are learned, the teacher can expand vocabulary used to target more specific language or descriptive words such as a *tall, large, high*, or *toppling* tower, which children will likely knock over with a *boom* or

crash. The teacher could also bring in different types of vehicles to drive down the block road and provide labels such as *car, van, firetruck*, or *bus.* Other opportunities to build and encourage language at the block center include telling stories and asking open-ended questions (Colker, 2008). These strategies will promote rich conversations where the teacher can elaborate on children's ideas and introduce new vocabulary.

As children create with playdough, teachers can use and encourage language such as *squish, stretch, roll, cut,* and *squeeze* (Swartz, 2005). Playdough also lends itself to more complex vocabulary such as the teacher describing wanting to go on a picnic in the park and asking the children what they may need. This prompt could lead to making various foods such as hamburgers, hot dogs, salad, apple pie, and lemonade as well as things they may need or play with such as a blanket, ball, or friends. Conversations can be basic or complex depending on the age and developmental level of the child. For example, a younger child may be focusing on identifying colors or shapes while playing with the playdough. An older child would be able to discuss what they were creating in more detail. For example, the child may make a scary playdough monster. The teacher and child can discuss how to make the monster *scary* by adding *sharp teeth, pointy claws*, or *red eyes*.

Tying oral language instruction to students' interests and everyday lives as well as activities focusing on art, music, and movement, can lead to improvements in academic achievement (Ford & Opitz, 2015). Early childhood teachers can observe the type of activities students are drawn to and join in on the fun to build engaging oral language experiences. In addition to the play opportunities previously mentioned, teachers can capitalize on the fine arts and everyday routines. For example, while the children are

working with a variety of art materials, teachers can ask open-ended questions about what they are creating or prompt them to describe how they are using the materials. During music activities, teachers can talk about sounds and moving to music (Birckmayer, Kennedy, and Stonehouse, 2010). For example, songs such as the *Hokey Pokey* teach children how to follow directions, basic vocabulary for their body parts, and left and right directionality.

With each of these activities, adult-child interaction is paramount as well as creating intentional instruction that is tied to children's current developmental level. As seen in Table 2.1, the focus of oral language building will shift according to the child's age and/or developmental level. Infants and toddlers are building a storehouse of basic vocabulary words. As children's vocabulary grows, teachers can add more complex elements to their talk such as diversity or variety of words to elaborate on the child's verbal ability.

Table 2.1

Oral Language Focus by Age/Developmental Level

Age	Oral Language Focus	Examples
Birth to One	Building foundation of later language development.	Narrating daily activities performed by caregiver and by child. Labeling items in the environment.
One to Three	Providing a high quantity of words along with using a variety of words.	Using words to describe play and intentionally including a variety of words such as big, huge, large, and enormous.
Three to Four	Use words to describe how things work or what has happened or will happen.	Discuss what will happen before going to an event or a doctor's visit. Explain why the Kool-Aid turns the water a different color.

From birth, infants are paying close attention to the sounds made by their primary caregivers. Research has shown interaction at this earliest stage bolsters early language development (Landry & Smith, 2006). Although infants are not able to verbally respond to caregivers, it is crucial for caregivers to imitate the child's sounds and respond to his or her attempts to communicate through crying or use of body language. This back and forth, conversational interaction is building the foundation blocks of later verbal language.

To support this growth, caregivers can use strategies such as self-talk, parallel talk, and open-ended questions to describe daily activities (Honig, 2014). *Self-talk* refers to the caregiver describing what he or she is doing. For example, when changing a baby's diaper, the caregiver can talk aloud about undressing the child, taking off the

diaper, cleaning up the mess, putting on powder, etc. This process of self-talk provides the child with a wealth of new vocabulary words. *Parallel talk* is similar in that caregivers are describing an activity; however, in this instance, actions performed by the child are described. For example, when a child reaches for a toy, the caregiver may describe stretching to reach the purple ball.

As children begin talking, open-ended questions that allow children to provide more than one answer can be added to play and everyday activities. Questions about a child's interests will prompt more active interaction and verbal language from the child. Maintaining a child's attention through continued conversation about one topic has also been connected to gains in comprehension and expressive language (Landry & Smith, 2006). An example where this strategy may be applied is at the water table. The caregiver can approach a child during play and ask what the child is doing. If the child says the kids are swimming in the pool, the caregiver could ask about what the kids took to the pool with them. Conversation could continue about who is at the pool, what activities you do at the pool, and what you wear at the pool. The key is to keep the conversation going, and allow the child to do the talking.

Between one and two years of age, the *quantity* of words spoken to children is most important (Rowe, 2012). When children are exposed to a large number of words, their later vocabulary skill increases. The amount of times a child hears a specific word is important as well. Children learn and remember words they hear the most in their everyday environment (Harris et al., 2011). Again, emphasizing new words in play and everyday activities is crucial to build a child's oral language.

The *quality* of words shared with children is also important, especially between the ages of two and three (Rowe, 2012). Words should be rich in variety and descriptiveness. During this time, children have an understanding of basic vocabulary words, signaling teachers to use more sophisticated language. For example, if a child is playing with a truck that has big wheels, teachers could use the words *huge, large, massive,* or *gigantic* in conversations with that child. Exposure to this rich vocabulary is related to a child's vocabulary skill one year later.

Once children reach preschool age, teachers can shift their attention to connecting what students already know to explaining concepts or to talking about past and future events (Rowe, 2012). Explanations might include discussing why a tower of blocks fell over when it was too tall. Providing narratives about a past or future event could occur before a child visits the dentist or goes to the doctor. Teachers may take time to explain what will happen at the visit to help the child prepare for this future experience.

National and State Policies

In an effort to promote best practices in early childhood education, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) created a position statement outlining what they call developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2009). This document outlines necessary components to promote optimal learning and development for young children ages birth to eight years old. The changing landscape of early childhood education has brought many challenges to an under prepared work force. Educators' classrooms are filled with diverse groups of children from a variety of cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some students are learning to speak English as

their second language while others have diagnosed special needs or may be at risk for some type of disability.

With those factors in mind, NAEYC identified and described five major areas that are critical to effective teaching and learning. Two major areas focus on the importance of building relationships. The first area emphasizes creating a caring community of learners where positive relationships provide the foundation for success in all areas including academic growth as well as developing social skills and improving all areas of development. This area also includes the importance of providing safe, healthy environments where children can focus on learning through play and respectful interactions with others. Another area that goes hand in hand with this one is building relationships with families as well. As educators and families work together, the child's needs can be met consistently and teaching can be reinforced both at home and at school.

The remaining three areas all build on each other. Educators need a clear understanding of child development and how children learn. Based on that information, educators can assess what children should be doing in all areas of development and plan effective lessons or curriculum. Having a balance of teacher-directed and child-directed learning is important as well as having specific goals in place that children are working towards at their own pace. Using scaffolding and adult-child interactions to guide learning will ensure children are progressing and improving based on their unique starting points.

In 2008, the Office of Child Development and the Virginia Department of Social Services created a similar document to outline expectations for what early childhood educators need to know and be able to do. This document, Competencies for Early

Childhood Professionals, outlines similar areas of importance such as understanding child development, importance of assessment, building relationships with children and families, and creating a safe, healthy learning environment. The unique layout divides each competency into standards and then into four levels. If educators are meeting basic expectations within a specific standard, they are performing at a level one. As they show improvement in their knowledge and application of these competencies, they move up to higher levels of performance. Directors and supervisors can use this tool to assess how their staff is performing as well as identify areas where training or professional development may be needed.

Recognizing the importance of intentional adult guidance in all areas of development, the Office of Early Childhood Development and the Virginia Department of Social Services also created Milestones of Child Development: A Guide to Young Children's Learning and Development from Birth to Kindergarten. This document was originally created in 2008 and was revised in 2013 to include up to date expectations and effective research practices. The layout breaks learning into strands including social/emotional development, approaches to learning, language and literacy, cognition and general knowledge, fine arts, and physical development. The strands are broken into age ranges such as birth to 18 months, 18 to 36 months, and 36 to 48 months. Within each age range, educators are provided with minimum standards children should be learning, examples of what children might be doing at that stage, and teaching strategies to support learning. A similar document was created for use with preschool children. In 2015, the Office of Humanities and Early Childhood and the Virginia Department of Education created Virginia's Foundation Blocks for Early Learning: Comprehensive

Standards for Four-Year-Olds. Similar to the Milestones, this document includes minimum standards as well as teaching suggestions to promote learning in all areas of development.

In the area of early literacy specifically, the Milestones include five strands educators should plan instruction around. These strands include listening and speaking, phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge, print awareness and concepts, comprehension, and early writing. The Foundation Blocks emphasize three areas of literacy: oral language, reading, and writing. Within the area of reading, phonological awareness skills, alphabet knowledge, and print concepts are addressed. Educators are encouraged to use these standards along with assessment data to guide instructional decisions.

VCCS Early Childhood Programs

Many community colleges offer early childhood programs that strive to provide the recommended education early childhood educators need to provide quality care and effective instruction to our youngest learners (Early & Winston, 2001; NAEYC, 2010). Virginia's Community College System offers several levels of education in early childhood across the Commonwealth. Students begin their journey with a 16-credit career studies certificate that provides entry level courses in health, safety, and nutrition, assessment practices, guiding behavior, and teaching fine arts. This builds into the next step, a 31-credit certificate that includes courses in child development as well as teaching literacy, math, science, and social studies. If students wish to continue their education, they can pursue an associate degree in early childhood education that includes courses in

teaching exceptional children, elementary reading methods, and working with families among other topics.

Students pursuing the 31-credit certificate complete the first course in early literacy: CHD 118 Language Arts for Young Children. The course description included in the VCCS master course file states:

> Emphasizes the early development of children's language and literacy skills. Presents techniques and methods for supporting all aspects of early literacy. Surveys children's literature, and examines elements of promoting oral literacy, print awareness, phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, quality storytelling and story reading. Addresses strategies for intervention and support for exceptional children and English Language Learners. ("Childhood Development", n.d.)

Course objectives focus on ages birth to preschool and include recognizing stages of language development, using children's literature, developing assessment techniques, planning a literacy environment, and creating differentiated literacy lesson plans.

If students continue to work on their associate degree, they are required to take a second literacy course: CHD 119 Introduction to Reading Methods. The course description for this class states:

> Focuses on promoting language and literacy skills as the foundation for emergent reading. Emphasizes phonetic awareness and alphabetic principles, print awareness and concepts, comprehension and early reading and writing. Addresses strategies for intervention and support for exceptional children and English Language Learners. ("Childhood Development", n.d.)

This course covers similar objectives for children during late preschool to third grade.

Summary

The literature in this review indicates the need for further research. Early childhood educators are often ill equipped with the knowledge needed to teach early literacy content using developmentally appropriate methods (Isenberg, 2000; IOM &

NRC, 2015; NRC, 2001). Community colleges offer early childhood programs to provide this knowledge, and an increasing number of educators are choosing this affordable, two-year program instead of entering a four-year bachelor's track (Early et al., 2007; NAEYC, 2010). After observing childcare providers in my college's service region; however, I was surprised by the low-quality oral language instruction provided by teachers who earned an associate degree in early childhood education.

To further investigate the content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy taught in Virginia's Community College early childhood programs, this capstone study compared the material covered in two early literacy courses to what is currently known about research-based knowledge and effective practices. Information gained from this study identified strengths and weaknesses present in these courses as well as guided recommendations to curriculum taught within the early childhood programs at VCCS schools. This study can also lead to professional development opportunities covering gaps in knowledge for local childcare providers currently working in the field.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter describes the research design and methodology applied in this capstone study. The following sections detail the purpose of the study, research questions, research design, participants and setting, data collection and analysis, validity, and researcher as instrument statement.

Purpose and Research Question

The goal of this study was to describe and evaluate early literacy instruction provided in Virginia Community College early childhood programs across the state and compare that instruction to what is known about early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy. The following research question was investigated.

> To what degree, if any, do community college instructors across Virginia include early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy within early childhood education literacy courses?

Answers to this research question will add insight into content provided surrounding early literacy instruction taught in Virginia Community College early childhood programs by providing descriptive evidence of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy emphasized in five community college settings. The results can potentially add to existing research on early childhood associate degree programs, guide future research, and provide needed knowledge to inform changes in college curriculum as well as provide professional development opportunities for current early childhood teachers.

Evaluation Design

Community college classrooms are social environments where knowledge is built through interactions between instructor, students, and texts. To explore and understand early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy presented in this type of environment, an interpretive research design provided the most effective, appropriate methods and guided this study. Ideas for interpretive research often stem from a researcher's own experiences and interests, which can play a crucial role when conducting research such as gaining access to participants or understanding the community participating in the study (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Once the idea is developed, the researcher builds prior knowledge through an extensive literature review and identifies methods of obtaining how that knowledge and concepts are applied in real life situations. This study stemmed from my own experiences as an early childhood community college instructor as well as time spent completing an internship in the field. My position as an assistant professor, as well as research reviewed throughout my doctoral program, provided me with a strong prior knowledge of early literacy instruction as well as community college classroom settings. Relationships built with colleagues likely played a part in early childhood instructors readily agreeing to participate in this study.

Another hallmark of interpretive research is expecting differences in how artifacts or materials are used by different people. Instead of searching for one specific reality the researcher co-constructs multiple realities while interacting with participants and working through the data analysis process. Participants' prior knowledge and lived experiences, the social classroom environment, as well as how information is presented in chosen

textbooks can influence the content and pedagogy of early literacy information that is presented to students. Therefore, the best way to obtain data relating to this study's research question was utilizing a mixture of qualitative methods that included face-to-face interactions and observations in the natural setting (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). To gain a deeper understanding of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy presented in community college early literacy courses, I used a combination of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and class observations.

This study was structured as a multi-site case study of five early childhood community college programs with five early literacy instructors spread out across rural areas in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Cases were carefully selected based on demographic similarities as well as the existence of an active early childhood program. Case study research is "used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context" (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 100). The multi-site case study approach was appropriate for this study as it allowed detailed exploration of early literacy instruction occurring in college classrooms, which led to comparisons of rich data gleaned from multiple perspectives.

Research Site and Participants

To explore early literacy instruction provided throughout the Virginia Community College System early childhood programs, I focused on colleges within the VCCS Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative. Fourteen college service regions across the state, as shown in Figure 1, include about a half million people who have not graduated with a high school diploma ("Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative", 2017). The VCCS strives to

increase the number of people pursuing education past high school and earn an associate degree or certificate. Of these fourteen colleges, nine currently have active early childhood programs. One college is where I currently work; therefore, the eight remaining programs were contacted to participate in this study. The eight community colleges included Danville, Eastern Shore, Lord Fairfax, Mountain Empire, New River, Paul D. Camp, Southwest Virginia, and Virginia Highlands.

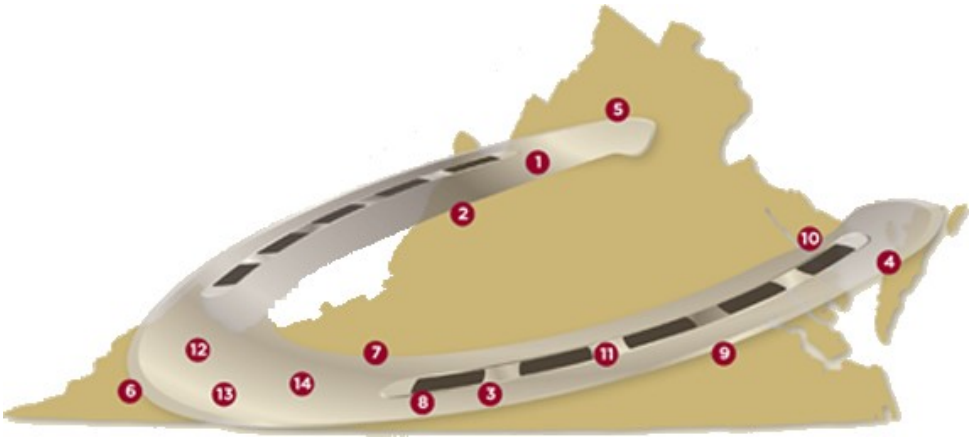

Figure 3.1. VCCS Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative.

To gain consent for this study, I first contacted the Assistant Vice Chancellor for Institutional Effectiveness, Dr. Cat Finnegan. As seen in Appendix A, I e-mailed Dr. Finnegan to explain the purpose of my study as well as the need to contact instructors for access to various documents and interviews. In addition, I inquired about the procedures within the VCCS to complete this type of research project. Dr. Finnegan explained that each individual college would need to grant me approval for their college to participate in the project. She suggested I reach out to the heads of institutional research at each college to inquire about their approval process.

As Dr. Finnegan instructed, I utilized the college directory at each institution to identify a point of contact in the institutional research department. I then sent an e-mail

to those contacts explaining the purpose of my study and inquiring about their approval process. As seen in Appendix B, I received a range of responses including contacting the early childhood faculty directly to submitting my approved proposal to be sent through the college's IRB process. Once my capstone proposal was approved by my committee, I reached out to the colleges again to begin their approval process and data collection. Each of the eight colleges' institutional research departments approved my research; therefore, I contacted the eight early childhood program heads at each college. Five out of the eight program heads agreed to participate in this study and connected me with the early literacy course instructor if they were not currently teaching the classes. The colleges participating in this study included Danville, Lord Fairfax, Mountain Empire, New River, and Paul D. Camp. At each college campus, one instructor taught all sections of CHD 118 and 119. Each instructor I contacted agreed to participate in this study for a total of five instructors. Detailed information providing context of participating sites can be found in the following findings chapter.

Data Collection Methods

This study utilized document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and class observations to explore early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy discussed in community college early childhood courses. Documents included course syllabi with assignment descriptions, required textbooks, and class PowerPoints. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the five community college instructors to gather data about content covered during class sessions that could confirm or add to information gleaned from document analysis. Finally, I

observed one class meeting to gather additional evidence that either confirmed previous emerging patterns or shed light on new or differing information.

Document Analysis

The first qualitative method I used during this study was document analysis. This method focuses on printed or electronic images and texts that provide supplementary information, spark questions, and provide supporting or disconfirming evidence found in other data sources (Bowen, 2009). For this study, I collected class syllabi with activity descriptions for the two literacy courses taught within the early childhood program: CHD 118 Language Arts for Young Children and CHD 119 Introduction of Reading Methods. Three of the five colleges offered both courses while the remaining two offered only CHD 118 within their early childhood program; therefore, I analyzed a total of five CHD 118 syllabi and three CHD 119 syllabi. I then reviewed the textbooks and class PowerPoints utilized for these classes at each college. Three colleges used the same textbook, and one college required two textbooks for CHD 118, which totals six textbooks related to that course. In addition, I analyzed three textbooks required for CHD 119 courses. Class PowerPoints were typically posted on the class blackboard site for each of the sixteen instructional weeks of the semester, which roughly totaled 80 presentations for CHD 118 across the five sites and 48 presentations across the three sites teaching CHD 119. Documents were analyzed through a process of finding and selecting relevant information, making sense of the data and synthesizing it. Information gleaned included excerpts, quotes, or passages that were organized into major themes or categories. Documents were analyzed for common patterns related to what is known

about early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The second qualitative method I used to address my research question was semi-structured interviews. For these interviews, I chose a few general topics to discuss with instructors but allowed them to construct their responses freely without having to follow a standardized format (Packer, 2011). General questions referred to which areas of early literacy are taught within CHD 118 and 119 as well as identifying the content, learning trajectories, and pedagogy in each area. Starter questions used for the interviews can be seen in Appendix C. This interview style allowed me to ask follow-up questions as needed to clarify misunderstandings or vague responses given by the interviewees.

I conducted a total of five interviews, one with each instructor at the five participating colleges. The interviews lasted thirty to forty-five minutes and were conducted using GoToMeeting™. This software allowed me to record the conversation and transcribe exactly what was said for later analysis. During the transcription process, I played back the recorded conversation and typed up what was said verbatim in a word document. I could easily stop, start, and rewind as needed to ensure accuracy of the resulting transcript. Similar to document analysis, information gleaned from the interviews were used to support or illuminate patterns I may have missed before having vital background information on the instructors' perspectives.

Observations

The third qualitative method I utilized in this study was class observations. Marshall and Rossman (2011) emphasized the importance of observations in qualitative

studies. Using this technique, researchers can record details of a complex, natural setting using all five senses. When conducting interviews with each instructor, I requested an opportunity to observe a class meeting during the fall semester to find confirming and/or disconfirming evidence of data found during the document analysis and interviews. Each instructor was teaching CHD 118 during the fall semester; therefore, I decided to focus observations within that course. Four of the five instructors were teaching completely face-to-face or using a hybrid format with in-person and online class meetings. The instructor teaching solely online, along with the four remaining instructors, provided me with access to their blackboard sites so I could explore class PowerPoints provided to students throughout the semester. One observation was conducted at each of the four sites holding in-person class meetings. Dates were scheduled based on which days/times the class met as well as my availability. I observed for the entire class meeting, which ranged from fifty minutes to two hours.

I approached each observation with a broad framework; however, my focus was on elements included in this study's theoretical frame: early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for each area of early literacy. During each observation, I recorded detailed descriptions and created narrative-style field notes. This format allowed me to record summaries of discussions as well as quotes from both the instructor and students. In addition, I was able to create a separate section to record my own thoughts and connections for later reference. As the project progressed, I used the field notes to discover reoccurring patterns across classrooms. This supplementary information provided a valuable third source of evidence to bolster trustworthiness of identified patterns and concepts and was used to form descriptive

categories of similar information, which was interpreted to make claims relating back to my research question (Maxwell, 2009).

Evaluation Criteria and Data Analysis

Based on the literature review driving this study, I utilized specific evaluation criteria when analyzing evidence across documents, interviews, and class observations. Table 3.1 provides detailed evaluation criteria used in this study for each area of early literacy.

Table 3.1

Evaluation Criteria

	Content	Learning Trajectory	Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy
Phonological Awareness	Identifying and generating rhyming words; identifying words and syllables; blending, segmenting, and manipulating phonemes	Continuum beginning with large units such as words and syllables and moving to more complex skills such as manipulating smaller units such as individual sounds or phonemes.	Informal assessments such as observations, checklists, anecdotal notes, or portfolios. Formal assessments such as the Preschool-Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing or PALS-PreK. Teaching through play, games, pictures, stories, clapping parts of words, concrete markers to represent phonological units.

Alphabet Knowledge	Letter recognition, letter sound production, and letter writing.	Beginning alphabet instruction utilizing the letters in a child's first name. Centering instruction around which letters are easier or more difficult to pronounce or write as well as what students already know.	Utilizing a differentiated versus one-size-fits-all approach. Informally assessing children using a checklist or using a formal assessment such as PALS-PreK. Shared reading, games, movement, play centers, using tactile materials such as shaving cream or playdough, sorting objects by sound.
Early Writing	Composition or getting ideas on paper; handwriting or letter formation; spelling or applying the alphabetic principle.	Children write about familiar topics and use action words before moving towards adding in details. Writing begins with drawing and random marks to scribbling before children begin to make letter-like forms and attempt phonetic spelling. Children often write the letters in their name first.	Observe children's writing and provide appropriate scaffolds through adult-child interactions. Create a writing center with a variety of writing tools. Integrate writing into play centers such as the kitchen or restaurant area.

Concepts of Print	How books work, directionality, difference between words and spaces, and identifying the parts of a book.	No set developmental sequence; however, children move through stages of context dependency, visual recognition, and letter-sound analysis.	Expose children to a variety of print including literacy-rich play centers and classroom labels. Draw child's attention to these concepts through adult-child interaction during play and shared reading experiences.
Oral Language	Expressive and receptive vocabulary; grammar or how to construct meaningful sentences; pragmatics or how language is used in a child's everyday social environment	Communication begins with coos, crying, and pointing before children are able to verbally communicate. Verbal language begins with words around age one and quickly builds to phrases and sentences. Toddlers begin understanding grammatical structures such as plurals, possessives, and past tense. In additions, toddlers are improving their sentence complexity and mastering basic structures of their language.	Teaching and modeling vocabulary through play and everyday activities. Teachers can narrate and describe activities children are engaging in as well as provide rich vocabulary while interacting with children's play. In the beginning, quantity of words is crucial. As children grow in their language development, quality of words and discussing past and future events becomes a larger focus.

While collecting data throughout this study, I continuously engaged in data analysis by implementing a three step, cyclical process including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process of

data reduction is continuous throughout a study where the researcher sorts through field notes and transcriptions to select and simplify the data into more focused summaries or chunks of information. Displaying the simplified data can help further organize patterns or emerging themes in a visual array. Once data is more manageable, the researcher can begin to draw conclusions based on multiple sources of evidence. Data reduction occurred during all phases of this research project as I focused on data related to the five areas of early literacy instruction as outlined in the research as well as the areas of content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy as identified in my conceptual framework. Data were also organized into data displays, which allowed me to see visual connections between chunks of data gleaned from various sources of evidence. As data were simplified and displayed, I was able to find patterns as well as inconsistencies among sites participating in the study. Each time new data were added, I continued to work through this process of reducing the data, visually displaying information, and drawing conclusions as well as verifying or altering previous conclusions in light of new information. Analytic memos were used to summarize patterns or emerging themes along with supporting evidence at various stages through the study. For example, each time new data were added, I referred to previous memos and built on those notes and/or conclusions. These memos provided a way to record my thoughts and connections throughout the data analysis process, which lasted several months.

Several specific methods were used throughout the data analysis process. I began data collection with document analysis of textbooks and course syllabi. I gave each participating site a number to ensure all pieces of data were collected as well as maintain

confidentiality. As I read through each document, I completed a document summary form that included the site number, document, date received, significance or importance of document, a brief summary of comments, and my personal reflections. Once several document summaries were completed, I then began coding chunks of information for areas specifically related to my research question and theoretical framework. Table 3.2 outlines descriptive codes applied during this study, and a sample of a document summary with codes can be seen in Appendix D. Codes were created using the first letter of each area of early literacy along with the first letter of the area related to my conceptual framework. For example, when finding evidence related to content taught in the area of phonological awareness, I utilized the code PA-C. Once several pieces of data were coded, I began compiling information related to specific codes in a conceptually clustered matrix. Seeing information in this visual display led to emerging patterns and themes across data sources as well as participating sites. Since data analysis was conducted over time, analytic memos were also used to keep track of my thoughts, conclusions, and connections.

Table 3.2

Descriptive Codes

	Phonological Awareness	Alphabet Knowledge	Concepts of Print	Early Writing	Oral Language
Content	PA-C	AK-C	CP-C	EW-C	OL-C
Learning Trajectories	PA-LT	AK-LT	CP-LT	EW-LT	OL-LT
Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy	PA-DAP	AK-DAP	CP-DAP	EW-DAP	OL-DAP

After analyzing documents for a participating site, I contacted the instructor to set up the interview. Due to distance between sites, I conducted interviews using GoToMeeting™, which allowed me to record the conversation and transcribe it to ensure accuracy of the instructor's comments. Once the transcript was completed, I printed the text and made notes in the margin as well as the same descriptive codes applied during document analysis. This process easily allowed me to compare and contrast chunks of information from document analysis and interviews both within each site and across participating sites. The marginal notes also added opportunities for me to add reflections, connections, or questions to check on or come back to later as well as make a note about patterns observed outside of my original codes.

During the interview, I set up observation dates for courses that had in-person meetings during the fall semester. For courses taught online, as well as solely in-person classes, I requested access to the course blackboard site as available to analyze class materials and other posted materials. When analyzing documents, I continued to utilize document summary sheets and descriptive codes. During class observations, data were organized using narrative-style field notes with reflective notes in the margin as well as descriptive codes. These sources of data confirmed conclusions and connections made during previous data analysis as well as uncovered disconfirming evidence or provided additional information that did not surface when analyzing other data sources. For example, during a class observation, one instructor covered early writing in much more detail than seen in document analysis or discussed during the interview.

As the amount of data increased, I began to visually display evidence using a conceptually clustered matrix. This organizational tool allowed me to pull together

chunks of data and group it according to overarching concepts driving this study including the five areas of early literacy instruction and specific information about content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy in each area. While previous data were organized by site, I created a conceptually clustered matrix for each area of early literacy and combined information obtained from all sources of data across sites. Compiling information in this way allowed me to compare and contrast evidence across rows and columns as well as look for any missing or incomplete data. An example of this organizational tool can be seen in Appendix E. Analytic memos were also used to summarize my emerging patterns along with my own thoughts and connections. This allowed me to keep track of information over time throughout the data analysis process.

Once all data were analyzed and entered into the matrices, I began comparing the evidence to research outlined in my literature review detailing the content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy for each area of early literacy development. I started this process by printing the literature review and each matrix. Then, I read through each area of early literacy and matched research to evidence found at each site. When a match was found, that information on the matrix was checked off. If no match was found, I made marginal notes in the specific area of the matrix to check on again and ensure information was not missed or overlooked in the original data analysis. Next, any information remaining in the matrix that didn't have a direct match to the research was highlighted. These notes were summarized using analytic memos to track patterns as well as missing or additional information noted during data analysis.

This process solidified conclusions made and patterns found throughout data analysis as well as compiled supporting evidence in one place.

Validity

To boost the rigor of this project, I used several techniques to increase validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). First, I used multiple sources of data to triangulate my findings including document analysis, interview data, and observations. Second, during data analysis I searched the data for disconfirming evidence to ensure I was not selectively choosing the parts that supported what I wanted to report. This was done by organizing data into conceptually clustered matrices and utilizing analytic memos to record patterns of evidence that supported an idea as well as evidence that presented alternate information. Third, throughout the data collection process, I separated my own inferences from the descriptive facts. Data collection was reflexive and iterative. During document analysis, I pulled factual quotes from the syllabi as well as textbooks and class materials to support patterns observed. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure the instructors' words were accurately represented. Narrative-style field notes were used during observations and recorded in a manner to separate facts from inferences. Once all three types of data were collected, I compared and contrasted information within and across sites to find confirming or disconfirming evidence of patterns. This process helped me to constantly reflect on my own position as a researcher and how my bias might affect how the data is interpreted.

Researcher as Instrument

My interest in this study was professional. I am currently an Assistant Professor of Education and Early Childhood at a community college in Virginia. This position has

thrown me even further into the research about quality education for our youngest learners as well as the reality of all the tasks on teachers' plates when working with children between birth and third grade. In addition, I have a master's degree in reading education through the University of Virginia and am currently working on my doctorate, also through UVA in reading education. These degree programs have a strong push towards meeting students at their developmental level in all areas of literacy instruction. I have been trained in using strategies such as leveled materials, small group reading instruction, word study, and differentiated instruction. I also have a strong interest in helping beginning teachers implement effective reading instruction and identifying barriers that may prevent them from being successful in this area. These interests could create bias in my interpretation of early literacy instruction occurring in early childhood programs across the Commonwealth; however, my experiences and education could also give me valuable insight into research-based early literacy instruction and various aspects that may influence instructional decisions (Maxwell, 2009). Throughout this project, I remained aware of my preconceived notions on what should be happening in classrooms. My notes served as a tool for me to separate my personal viewpoints from actual instruction being provided in early childhood programs.

Summary

This qualitative capstone study used document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and observations to explore early literacy instruction conveyed in community college early childhood programs across the Commonwealth of Virginia. Specifically, data was coded based on content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy as it related to the five areas of early literacy development. The use of three

sources of data facilitated the ability to confirm evidence as well as discover any disconfirming evidence that did not match up or presented an alternative point. Anecdotal notes as well as clear coding were used to separate my bias and opinions from conclusions made from the data. The following chapter provides the findings of this study through a thick narrative description of strengths and weaknesses across participating colleges. Recurring themes relating back to my conceptual framework and literature review are discussed.

Chapter IV: Evaluation Results

This capstone study utilized document analysis, interviews, and observations to explore early literacy instruction in five Virginia Community College early childhood programs. Specifically, data were analyzed for evidence related to content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy in the following five areas of early literacy development: phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, early writing, and oral language. Data analysis yielded strong evidence of early literacy instruction across all five participating sites; however, there were three main areas that could be enhanced. First, the areas of early writing and oral language could include a broader content focus. Second, as the content taught in each of these two areas is broadened, discussions around learning trajectories could address skills surrounding composition and handwriting in early writing as well as pragmatics of oral language. Third, specific informal and formal assessments could be introduced more consistently across the five sites. This chapter will provide context about the sites followed by a detailed discussion of the three main findings.

Context of Sites

Virginia's Community College System offers stackable credentials in early childhood education that allow students to stop and start at various knowledge levels. Students start the program by working on a 16-credit career studies certificate that provides entry level courses in health, safety, and nutrition, assessment practices, guiding behavior and teaching fine arts. These courses build into the next level, a 31-credit

certificate that includes courses in child development as well as teaching literacy, math, science, and social studies. If students wish to continue their education, they can pursue an associate degree in early childhood education that includes courses in teaching exceptional children, elementary reading methods, and working with families among other topics.

Students pursuing the 31-credit certificate complete the first course in early literacy: CHD 118 Language Arts for Young Children. Every community college is required to follow the course description and objectives as stated in the VCCS master course file. Instructors can add information if they desire; however, the master course file describes the minimum requirements. Table 4.1 outlines the course description and objectives for CHD 118. This course focuses on ages birth to preschool and includes recognizing stages of language development, using children's literature, developing assessment techniques, planning a literacy environment, and creating differentiated literacy lesson plans.

Table 4.1

CHD 118 Minimum Requirements

Course Description	Course Objectives
Emphasizes the early development of children's language and literacy skills. Presents techniques and methods for supporting all aspects of early literacy. Surveys children's literature, and examines elements of promoting oral literacy, print awareness, phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, quality storytelling and story reading. Addresses strategies for intervention and support for exceptional children and English Language Learners. (“Childhood Development”, n.d.)	• Recognize stages of language development in young children and apply this knowledge when teaching children • Identify various techniques for supporting pre-emergent reading, and developing and using resources for fostering early literacy skills • Apply appropriate strategies for using children's books (authentic literature) in the development of literacy strategies • Assess various strategies for working with children, both individually and in groups, to foster pre-emergent literacy • Develop observation and assessment techniques that promote children’s developing literacy skills to provide for differentiated instruction • Differentiate successful strategies to modify instruction for English language learners, and other students who made need additional support • Plan an environment that promotes early literacy • Identify and apply learning standards as they relate to developing language arts: the Virginia Foundation Blocks, the Child Development Milestones, the Virginia Standards of Learning, and Core Competencies for Early Childhood Professionals.

If students continue to work on their associate degree, they are required to take a second literacy course: CHD 119 Introduction to Reading Methods. Table 4.2 details the course description and objectives instructors are required to use. This course covers similar objectives pertaining to language and literacy development, for children in late preschool to third grade.

Table 4.2

CHD 119 Minimum Requirements

Course Description	Course Objectives
Focuses on promoting language and literacy skills as the foundation for emergent reading. Emphasizes phonetic awareness and alphabetic principles, print awareness and concepts, comprehension and early reading and writing. Addresses strategies for intervention and support for exceptional children and English Language Learners. (“Childhood Development”, n.d.)	• Recognize stages of language development in young children and apply this knowledge when teaching children • Develop materials and activities suitable for supporting children's developing emergent, early and fluent reading skills. • Evaluate teaching strategies which promote the development of emergent, early and fluent reading skills in young children • Identify appropriate books and media materials for children who are beginning to read and write • Appraise use of techniques to assess children's developing reading and writing skills • Differentiate adaptive learning materials to meet the needs of all children, including children with special needs in language arts • Distinguish wide range of skills for promoting language and literacy skills that are sensitive to the language spoken in the child's home, and meets the needs of individual learners • Apply the Virginia Foundation Blocks, and Standards of Learning in English from K-3.

In addition to minimum content requirements, the VCCS also requires the courses to include a specific number of lecture and lab hours. For both CHD 118 and 119, class

time can be divided into two lecture hours and two lab hours or a total of four hours of class time and/or activities each week. Instructors, along with their deans, decide how this requirement will be met along with the class format, required texts, and assignments. For example, courses can be offered solely in person, online, or a hybrid of both in person and online. In addition, instructors decide specific assignments or activities students will be required to complete for the lab portion of the class. Assignments could include semester long projects or portfolios as well as observation hours completed at local child care centers and schools.

Documents, interviews, and observations across sites revealed variations in how courses were offered as well as required textbooks and student assignments. Two schools offered courses solely in person while one school offered the classes solely online. The remaining two schools offered hybrid courses where students attended some face-to-face class meetings and completed online readings and assignments in between. Students completed a range of assignments including lesson plans, quizzes, discussion board posts, and presentations. In addition, four out of five sites required students to create projects for use in their current or future classroom. These included developing a list of potential books for a reading center, creating interactive story time lessons that included props or puppets, and assembling dramatic play kits. Two sites also required students to complete observation hours and related assignments in a local child care center, head start classroom, or public school preschool program. Required readings ranged from textbooks to handouts, online articles, and websites.

Finding One: Broadening Content

Areas of Strength

Data gleaned from course materials, interviews, and observations provided a strong evidence base of content presented in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. Phonological awareness is an area where researchers are in general agreement on which skills are included; therefore, it was not surprising that evidence in all five sites covered phonological skills including word and syllable awareness along with rhyme and manipulating smaller units of speech sounds in words. Textbook three defined phonological awareness as "an umbrella term that includes the awareness of the larger parts of spoken language, such as words, syllables, and onsets and rimes – as well as the smaller parts, phonemes." During interviews, instructors emphasized phonological awareness skills such as rhyming, syllables, and manipulating phonemes. For example, one instructor said, "we discuss phonological awareness as an umbrella term that includes many skills such as rhyming and breaking words down into syllables and individual sounds" (Interview 51, 2017). A second instructor made a similar comment by saying, "phonological awareness includes many skills such as rhyme and manipulating phonemes" (Interview 45, 2017).

The area of alphabet knowledge covered all content areas of letter recognition, letter sounds, writing letters, and making letter-sound connections. Class PowerPoints emphasized that words are made up of letters, that the letters stand for the sounds we make when we say the words, and that by putting the letters together in various ways we make different words. For example, Class PowerPoint 54-5 states the following points about alphabet knowledge: "Written words are made up of letters. Letters represent the

sounds in words. In order to read words, children start by applying the skill of consonant sound association beginning with the first letter." During a class observation, an instructor discussed various early literacy skills that can be integrated into storybook reading such as letter identification and matching upper and lowercase letters. In addition to utilizing a strong definition of alphabet knowledge, materials also focused on environmental print, emphasized children's strong reliance on context, and suggested a progression of learning letters and sounds before moving towards spelling patterns. For example, one instructor specifically emphasized "teaching children letters and sounds in their natural environment and children's ability to recognize environmental print such as the McDonald's logo as well as print posted in the classroom" (Interview 84, 2017).

Evidence for content covering concepts of print was equally as strong. During one classroom observation, the instructor asked students what types of skills they could teach when reading story books. Among other ideas, students mentioned "book skills such as how to hold a book, how to turn pages, the difference between illustrations and words, identifying author and illustrator, identifying cover and spine, and reading left to right/top to bottom" (Class Observation 10, 2017). This conversation during class, provided evidence that the content related to concepts of print had been previously discussed and students understood how to connect that content to instructional opportunities. Instructor interviews yielded similar strong knowledge of concepts of print content. For example, in interviews 41, 45, and 19, instructors identified these areas:

- knowing that you read left to right;
- turning the book over;
- knowing that you turn the pages a certain way;

- knowing salient print features;
- book awareness;
- directionality;
- where to start reading;
- we identify the spine of the book;
- how to hold the book;
- the author and the illustrator;
- identifying the front and back.

This same information was also included in documents and texts across all five sites.

Literacy Areas with Inconsistent Content Descriptions

Early writing. For this capstone study, I adopted a broad definition of early writing that included composition (ideation), handwriting (letter formation), and spelling (phonetic) (Kaderavek, Cabell, & Justice, 2009). Composition focuses on the process of generating topics to write about and working through the thought processes to successfully plan out how those ideas might be presented on paper. Handwriting refers to teaching children how to form letter shapes on paper. Spelling refers to making letter-sound connections between speech sounds and letter shapes that allow children to write down their speech using phonetic letter choices, even if those choices are not correct. For example, early writers may write *BB* for baby or *S* for sun. Spelling encompasses the alphabetic principle, the insight that speech can be divided into tiny sound units and matched to alphabetic letters that represent them in a systematic way. The alphabetic principle takes years to attain and is a necessary prerequisite to learning to read.

Data obtained from each site included a basic definition related to content covered in the area of early writing. Course textbooks and materials defined early writing more narrowly as a way to communicate ideas by using print to communicate with others. Instructors echoed this definition in interviews as well. Table 4.3 provides examples of early writing definitions used across sites.

Table 4.3

Early Writing Content

Documents	Interviews
"Drawing and writing is a way to communicate ideas" (Textbook 2, 2017). "Writing is the ability to use print to communicate with others" (Textbook 5, 2017). "Children write during play to communicate real-life activities such as writing down a grocery list or making a menu for their restaurant" (Class PowerPoint 19-8).	"Young children begin communicating stories through scribbling, drawing, and creating their own symbols" (Interview 19, 2017). "Early writing is about children expressing their ideas through scribbling and drawing" (Interview 45, 2017). "Children use writing to express themselves through print" (Interview 84, 2017).

Utilizing this basic definition of early writing as a way to communicate ideas in print is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. The areas of composition, letter formation, and spelling, however, were emphasized during the learning trajectory and developmentally appropriate pedagogy of early writing. When discussing developmentally appropriate pedagogy, data indicated that community college instructors utilized early writing teaching strategies that encouraged teachers to pinpoint weaknesses in letter formation or letter sound knowledge for small groups of children as well as the class as a whole. For example, in interview 84, one instructor shared, "Early writing should be done in a play-like, supportive environment instead of everyone come sit down and we're going to do

this at this particular time. In this small group or one-on-one approach, the teacher can support struggles in letter formation or phonetic spelling." During class observation 10, the instructor discussed the effectiveness of journaling and idea boards that provide students with sample writing prompts to assist with brainstorming writing topics. These strategies provide opportunities for teachers to discuss and provide support around all areas of early writing including composition, letter formation, and how to use the alphabetic principle to represent speech sounds in writing.

Spelling, or learning to apply the alphabetic principle, was integrated into discussions of the developmental progression or learning trajectory of early writing. Throughout course materials and interviews, children's use of invented spelling from birth to preschool was emphasized, and the path to conventional spelling was also discussed. For example, in interviews 19 and 54, instructors emphasized the progression from drawing and scribbling to pre-phonetic writing and then more conventional writing. Information on class PowerPoint 45-12 provides the following specific examples of various stages children move through when working towards conventional spelling.

Writing through conventional spelling—

- Precommunicative----letter strings, random letter formations, etc.
- Semiphonetic----dependence on letter names, ex. **mt** for empty
- Phonetic----effort to represent vowel sounds in every syllable, such as **fet** for feet
- Transitional----awareness of & representations of other aspects of words, such as using to letters to represent a sound ex. **chrie** for try
- Correct stage----have achieved conventional spelling

Data also provided evidence that letter formation and the alphabetic principle were discussed in detail within the content area of alphabet knowledge showing students in early literacy courses were exposed to that information in other ways. Textbook 4, for example, provided a chart which listed letters from the easiest to the most difficult to

write within the chapter on teaching alphabet knowledge. For example, the chart identified l, o, i, and v are easier to form than y, p, g, and q.

Oral language. Oral language includes the development of expressive and receptive skills, which focus on the level of words and sentences children can verbally say as well as words and sentences children can understand. In addition, oral language includes the pragmatics of language, including word usage and how language is structured to effectively communicate thoughts and ideas. Evidence across the five participating sites suggests that the area of oral language was defined inconsistently across data sources. For example, a textbook from one site discussed the differences between expressive and receptive language and also included this strong definition of oral language: "The understandings we have about how oral language is used to communicate as well as our understanding of word usage and placement within speech" (Textbook 1, 2017). At another site, class PowerPoint 54-7 included bullet points about "teachers must consider dialects and cultural influences on language."

All data sources, however, did not include such a broad view of oral language and only emphasized using language to communicate and understand others. For example, textbook three defined oral language as "the set of words for which students know the meaning when others speak or read aloud to them, or when they speak to others." In interview 19, the instructor described oral language as "focusing on children's expressive and receptive language." Another instructor explained an emphasis on how children communicate as well as interact with others.

> I have a strong emphasis on communication, reciprocity, how we communicate with children whether they are infants or toddlers or preschoolers, how we communicate with co-workers, back and forth conversation to scaffold children's understanding. A second area I put a lot of emphasis on is vocabulary and

> everyday language. So for students to enhance children's vocabulary, they have to have a fairly rigorous repertoire of words to pull from. (Interview 84, 2017)

Utilizing a basic definition of oral language as communicating through expressive and receptive language does not include other important pieces such as grammatical structures in sentence production and the pragmatics of language.

Finding Two: Broadening Learning Trajectories

Areas of Strength

Similar to content, instructors across all sites thoroughly discussed the learning trajectories, or the typical learning progression, of phonological awareness skills, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. Phonological awareness was described across all sites as a continuum of skills that range from least to most complex. For example, textbook two broke this area into four developmental stages including word, syllable, onset-rime, and phoneme. Those stages were described as a continuum that students typically progress through where they focus on larger units of sound before moving to smaller units of sound. Two instructors emphasized this same continuum during their interview and discussed covering the various skills children learn at each developmental stage. For example, in interview 41, the instructor said, "A big thing I cover in 118 for several weeks is the steps on the phonological awareness continuum. Students need to understand how children move from easier tasks like rhyme to more difficult ones like deleting sounds." Similarly, another instructor stated, "We talk about at what stage of development kids learn the various skills and what to emphasize when. All skills within phonological awareness have varying levels of difficulty" (Interview 84, 2017).

The learning trajectory of acquiring alphabet knowledge requires the consideration of a variety of factors that influence children's alphabet learning, such as

using the letters in children's first names, discriminating the visual similarities of letters (e.g. b/d; p/q), and the relationship of letter sounds to pronounced letter names (e.g. the letter name Bee contains the /b/ sound, so that letter sound is easier to learn than the sound for W, which has no relationship to the pronounced letter name, Double You). Instructors across all five sites are focusing on these variables along with critiquing methods for teaching the alphabet that are not the most effective, such as teaching letters in order from A to Z or using a "letter of the week" approach. The following excerpt from an instructor interview provides one example highlighting different ways alphabet knowledge could be taught as well as variables of letter knowledge beginning teachers may not think about such as visual similarities and patterns.

> I get them to think about what are the many different ways it [alphabet knowledge] can be taught because the traditional way and what they will often see when they go out to childcare centers or public schools is the letter of the week. I try to help them think about if we were trying to read Chinese, and I usually have an article that's written in Chinese, so I ask them if you were trying to read this, how you would even begin to discern what these marks on the paper mean. For young children seeing words in a book is like you and I trying to read Chinese. So I try to provide a context for them first so that they can get from a person just learning about books to the alphabet. Then, we talk about the chronological way and then connecting uppercase and lowercase A, but then we also talk about what do you see similar in these letters and what do you see that's different. Like if you identify all the letters that have circles in them and all the letters that have vertical lines. That might be another way to help children develop higher order thinking skills of comparing and contrasting but also seeing letters that have similarities. For example, a lowercase b and d looks very similar except the line is moved from one side to another. Also, helping a child to identify patterns in letters. So there are multiple ways to expose children to the written language instead of just going A to Z. So I put a lot of emphasis on that. (Interview 84, 2017)

In another interview, an instructor referred to using the letters in a child's first name when discussing which letters should be taught first. "I cover developmental sequences of what children should be able to understand. For instance, children usually learn the

first letter of their first name. They usually claim is as their own. They say M, that's my name" (Interview 41, 2017). During a classroom observation, another instructor emphasized using structural linguistics, which focuses on which parts of the mouth are used to produce letter sounds, as another tool teachers can use when determining appropriate developmental sequences for teaching children letter sounds. This field note excerpt further describes this strategy.

> At the end of class, the instructor covered structural linguistics or the study of how sounds are produced. The instructor spent time researching this area during a doctoral program and told students it would change how they taught phonics. The instructor explained that physiology is about what parts of the mouth are used to make the letter sound, whether it is voiced or voiceless, and if the airflow is a stop, fricative, or nasal. The instructor then led the class through a chart of letters including P, B, M, T, D, N, K, G, F, V, SH, and CH. The chart was completed noting if the letter was a bilabial, dental, velar, labio dental, or alveolar. In addition, students marked voice or no voice and stop, fricative, or nasal. The instructor emphasized, "You won't teach children these terms, but you can teach them how to make different sounds so it's not only auditory. This gives them a tactile/hands-on way to solve the problem and focus on where you put your tongue, how it feels when air comes out or the vibration in the throat and nose." The instructor also mentioned this is mostly done by speech therapists but emphasized "this is another tool to help kids feel it." (Field Notes 10, 2017)

These pieces of evidence, along with textbook data, provided numerous ways to think about developmental learning progressions for the children learning alphabet knowledge and how to individualize instruction. Through a variety of course materials, instructors provided instruction surrounding the order in which children learn letters by looking at their individual needs and by considering which letters may be more or less difficult to teach together based on visual similarity and the relationship of letter sounds to pronounced letter names and other linguistic considerations.

Literacy Areas with Inconsistent Learning Trajectories

Early writing. As noted in the section above on content, early writing includes not only putting pencil to paper but also discussing the idea(s) of what children want to write about as well as learning how to form the letters and how to represent speech sounds with phonetically plausible letter choices. Across all five sites, instructors covered the stages of writing that children move through at various paces. Discussion and examples of drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, phonetic spelling, and traditional spelling were presented and emphasized. For example, this field note excerpt illustrates an instructor discussing the stages of writing during an in-person class meeting.

> The instructor placed writing samples and a continuation chart on the document camera and went over the following: "There are six different stages of children's writing. Stage one is random marks, which is like doodling but they can tell you what they were saying. Stage two is representational drawing where the picture starts to look like something you can recognize. In stage three, drawing is distinct from writing. There may be a picture with random scribbling, but even though it doesn't look like writing, they know pictures and text are different. They know that because you've presented examples and dictations. Stage four is the letter like stage. Here children are doing some doodles and some random marks along with numbers and letters. Stage five is called symbol salad because you're really seeing letter and number forms you're familiar with. The child knows this says something, but they have no letter/sound awareness. The sixth stage is partial phonetic where it is very common for children to write the first sound in the word." After going over these stages, the instructor pointed out that there is no specific age that this happens. Instead, it is a progression kids move through. (Field Note 9, 2017)

During interview 41, a different instructor, described using a "video of teaching writing that covers the six stages of writing and talks about all the things that children are writing even though it doesn't look like children writing [conventionally]. So it covers drawing, scribbling, writing pre-phonetic, writing, and then traditional spelling." As seen in Table 4.4, textbooks across sites also discuss this early writing progression or learning trajectory.

Table 4.4

Early Writing Learning Trajectory

Textbook 1	Discusses a continuum of writing that students move through at various paces and sometimes move back and forth between these six levels of writing: drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, familiar units or letter strings, invented spelling, conventional spelling. Descriptions and examples of each level are provided. (Document Summary Form T1, 2017)
Textbook 2	Usually develops in this sequence: scribbles, linear scribbles, individual shapes, letter-like forms, recognizable alphabet letters (maybe be mirror images or upside down), groups or letters with spaces in between, invented spelling, correct spelling with spacing. (Document Summary Form T2, 2017)
Textbook 3	Describes stages of drawing where 2 – 4 year olds are scribbling and move from uncontrolled scribbles to controlled to markings and 4 – 7 year olds create drawings that are more representative of the actual object. Next, the road to conventional spelling is described as precommunicative, semiphonetic, phonetic, transitional, and correct stage. (Document Summary Form T3, 2017)

The typical progression of what children write about, however, was not presented in any of the sites. For example, when getting ready to write, children first have to think about a topic to write about. Often, children write about themselves or events that happened to them. The writing typically consists of a list of actions or labels for events, well before children begin to include detail or imagination in their stories (Chapman,

1996). None of the sites addressed this important aspect of early writing. Nor was there evidence at any site, indicating an instructional emphasis on differences in how children may learn to form letters. Researchers have emphasized the importance of writing in early childhood and have identified specific characteristics of letters that make some letters more difficult to write than others. Some of these characteristics pertain to visual similarities among letters, directional shifts in letter formation, or frequency of occurrence in print (Pollo et al., 2009; Ritchey, 2008). Instruction on how to address these issues in teaching young children how to write letters is essential for promoting early writing practice, but there was little evidence that the early childhood instructors in the five participating sites of this capstone included such information. Addressing what children write about and the ease or difficulty of writing letters would provide a more nuanced view of how children learn important aspects of early writing such as ideation and letter formation, both of which affect children's learning trajectory in early writing and are critical pieces in the implementation of developmentally appropriate early writing instructional practices used with young children.

Oral language. As described above, the oral language content evaluated across the five sites did not consistently include the areas of grammatical structure (e.g. sentence structures and word order) or pragmatics, (e.g. cultural and conversational elements of language a child is exposed to on a daily basis). Although all sites referred to how children communicate with others, the learning trajectory for acquiring sentence structures and pragmatics was not consistently discussed. The field note excerpt below demonstrates one example of this.

> As the instructor called the roll, students were asked to tell one way infants communicate. As students responded, the instructor elaborated on their idea. For

> example, students mentioned babbling, reading sensory books, motherese, cooing, playing peek-a-boo, and crying. The instructor gave examples of what motherese would sound like and emphasized that crying is the first way babies communicate because they are hungry, bored, tired, etc. The next group of students called were asked about how toddlers communicate. They mentioned scribbling, gesturing, saying one word, facial expressions and mimicking. The instructor emphasized that first words are often something the child really likes and the adult's job is to expand on what the child says. (Field Notes 9, 2017).

Course textbooks emphasized communication as well. Textbooks described the typical learning trajectory for language production that children progress through beginning with cooing and babbling before verbally expressing one or two words and phrases. Texts also provided averages of the number of words children are able to produce at different ages. As seen in multiple sources across sites, the developmental trajectory of how children learn to communicate is covered in detail. Course textbooks, class observations, as well as instructor interviews all detailed communication beginning with sounds, facial expressions, and gestures before verbal words are expressed.

In contrast, a content analysis of the textbooks used indicated a lack of attention to the development of grammatical (sentence) structures and pragmatics. One textbook and one PowerPoint referred to older preschool-aged children making grammatical errors with verb usage, time words, and double negatives; however, no other data source provided evidence that grammatical structures were addressed at all. In addition, no data source provided information on the pragmatics of language, the cultural and conversational elements of language that a child is exposed to on a daily basis.

Finding Three: Specific Early Literacy Assessments

Data collected across the five participating sites suggested that all instructors included a range of strong, developmentally appropriate pedagogy in their instruction. As seen in table 4.5, documents, instructor interviews, and observations provided

evidence that community college early childhood instructors recommended teaching young children through play, sensory learning, and providing scaffolding through adult-child interactions. Data also emphasized integrating the fine arts, thinking about children's interests, teaching with literature, and using hands-on activities when teaching all areas of early literacy.

Table 4.5

Examples of Developmentally Appropriate Pedagogy

Documents	Interviews	Class Observations
Use songs to teach children how to recognize and generate rhyming words such as in Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star and Down by the Bay. Songs can also be used to move sounds around to create new words. For example, the name game lends itself to moving sounds around as well as focusing on beginning sounds and blending. Nursery rhymes and rhyming poems can also be used for these activities. (Textbook 1, 2017) Objects can be sorted based on the number of syllables or beats in a word. Clapping or movements can also be used. (Class PowerPoint 19-4, 2017) Describes how to set up a writing center including a variety of paper, writing utensils, and print that children can access readily. Adults should model and demonstrate writing in dramatic play opportunities. (Textbook 3, 2017)	"Playing in sand and a cookie sheet with cornmeal on it [alphabet knowledge], making a grocery list to make your snack with. We talk about fine motor control, toys children should be playing with to develop their hand muscles." (Interview 41, 2017) "We use alphabet charts at eye level, games, and activities to encourage letter and print awareness. For example, we use names, make a family book, draw letters in shaving cream, letter matching games, I spy, etc." (Interview 45, 2017) "So using tactile things or kinesthetic things like making letters out of playdough." (Interview 19, 2017)	Instructor mentioned various skills you can teach with books. During this time, letter identification and upper/lowercase letters were mentioned. (Field Notes 10, 2017) "Research is clear that infants and toddlers need chatty caregivers. Children are watching the world to see differences in adult-child interactions. Just putting out toys and letting kids play isn't enough. You have to talk and boost their language." (Field Notes 9, 2017) "I think puppets are a very unused media for storytelling and now children don't know what to do with them. Puppets are great to help with children that are shy or need a smile and can sometimes give kids a voice. They help with social/emotional development and language." (Field Notes 11, 2017)

A missing piece that is crucial to developmentally appropriate pedagogy, however, was providing specific examples of how to assess each area of early literacy and connect that assessment information to instruction. Little to no data were collected and/or analyzed across sites that addressed the specific components of early literacy assessment in detail. Nor were different types of assessment and their purposes addressed; preassessments to plan instruction, formative assessments to guide instruction, and summative assessments to evaluate instruction were not discussed specifically in the textbooks reviewed.

Nevertheless, content analyses of textbooks, interviews with instructors, and observations of community college classrooms all yielded evidence that students were exposed to informal assessments in general. Informal assessments included how to make observational notes, how to use checklists, make anecdotal notes, and/or collect writing samples. However, these informal assessments were not always connected to a specific content area of early literacy. For example, textbook one discussed observing and assessing early literacy growth by observing children carefully and taking notes; however, this assessment practice was not tied to a specific area of early literacy such as print concepts or alphabet knowledge. In addition, there were no examples provided to illustrate what this assessment might look like. In textbooks three and four, the term *observation* referred to jotting down notes about children's writing or their ability to turn the pages in a book correctly while reading. These examples are more specific, however, no other types of assessments or connections were mentioned.

While informal assessments were emphasized across sites, evidence of instruction on how to conduct formal assessments was only found in textbook 3. Formal

assessments differ from informal assessments in that informal assessments are quick, easy to use tools that provide a glimpse into a child's knowledge. These assessments are based on a specific content area and seek to identify how a child is performing on a set of skills. Results can be used to inform instructional decisions that will help a child continue to grow in the area assessed. Formal, or standardized measures, can be used to ensure children's skills are being measured uniformly. These assessments yield scores such as percentiles or standard scores based on statistical computations of how children have performed on the specific assessment. Textbook three provided charts detailing formal assessments that could be used in various areas of early literacy. For example, when discussing phonological awareness, the textbook identified ten assessment options including PALS, DIBELS Next, AIMSweb Test of Early Literacy, Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP), and the Test of Phonological Awareness, 2nd Edition: PLUS (TOPA-2+). Similarly, several assessments were identified for assessing concepts of print, including PALS, TRPI Early Reading Assessment, and the Test of Early Reading Ability, 3rd Edition (TERA-3). These formal assessments can be used to delve deeper into areas of knowledge that informal assessments may not provide. Familiarity with specific formal assessments might help early childhood educators implement more effective assessment practices that can lead to stronger connections between assessment and instructional practices.

Conclusion

Each community college early childhood program participating in this study provided students with information on all areas of early literacy including phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, early writing, and oral language.

When covering early literacy content, textbooks, course syllabi, class PowerPoints, instructor interviews, and class observations across all five sites provided evidence of addressing the key content domains of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. Early writing and oral language, however, were narrowly defined and addressed in a limited fashion.

Documents, interviews, and class observations across all five sites did include a basic definition of using writing to communicate and a description of the typical progression children move through when learning to write, ranging from scribble to using phonetic spelling. However, composition (ideation) and letter formation were inconsistently discussed and there was little attention to these aspects of learning trajectories in early writing. Perhaps as a consequence, there was a similar omission of developmentally appropriate pedagogy of early writing. To be fair, these topics were sometimes discussed when instructors covered alphabet knowledge; however, without explicit instruction on how to get young children to write, community college students are not likely to make the connection to the full, broader definition of early writing on their own. Emphasizing the connection between alphabet knowledge and early writing, as well as other literacy areas, would likely help these students clearly see the connection across these areas of early literacy.

Similar to early writing, community college early childhood courses included a narrow definition of oral language. While course materials and instructors emphasized expressive and receptive language development, the area of oral language also includes grammatical structures (e.g. sentence structures and word order) and the pragmatics of everyday language. For example, children learn how speakers construct sentences that

are meaningful and accurate such as how to use past tense verbs to refer to something that has already happened and future tense for events that will occur. Pragmatic skills are unique to the culture and social conversational style children are exposed to on a daily basis. This could include how to ask questions, how to respond to others appropriately, and how to contribute to the topic being discussed. Evidence illustrated a focus on the basic, communicative definition of oral language; however, content referring to the grammatical structures and pragmatics of language was lacking across all sites. Broadening the content included in both early writing and oral language could provide a more comprehensive view of children's oral language development.

Data related to learning trajectories, or typical learning progressions, were strong across all five sites in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. Evidence of developmental learning progressions were seen throughout analysis of documents, interviews, and class observation field notes. The area of early writing, however, does not currently include a comprehensive treatment of what children write about or a strong focus on letter formation.

Finally, developmentally appropriate pedagogy that focused on hands-on, active learning was emphasized across all five sites. Evidence analyzed in textbooks, interviews, and class observations included specific examples explaining how to teach all areas of early literacy through games and play-based learning such as adding writing to free play centers, talking with children during free play and meal times, and using engaging materials such as playdough and magnetic letters when teaching alphabet knowledge. Evidence of the importance of assessing children and using student data to drive instruction was also present; however, specific examples of informal and formal

assessments that related to each area of early literacy were not consistently provided. Documents and instructors referred to general assessments such as checklists or anecdotal notes; however, explanations surrounding what types of assessments to use to obtain specific types of information could help early childhood educators quickly develop or obtain effective early literacy assessments to consistently collect data that is useful for instructional purposes. For example, identifying specific letters a student already knows or pinpointing where a child is performing along the typical writing progression would guide a teacher's decisions when planning both individual, small group, and whole group instruction.

Chapter V: Recommendations

In this chapter, I will summarize the study along with the major findings and implications. Next, I will provide recommendations for the participants in this study as well as other early childhood programs across the Virginia Community College System. Finally, I will outline limitations of this study as well as possible research to further explore my original problem of practice.

Summary of Study

Problem of Practice

In my current position as an Assistant Professor of Education and Early Childhood at a rural community college in Southside Virginia, I had the opportunity to work with childcare providers and directors in the college's service region. One director expressed concerns about the lack of adult-child interactions and effective instruction occurring in classrooms at her center and wanted to know more about how to prompt the teachers at her center to interact more with the children and create more engaging lessons. After much conversation, I asked the director for permission to complete a required doctoral internship at her center to further investigate her concerns while also completing a step in my program of study.

To explore more about how caregivers at this specific center encouraged early language and literacy development, I spent more than one hundred hours observing and working with infant through preschool teachers. During this time, I observed minimal interactions and instruction that was both poor in quality and developmentally

inappropriate. I noted a range of instructional practices that included a minimal focus on literacy instruction and teaching skills through worksheets or whole class discussion. There were negligible amounts of teaching through play, writing, fine arts activities, and lessons including books or shared reading opportunities.

When reflecting on the low quality of early literacy instruction occurring at this center, I quickly assumed that the childcare providers had not received instruction or training in this area; however, I discovered that three out of the four had earned associate degrees in early childhood education from the local community college. Being familiar with the curriculum in the program, I knew that students were required to take two early literacy courses. This experience sparked an interest in the curriculum taught in the community college's early childhood program specifically related to early literacy and whether or not it was the same at community colleges across the state. I wondered if students were learning about early language and literacy development and research-based strategies to teach skills related to concepts of print, early writing, oral language, phonological awareness, and alphabet knowledge. This capstone study stemmed from my internship experience and reflections as well as my current position in an early childhood community college program.

Methodology

The goal of this study was to describe early literacy instruction provided in Virginia Community College early childhood programs and compare that instruction to what is known about early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy. Early literacy instruction includes phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, early writing, and oral language. Each of these

areas was explored to answer the following research question: To what degree, if any, do community college instructors across Virginia include early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy within early childhood education literacy courses?

In an effort to include demographically similar community colleges in this study, I focused on colleges within the VCCS Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative. Fourteen college service regions across the state include about a half million people who have not graduated with a high school diploma, and the Virginia Community College System has focused their efforts on increasing the number of people who not only graduate from high school but also pursue an associate degree or certificate. Of these fourteen colleges, nine currently have active early childhood programs. One college is where I currently work; therefore, the eight remaining programs were contacted to participate in this study. All eight colleges approved this study through their internal review board process; however, only five instructors agreed to participate, which included the following community colleges: Danville, Lord Fairfax, Mountain Empire, New River, and Paul D. Camp.

To learn more about the content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate instruction occurring in early literacy courses, I used document analysis of course textbooks, PowerPoints, and syllabi, along with semi-structured instructor interviews, and class observations. For solely online courses that I could not observe face-to-face meetings, I was granted access to the course blackboard site to further explore class materials provided to students. Analysis of these data sources across five community college sites led to three major findings with five practical implications.

Practical Implications

Implication 1. Data analysis surrounding early writing instruction revealed a narrow content focus. This capstone study focused on a broad definition of early writing that included composition, handwriting and spelling (Kaderavek, Cabell, & Justice, 2009). Composition refers to the process of generating topics to write about and working through the planning process to successfully put those ideas on paper. Handwriting refers to letter formation, and spelling refers to the connection between letter names and letter sounds to letter forms, leading to a child's ability to write the sounds they hear with logical phonetic choices, even if those choices were not 100 percent correct. For example, early writers may write *BB* for baby or *S* for sun. Course textbooks and materials across participating sites defined early writing as a way to communicate ideas or using print to communicate with others. This basic definition of early writing is not incorrect; however, it could be broadened to include other important pieces such as learning prewriting strategies, how to form letters, and how to apply the alphabetic principle to spell phonetically in early writing attempts.

During my internship experience, which sparked this capstone study, teachers utilized worksheets and included minimal writing experiences throughout the day. While earning an associate degree, the teachers I observed may have been presented with the narrow definition of writing being used to communicate ideas. A broader definition of early writing that includes information related to composition, letter formation, and spelling could have helped these teachers solidify the connection between early writing and other early literacy domains, especially between phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. Perhaps had they been informed of other aspects of early writing

they could have made stronger connections to learning trajectories across multiple content domains (e.g. phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, oral language, and early writing) through the use of authentic, integrated, developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices.

Implication 2. Similar to early writing, the area of oral language was defined too narrowly in most sites. Oral language includes the development of expressive and receptive skills, which focus on the level of words and sentences children can verbally say as well as words and sentences children can understand. In addition, this area emphasizes pragmatics of language including word usage and how language is structured to effectively communicate thoughts and ideas. Data from most sites indicated an emphasis only on using language to communicate with and understand others. This basic definition of oral language is not incorrect; however, it could be broadened to include other important pieces such as how to model and extend sentence structures and how to exercise the pragmatics of language use through asking and responding to questions, and the like. Presenting oral language solely as a means to communicate with and understand others does not provide students with the entire picture of oral language development, which in turn, limits their discussions of learning trajectories and developmentally appropriate pedagogy related to oral language development.

Throughout my internship experience, oral language instruction was minimal and poor in quality. In each classroom, the day mostly included meeting the basic needs of the children and keeping them under control. Adult-child interaction across classrooms consisted mainly of providing directions for an activity or giving commands. For example, I observed teachers saying, “Sit down. Come here. Be quiet. Color your

paper. Glue this here." While earning their associate degree, the teachers I observed were likely exposed to a basic definition of oral language as a means of solely building receptive and expressive language. If the teachers I observed were exposed to a broader view of including grammatical structures and pragmatics within adult-child interactions and instruction, they may have been more equipped to apply those ideas when working with young children. Instead of solely communicating through commands and directions, the teachers could have learned the importance of semantic and syntactic knowledge that allows children to communicate meaning by grammatically connecting ideas, demonstrating relationships, and appropriately building on social conversations (Roth, Speece, & Cooper, 2002; Snow, 1983). In addition, the teachers could have built an understanding that pragmatic skills are unique to the culture and social conversational style children are exposed to on a daily basis. This could include how to ask questions, responding to others appropriately, and contributing to the topic being discussed.

Implication 3. The narrow definition of early writing utilized in community college early literacy courses affected the instruction provided on learning trajectories in this area. Learning trajectories refer to the order children naturally learn content in a specific area of early literacy. In the area of early writing, all instructors covered the typical stages of writing that children move through at various paces, including drawing, scribbling, letter-like forms, phonetic spelling, and traditional spelling. However, the typical progression of what children write about and the differences in how children may learn to write letters was not presented consistently across participating sites. Addressing what children write about and the ease or difficulty of learning to write letters could provide a broader view of how children learn aspects of early writing, and could affect

the implementation of developmentally appropriate instructional practices used with young children.

Teachers observed during my internship were likely not exposed to how children's composition skills develop. In addition, information detailing the varying difficulties of learning to write letters may not have been presented. Researchers have emphasized the importance of writing in early childhood and have identified specific characteristics of letters that make some letters more difficult to write than others. Some of these characteristics pertain to visual similarities among letters, directional shifts in letter formation, or frequency of occurrence in print (Pollo et al., 2009; Ritchey, 2008). Instruction on how to address these issues in teaching young children how to write letters is essential for promoting early writing practice. Addressing what children write about and the ease or difficulty of writing letters could provide a broader view of how children learn aspects of early writing, and could affect the ability of teachers in the center where I observed to implement developmentally appropriate instructional practices with young children.

Implication 4. The narrow definition of oral language content within community college early literacy courses also affected information presented on learning trajectories in this area. Teachers participating in my internship experience likely learned how children typically develop expressive and receptive communication beginning with sounds, facial expressions, and gestures before verbal words are expressed. Information related to grammatical structures nor pragmatics of language, which refers to the cultural and conversational elements of language that a child is exposed to on a daily basis, may not have been presented. For example, teachers I worked with may not have learned that

while toddlers are learning to verbally express words at a rapid pace, they also begin to demonstrate knowledge of developing grammatical structures. For example, toddlers use plurals, possessives, and past tense in their daily language. They are also improving their sentence length and complexity, which has improved from using one-and-two-word phrases. When considering pragmatics, by three years of age, most typically developing children have mastered the basic structures of the language they are regularly exposed to within their families and environment. Knowledge about these pieces of oral language, which are more culturally and community based, could help the teachers I observed understand how children develop structural communication skills and interact with their families on a daily basis. This knowledge could then be effectively and purposefully applied when building positive adult-child verbal interactions and effective oral language instruction in the classroom.

Implication 5. The final area of inconsistency across participating sites pertained to information on the use of informal and formal literacy assessments. Teachers participating in my internship likely learned about types of informal assessments such as how to make observational notes, how to use checklists, make anecdotal notes, and/or collect writing samples. However, they may not have learned how to connect those assessment tools to a specific area of early literacy. For example, observing children carefully and taking notes may have been presented as a type of informal assessment; however, this practice may not have been tied to a specific area of early literacy such as print concepts or alphabet knowledge. In addition, teachers may have received minimal instruction related to formal assessments used across areas of early literacy. Formal assessments could help these teachers delve deeper into areas of knowledge that informal

assessments may not provide. Familiarity with specific informal and formal assessments might help the teachers I observed implement effective assessment practices that can lead to developmentally appropriate instruction in all areas of early literacy.

Recommendations

Data analyzed across all five participating community college sites provided strong evidence of early literacy instruction. Course materials, interviews, and observations included in-depth coverage of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate instruction in all areas, especially in the areas of phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and concepts of print. Instruction pertaining to early writing and oral language was also evident but could include a broader focus. Specifically, in the area of early writing, instruction was lacking on topics children typically write about or how to encourage them to write about those topics. Information was also lacking on how to help children apply the alphabetic principle to writing. In the areas of oral language, instruction and information were lacking on the grammatical structures of oral language and how these structures are acquired across development. Likewise, there was little evidence that instruction in the community colleges address the pragmatics of oral language development. Pragmatics refers to the ways in which children use language within social situations and the ability to use language for different purposes. An important part of language development is learning how to use language in different social settings and for different purpose, such as how to greet people versus how to inform them about things or how to demand versus request things. In addition, a more robust emphasis on specific informal and formal assessments that are specifically related to early literacy instruction could be expanded. The

following recommendations, as outlined in Table 5.1 are based on the findings of this study.

Table 5.1

Recommendations for Improving Early Literacy Instruction

Recommendation 1:	The results of this study should be shared at the next early childhood peer group conference to ensure participating instructors as well as other instructors across the state have access to this information.
Recommendation 2:	The blackboard site where early childhood instructors across the state can share resources and ideas should include a space for instructors to share resources related to early literacy in general as well as specific areas related to this study's findings.
Recommendation 3:	Instructors should consider adding readings or other course materials related to broader definitions of early writing and oral language as well as specific early literacy assessments. These materials could be discussed in detail throughout community college early literacy courses, and instructors could consider adding specific assignments where students would apply their knowledge.
Recommendation 4:	Instructors should consider how early literacy instruction can fit into the larger early childhood program. For example, early literacy formative assessments and field applications could be integrated into general assessment coursest and the pragmatics of oral language could be discussed in courses related to working with families.
Recommendation 5:	In this study, instructors provided a strong foundational knowledge of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate instruction. To strengthen application from the classroom to a real-life classroom, instructors might consider adding field applications into the lab portion of early literacy courses in order to discuss real-life examples within the college course.

Recommendation One

The Virginia Community College System utilizes a peer group program that encourages faculty from similar disciplines or interests across the state to meet together every other year. The goal of this program is "collaboration, creativity, problem-solving, planning, forecasting, learning, and networking in the VCCS" (VCCS Peer Groups, n.d.). During peer group conferences, which are organized and hosted by the VCCS, faculty have the opportunity to discuss curriculum, technology, instruction, and updates related to their specific discipline or area of interest. The early childhood peer group recently met in November 2017 and will meet again during the fall of 2019.

Recommendation one states that results of this study should be shared during the next early childhood peer group meeting in fall of 2019. During this time, instructors who participated in this study, as well as others from across the state, will be gathered together in one location with the sole purpose of discussing topics such as curriculum taught within the program. Sharing the findings of this study could spark faculty exploration of their own early literacy courses to ensure that content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy are covered effectively and in-depth in each of the five areas of early literacy.

It is crucial for VCCS early childhood instructors to provide consistent, effective instruction related to early literacy development. While there are decades of research supporting the importance of early childhood education, early childhood teachers have historically not been prepared to provide quality, effective, research-based instruction and care (Isenberg, 2000; NRC, 2001). Several research studies have investigated the value and effect of earning a degree in early childhood education or a related field on the

quality of education provided. Whitebook (2003) reviewed research connecting teacher education level to child outcomes. Again and again she found that higher levels of education led to increased child outcomes on cognitive testing, positive teacher-child relationships, and more patience as well as understanding of children's needs from the teacher.

Although researchers have shown the importance of early childhood teachers receiving training and degrees, studies have also revealed inconsistencies in the content covered in early childhood degree programs (Maxwell, Lim, & Early, 2006). The results of this study align with those findings and highlight inconsistencies within specific areas of early literacy instruction from one Virginia community college to another. It is important to ensure early childhood students across Virginia are being exposed to the same information regardless of the college they attend. Sharing inconsistencies found across programs with early childhood faculty across the state is one step to shoring up any irregularities and aligning curriculum.

Recommendation Two

The Virginia Community College System utilizes an online learning management system through Blackboard, Inc. Through this forum, the early childhood peer group created a webpage that all early childhood instructors across the state can access. This site is managed by the peer group chair and includes opportunities to post announcements, discussion board threads, documents, and web links among other sources of information. Any member of the site can share information or pose questions to the rest of the group.

Recommendation two suggests creating a space on the current early childhood blackboard site for instructors to share resources related to early literacy in general as well as specific areas related to this study's findings. Between peer group meetings, early childhood instructors have limited opportunities to gather face to face, and most, if not all, of those opportunities are structured conferences or meetings. This leaves little time for collaboration around curriculum content. The peer group blackboard site provides a place for instructors to connect anytime as it fits into their schedule. In this forum, instructors can be encouraged to post early literacy textbooks, articles, and activities as well as questions or concerns. This venue could extend discussion and thoughts sparked after the results of this study are shared during the in-person peer group conference.

Recommendation Three

Based on the findings of this study, instructors should consider adding readings or other course materials related to broader definitions of early writing and oral language as well as specific early literacy assessments. These materials could be discussed in detail throughout community college early literacy courses, and instructors could consider adding specific assignments where students would apply their knowledge. Table 5.2 outlines possible materials that could be utilized separated by topic. These resources could be shared at the peer group conference as well as on the discussion board as a starting point. Instructors could use these as well as add to the list of ideas.

Each article, webinar, or newsletter covers information that is currently missing from course materials used by VCCS early literacy instructors. For example, the early writing resources talk in depth about applying the alphabetic principle when writing as well as how to prompt writing topics based on children's interests. Oral language

resources explain the importance of grammatical structures and pragmatics of language along with receptive and expressive language development. Finally, resources related to informal assessments provide examples of sample assessments for several areas of early literacy while the article on formal assessments provides names of appropriate formal assessments separated by specific areas of early literacy. These free, easy to understand resources could be effective additions to current required course materials in community college early literacy courses.

Table 5.2

Additional Reading and Course Materials

Early Writing:	Cabell, S. Q., Tortorelli, L. S., & Gerde, H. K. (May 2013). How do I write…? Scaffolding preschoolers' early writing skills. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(8), pp. 650-659. This article can be accessed at http://www.readingrockets.org/article/how-do-i-write-scaffolding-preschoolers-early-writing-skills Neuman, S. B. (n.d.). From scribbles to sentences. Retrieved from http://www.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=11273 Cabell, S. (2013). Supporting Young Writers: A Framework for Understanding Early Writing Development [Webinar]. In *Front Porch Series*. Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/framework-understanding-early-writing-development
Oral Language:	Podhajski, B. (2012, March 29). Early Literacy Research and Language Development [Webinar]. In *Building Blocks for Literacy® Webinar Series.* Retrieved from http://www.getreadytoread.org/early-learning-childhood-basics/early-literacy/early-literacy-webinars Genishi, C. (n.d.). *Young children's oral language development.* Retrieved from http://www.readingrockets.org/article/young-childrens-oral-language-development The National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness (n.d.). Oral language and vocabulary. *The Big 5: The Big Picture.* Retrieved from https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/big5-big-picture-oral-language-vocabulary-eng.pdf
Early Literacy Assessments:	Reading Rockets (2004). Informal reading assessments: Examples. Retrieved from http://www.readingrockets.org/article/informal-reading-assessments-examples The Access Center (2005). Early reading assessment: A guiding tool for instruction. The Access Center: Washington DC. http://www.readingrockets.org/article/early-reading-assessment-guiding-tool-instruction PALS-PreK (2004). Formative emergent literacy assessment and instructional resources including downloadbale activities and professional development webinars. https://pals.virginia.edu/public/tools-prek.html

Recommendation Four

In addition to adding readings and resources related to broader definitions of early writing and oral language, as well as specific early literacy assessments, instructors might also consider how early literacy instruction and application activities could easily fit into other early childhood coursework. For example, students earning an associates degree at a Virginia community college take two observation courses: CHD 165 Observation and Participation in Early Childhood Settings and CHD 265 Advanced Observation and Participation in Early Childhood Settings. Each of these courses require students to complete 60 observation hours in the field. Students typically take CHD 165 during their first semester and learn how to assess children and use the data to plan appropriate instruction. This course would be an ideal place to add assignments requiring students to assess specific areas of early literacy, discuss the results, and plan instruction that would meet the specific needs of that student. CHD 265 is typically taken in a student's final semester and requires the student to become the teacher and implement all that has been learned in the early childhood associates degree program. This is another course where early literacy applications can be practiced, and discussed.

Another course students complete during their associates degree program is CHD 216 Early Childhood Programs, Schools, and Social Change, which focuses on working with families. This course covers topics such as differences among families, understanding families' cultures and backgrounds, and applying that information to adult-child interactions as well as instruction. This course would be an ideal place to add in discussions and activities surrounding pragmatics of oral language, which centers around how children learn to verbally interact in social contexts with others in their families and

communities. This topic is heavily affected by each child's culture and background making it a good fit for the CHD 216 course.

Recommendation Five

Both early literacy courses, CHD 118 and CHD 119, include a lecture and lab component. Currently, instructors decide how to utilize the lab time; therefore, students complete a range of activities such as field work observations or lengthy projects. To strengthen the connection between foundational knowledge presented in the classroom and what actually occurs in real-life classrooms, instructors should utilize the lab component of each class for field assignments that can be discussed further during class lecture time. For example, students could complete an assignment where they gather writing samples from a particular age group of students and bring the samples to class. During class time, students can evaluate the writing samples, identify where the child is along the early writing continuum, and discuss appropriate scaffolding supports as well as activities for that specific child. Similarly, students can take anecdotal notes on a child's oral language ability during play. Those notes can then be discussed during class time where students can identify where the child is developmentally and plan appropriate instruction. Conversations about pragmatics can be weaved in as well through the varied anecdotal notes students bring to class. For example, the instructor can lead students in a discussion about the differences in how children ask questions for different purposes, how they socially interact with others, and how their conversational styles differ across social contexts.

Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is sample size. While five sites provided substantial information to discover patterns within early literacy instruction, evidence analyzed in these sites may not be an accurate representation of early childhood literacy instruction across the entire Virginia Community College System. Participation from the remaining three invited instructors could have provided similar or disconfirming evidence that would have bolstered these results or called them into question. Currently, there are fifteen active early childhood programs; therefore, this study describes one-third or 33% of early literacy instruction. This leaves a large portion of unknown information where instructors could potentially be presenting similar or differing instruction to early childhood students.

Another possible limitation of this study is the small number of observations completed. Instructors teaching in-person courses were observed one time during the semester. During this time, the observed instruction varied from early writing to oral language to story book reading. When analyzing evidence from one specific cite, there was no information on early writing in the documents; however, the instructor taught about this area of early literacy in detail during the class observation using handouts. If a different class meeting were observed, evidence of early writing may not have been found for that site; therefore, it is possible that information on assessments or pragmatics of language was presented by instructors during class meetings that were not observed.

Future Research

This research study stemmed from a concern about graduates of early childhood education programs not applying research-based effective literacy instruction in their classrooms. This study explored one possible reason for that disconnect – content

covered in early literacy instruction courses offered at Virginia Community Colleges. The findings of this study provide evidence of strong early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy in all areas of early literacy development with the exception of a few inconsistencies. No area of early literacy was completely ignored or poorly addressed, which prompts this researcher to wonder what else could cause a disconnect between early literacy knowledge and effectively applying that knowledge when teaching young children. The following sections provide possible areas that could be explored further.

Foundational Knowledge

During my internship experience, which sparked this study, I observed teachers providing ineffective instruction as well as minimal adult-child interaction. Surprisingly, four of the five teachers had previously earned an associate degree in early childhood education at the local community college. While the teachers may have learned basic knowledge of literacy practices, there was little evidence of a clear understanding of how to apply that knowledge in a classroom setting. This capstone study found strong coverage of early literacy content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy across participating community college programs. These results align with several studies exploring the application of effective instruction by beginning teachers, which found teacher preparation programs provided pre-service teachers with strong foundational knowledge on how to teach reading (Bauml, 2011; Flint, Maloch, & Leland, 2010; Grisham, 2000; Helfrich & Bean, 2011; Kosnik & Beck, 2008; Maloch et al., 2003; Smith, 2009; Wong, Chong, Choy, and Lim, 2011). While teachers did agree on obtaining foundational knowledge, they also discussed not having the depth of

knowledge needed to teach reading. One teacher compared her teacher preparation program to planting a seed that she later developed further through professional development opportunities (Maloch et al., 2003). Grisham (2000) found similar results in her study following teachers through their first two years of teaching. These case studies revealed teachers' desires to dig deeper into instructional strategies, especially knowledge to pinpoint an effective tool for a particular child.

The results of this capstone study align with early childhood teachers being presented with the foundational knowledge needed to understand early literacy instruction; however, that could be just scratching the surface of what teachers need to be successful. Data revealed more instruction is needed specifically in the area of developing and using specific early literacy assessments to identify children's strengths and weaknesses, which would assist teachers in pinpointing what to do for each individual child. More information is needed on what is necessary past providing foundational knowledge to assist teachers in assessing children's knowledge and skills, and using that assessment data to provide developmentally appropriate pedagogy. Community college instructors could possibly plan application activities where students are connecting the foundational knowledge learned to what effective instruction looks like in a real classroom. Two of the five participating community college sites in this study required students to complete observation hours related to early literacy instruction, which could allow them to see theories and strategies discussed in class applied in a classroom setting. This variation among sites could lead to another reason teachers participating in my internship had trouble applying information after graduating.

On the Job Mentoring

During my internship experience, I spoke with the center director about the teachers' education and ongoing learning. Along with college coursework completed by the teachers, the center is enrolled in the Virginia Quality Initiative through Smart Beginnings. This program is voluntary and free for childcare center providers. The aim is to assess the center's current program and provide goals for improvement in the areas of staff education levels, professional development, curriculum, assessment, environment, and interactions (Virginia Quality, n.d.). Also, the director invited the region's infant/toddler specialist in to observe the teachers and provide suggestions for improvement. Finally, she participates in a director's group where they take turns visiting each other's centers to receive and/or provide suggestions. Each of these programs and connections provide sporadic on-site observations and suggestions from specialists in the field; however, the teachers did not have a consistent on-site mentor or more consistent observations and follow-up.

To bridge the gap between college coursework and effective application to a classroom setting, teachers in this center could benefit from a strong mentor. Mentoring can be defined in many ways, but "the overall goal of teacher mentoring is to foster a relationship of ongoing support, collaboration and the development of knowledge and skills that translate into improved teaching strategies" (Cook, 2012, p. 3). This necessary connection aids beginners in bridging knowledge gained in pre-service teacher education with applying techniques learned to a real world classroom. Researchers have reported several benefits of mentoring programs for beginning teachers including increased morale and job satisfaction along with improved classroom and time management (Bullough,

2005; Lindgren, 2005). The best mentoring programs provide opportunities for beginning teachers to be active participants in observing, questioning, conferencing, and setting goals to improve aspects of good teaching (Clark & Byrnes, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2004; Kahrs & Wells, 2013; Schwille, 2008; Womack-Wynne, 2011). This on-the-job involvement could allow teachers I observed and an assigned mentor to tie previous knowledge with real-world classroom experiences. The end result could create genuine learning opportunities that could affect these teachers' decisions and instruction for years to come.

Final Thoughts

In order to provide effective early literacy instruction to young children, early childhood teachers must obtain knowledge about content, learning trajectories, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy in phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, concepts of print, early writing, and oral language. One way of obtaining that knowledge is through taking early childhood classes at a Virginia Community College. Data analyzed in this study provided strong evidence of effective early literacy instruction being provided across five early childhood education programs with the exception of a few areas that needed improvement. Sharing this information with early childhood instructors and providing suggestions for additional readings and course materials could lead to these areas being strengthened.

Once knowledge of early literacy instruction is obtained, early childhood teachers must then have the ability to effectively apply their early literacy knowledge in a classroom setting. During my own observations in a local childcare center, there was an apparent disconnect between college course content and effective application. Since this

study shows strengths of instruction provided within community college courses, other areas could be explored to find possible reasons behind the gap occurring from college to classroom. These alternate areas could include providing a deeper level of understanding as opposed to scratching the surface of many early literacy topics and ensuring beginning teachers have an effective mentor during their first years of teaching.

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Appendices

Appendix A: E-mail Inquiring about VCCS Research Approval Process

From: Dulaney, Kristin [mailto:kdulaney@patrickhenry.edu]
Sent: Friday, November 18, 2016 2:07 PM
To: Catherine Finnegan <cfinnegan@vccs.edu>
Subject: Research Procedures

Dr. Finnegan,

I am currently working on my EdD. in Reading Education through the University of Virginia and am getting ready to begin my final research project. I would like to explore how reading courses are taught in the early childhood programs at colleges in the Virginia Horseshoe. To do this, I would need permission to contact instructors about participating in the project. I would request copies of class syllabi and activities. I also want to conduct interviews to gain their perspectives about early literacy as well as teaching methods they emphasize in their classes. My goal is to explore how early literacy instruction is being presented to current or future childcare providers who are taking the courses.

What would I need to do to obtain permission for this project? I will just be beginning the process and writing my proposal next semester so I'm not far into the process. I wanted to touch base with you to know VCCS' procedures before moving forward. Thanks for your time.

Kristin Dulaney
Assistant Professor of Education and Early Childhood
Patrick Henry Community College
645 Patriot Ave.
Martinsville, VA 24112
Phone: 276-656-0217
kdulaney@patrickhenry.edu

From: Catherine Finnegan <cfinnegan@vccs.edu>
Sent: Thursday, December 1, 2016 9:22:00 AM
To: Dulaney, Kristin
Subject: RE: Research Procedures

Kristin,

Thank you very much for reaching out to me. With the type of research you are proposing, you will need to contact individual colleges and faculty to determine if they are interested in participating. Some colleges have a well-defined process for approving external research projects, while others are more laissez faire in their approach. I'd suggest using the VCCS course and program search to identify the colleges that offer early childhood degrees, then reach out to the institutional research offices to get an idea about their procedures.

You may also want to consider the non-credit early childhood programs as well, since many colleges only offer training that way. The IR offices should be able to help connect you to the right people in those programs too.

Best Wishes and good luck on your research,

Cat Finnegan
Dr. Cat Finnegan
cfinnegan@vccs.edu
Office: 804-819-1665
Mobile: 706-207-4696

Appendix B: Sample Responses from Community College Institutional Effectiveness Departments

Sample 1
Kristin,

Once your proposal has been completed and approved just submit it to me and I will work with our IRB for the approvals.

Thanks,
Robert

Robert May
Director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness
rmay@vhcc.edu
Virginia Highlands Community College
PO Box 828, Abingdon, VA 24212
Phone: (276)739-2436
www.vhcc.edu

Sample 2
Kristin,

Since you are currently only proposing working with faculty it does not fit within our normal IRB process. You can just directly contact our early childhood faculty lead.

If you decide you would like to interview students in the program, at that point I would need a copy of your IRB approval through UVA.

Thanks,

G. Still
DCC

Sample 3
Good Morning, Kristin,

I think the best avenue would be for you to contact the lead faculty to see if she would be interested or have the time to assist you. We have her pretty heavily loaded with work, so please understand if she is already over-booked for spring semester. Please know, though, that she is an excellent resource, professor, and mentor. You would gain much from her. I have copied her on this email, along with her dean.

Thanks,
Pat

Appendix C: Sample Starter Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

1) When teaching about early literacy, which areas do you touch on throughout the semester?

2) Explain what you typically cover when teaching about an area of early literacy such as alphabet knowledge?

3) How do you decide which topics and teaching methods to emphasize during your class instruction?

4) What, if any, areas or teaching methods do you share with students outside of what's currently outlined in your syllabus and course readings?

Appendix D: Sample Document Summary with Codes

Site: 45

Document: CHD 118 Syllabus

Date received or picked up: July 19, 2017

Significance or importance of document: Course syllabus outlines topics covered throughout the semester as well as class assignments.

Brief summary of contents	Code
Receptive/expressive language covered during August 21st class meeting as well as reading and assignments related to early language development; students are required to read articles found on www.naeyc.org about the language domain and read chapter 11 about specific word instruction during the October 2nd self-study week	OL-C
print awareness mentioned in an assignment for September 4th self-study week; print awareness is a topic for the September 18th class meeting, students read articles and complete a reader's response assignment about it	CP-C
alphabetic principle mentioned in an assignment during September 4th self-study week and as a topic during the September 18th class meeting; students are required to read chapter 4 titled letter knowledge after the October 23rd class meeting	AK-C
Writing and journaling covered during September 18th class meeting	EW-C, EW-DAP
Students are required to read chapter 5 titled phonological awareness after the September 18th class meeting and complete a thematic rhyming lesson using the model in the text on page 128	PA-C, PA-DAP

((*All areas of early literacy are being touched on throughout the semester. I will need to refer to the textbook, interviews, and observations to get a better idea of how these areas are defined and what material is covered.))*
Adapted from Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.55

Appendix E: Sample Conceptually Clustered Matrix

Site 41	CP-C	CP-LT	CP-DAP
Documents	"The understanding of how books 'work', such as that they have a front and a back, are read from left to right, have pictures that give us information about the text, have spaces separating words, and have words that don't change between readings."	Expose infants and toddlers to concepts of print through reading aloud and allowing them to help turn the pages. Preschoolers should be able to find the cover, title, author, etc. Children pick up on this skill through exposure to books regularly over time so teachers should not spend a lot of time on this.	Read alouds…when doing this we are demonstrating how to hold, open, and read the book; we can model directionality and reading the words not pictures by pointing or tracking as we read aloud; talk about the parts of the book such as front and back; talk about text features such as table of contents, heading, page numbers, etc.; can read a variety of texts such as big books, recipes, poems, magazine articles, etc.; put copies of books at the listening center so children can practice applying concepts of print such as turning pages and following along with the text while listening
Interview	Like left to right knowledge, turning the book over, knowing that you turn the pages this way, knowing that you read left to right, knowing salient print features.	This was not discussed during the interview.	I use scaffolding with story books where I put a stack of books on the table. Then, I talk about different concepts of print and they have to find a book that does it.
Observation	This was not discussed during the class observation.	This was not discussed during the class observation.	This was not discussed during the class observation.