

Fall 12-2022

Creating More Equitable Opportunities in Early Childhood by Highlighting Parent Voice: A Qualitative Case Study

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**CREATING MORE EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD BY
HIGHLIGHTING PARENT VOICE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY**

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION, EARLY CHILDHOOD

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

December 2022

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ABSTRACT

CREATING MORE EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD BY HIGHLIGHTING PARENT VOICE: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Julie Dawn Sill
Old Dominion University, 2022
Director: Dr. Angela Eckhoff

This qualitative, single embedded case study, framed on Bioecological Systems Theory, Adult Learning Theory, and a Family-Systems Intervention Model investigates the reasons parents and caregivers of young children enroll in and complete parent education classes during the birth to three-year period, as well as the supports that may contribute to positive early parent-child communication or the barriers that may prevent these interactions from occurring (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Knowles et al., 2020). Convenience sampling was used to recruit adult participants from a community organization in the Southeastern USA whose mission was to improve the school readiness of its youngest citizens. The case boundary was placed around a specific facet of the community organization that provided group parent education classes using both virtual and in-person delivery methods. Data collection for the case consisted of archived program documents, semi-structured individual interviews, and participant created artifacts. Twenty-seven adults completed a programmatic enrollment form, twenty-six completed a pre-class parent survey, twenty-one completed an end of course feedback questionnaire, ten participated in individual interview sessions, and three created a participant artifact about early communication. Elemental coding procedures were utilized and included descriptive and In Vivo coding to highlight parent voice (Saldaña, 2021). The study population demonstrated lower attrition and a greater diversity in self-reported race, languages spoken in the homes, socioeconomic status, and educational levels as compared to previously published literature on the topic (Caron et al., 2015; Du Paul et al., 2013; Elmquist et al., 2021; Stephan & Miclea, 2013). Results also revealed diversity in the employment status of the individual interview participants and included the voices of fathers. Themes of accountability, empowerment, and inclusivity were reasons for enrolling in and completing the parent class. The findings also noted supports for success, barriers to participation, and the

systems of influence that aided the caregivers with early parent-child interactions, highlighting the missing voices and preferences of adult caregivers with young children.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my family who have loved, supported, and inspired me to set my sights and expectations high in life, to dream big, to follow my passions for education and life-long learning, and to proudly exhibit a strong work-ethic in the process. Words cannot adequately express the gratitude that I have for your unending love and support over the course of my lifetime and during this dissertation journey. Your words of encouragement and affirmation were appreciated more than you know. May I always pay this love, empathy, and inspiration forward in a Christ-like manner to positively impact the trajectory of others' success in the process. Thank you for modeling the fruits of the spirit and for encouraging me to do the same when interacting with others that I encounter. May I always exhibit these characteristics as noted in Galatians 5:22.

This dissertation is also dedicated to the village of strong women educators who have supported me over the course of my career, who have encouraged me to stand proudly as an educator, to follow my passions for teaching and research, and to rely on others in the process. Thank you to the Texas PIPsters who opened my eyes to the fact that research is an avenue for advocacy and for showing me that dedication to a worthy cause is better achieved as a collective group of inquisitive, albeit different minds who are focused on the same goal. You are all an inspiration to the families and students that you serve.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the faculty of the Teaching and Learning Department at Old Dominion University for challenging me to view issues about curriculum and education from a critical lens. Thank you to Dr. Dunkerly, Dr. Grant, and Dr. Sunday for pushing me to think outside of the box, to be an innovative researcher, and to be a strong advocate for those who may not have a voice. Thank you to Dr. Crompton for mentoring me and for creating innovative research and publishing opportunities for me during a global pandemic. I would also like to acknowledge my dissertation committee members for their dedication to quality throughout the dissertation process. Their collective wisdom was inspiring and further increased my desire to pursue research projects of the same caliber in the future. Moreover, I would like to thank my committee for helping me to pursue a worthy research project from a distance, during the COVID-19 social distancing period. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my committee chairperson Angela Eckhoff, whose dedication to excellence and education were seen throughout the entire project. Her mentorship, advice, and insightful comments allowed me to think critically about each step of the research process and to grow from a graduate student into an independent researcher. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with her on this journey. I am grateful for the myriad of lessons that I learned from her over my time at Old Dominion University and during the dissertation process due to the vast number of experiences and advice that she was able to share with me. Thank you for the countless hours of time and dedication that you give to your graduate students as mentor and co-program director. Your contributions to academic research and to the field of early childhood education are admirable and noteworthy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that the early childhood years are a crucial time for growth and development in a young child's life. Research has shown that language ability at a young age is often predictive of school achievement, communication, literacy skills, and improved social emotional skills (Beecher & Van Pay, 2021; Gilkerson et al., 2018; Gunderson & Levine, 2011; Patel et al., 2021). However, this language is not learned in isolation, but in the dynamic homes and communities of young children, and often with familiar caregivers and family members (Begus & Southgate, 2018; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Heath, 2012; Jipson et al., 2018; Neal & Neal, 2013; Saylor & Ganea, 2018; Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2016). While improved science, technology, and research have played a critical role in our current understandings about this topic, a more focused pursuit of equitable learning opportunities is needed as our nation welcomes an increasingly diverse population of students into the public schools (McKenna & Millen, 2013; see, United States Quick Facts for more). As Maria Montessori stated, "those things which occupy us in the field of education are the interest of humanity at large" (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 21). Since many of these early learning opportunities occur in real-world contexts before a child enters the formal classroom and can be molded by culture or communication styles, equitable learning opportunities and school readiness are the responsibility of the entire village of community stakeholders, parents, and academics alike and must be addressed to combat the current disparities in school readiness (Clinton, 2006; Saylor & Ganea, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of early experiences by objectively investigating supportive, early positive parent-child interactions, and language development using a Language ENvironmental Analysis (LENA) technological device (Caskey et al., 2014; Gilkerson et al., 2017a; Gilkerson et al., 2017b; Gomez & Strasser, 2021; Morris et al., 2020; Suskind, 2016; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). The LENA device, essentially a 'verbal pedometer' of the child's natural environment, was created to analyze early childhood learning and to increase more equitable

learning experiences for all children before they reached formalized school situations (for more, see LENA Foundation, Understanding LENA Technology). The small, wearable technological device can be worn by young children with minimal effort and helps researchers to analyze the overall auditory environment (e.g., ambient noise, electronic noise, etc.), the number of adult words, and calculates the number of adult-child conversational turns that occur each day using complex computer algorithms (Xu et al., 2009). The device also allows researchers and educators to give objective feedback to family members in a timely manner, something that was nearly impossible to do a few years ago. The LENA device allows researchers to better understand the science behind active learning in childhood, as well as the parent or caregivers' role in the process (Begus & Southgate, 2018; Elmquist et al., 2021; Saylor & Ganea, 2018; Tamis-Lemonda et al., 2019). Most recently, the LENA device was utilized to show that the conversational turns experienced at eighteen months of age were predictive of the emotional regulation and communication of children who were 30 months old, further demonstrating the powerful influence of caregivers during the early years (Gomez & Strasser, 2021; Jipson et al., 2018). This supported research which demonstrated how parent engagement (i.e., increased conversational turns) could positively affect a child's language development, often leading due to improved social emotional development, academic learning (e.g., literacy, math), or future relationships due to the brain's plasticity during the formative years (Gunderson & Levine, 2011; Kaiser & Hancock, 2003; Morris et al., 2020; Sanders, 2019). Moreover, it highlights the importance of guiding and supporting the entire family as a social unit during this crucial time of development (Dunst, 2000; Morris et al., 2020).

While many families have the desire to give their children the best start in life, they do not always realize the crucial impact that their actions have on the developmental process; others face barriers or distractions that prevent them from doing so effectively on this journey (Hafner, 2019). Since children often spend the majority of their day with caregivers and families during the formative years, these stakeholders must be supported with evidenced-based information, technology and resources, as well as from a collaboration of community and professional stakeholders to maximize parents' potential by understanding the tools that are available to them, at a time when their efforts can exponentially and

positively impact future learning (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Eply et al., 2010; Evangelou & Sylva, 2004; Williams & Lerner, 2019). Only then will they be able to address a current problem and phenomenon in education, the disparities of young children's school readiness.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study sought to examine the complicated and often layered influences that affect development during the formative years. As such, a theoretical framework that encompassed and valued multiple influences on child development, including that of adult stakeholders, was necessary. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, later renamed the Bioecological Systems Theory (BST), gave this study a specific lens from which to study the contemporary problem of disparities in school readiness, as it nicely framed the intricacies of human development as well as the dynamic relationships and other environmental influences that are an integral part of this process. While Bronfenbrenner (2005) was ultimately concerned about the development of children, he realized that focusing on the child alone was not an adequate approach,

“Although most parents have the capacity and the motivation to respond to the immediate physical and psychological needs of their children, the situation is rather different with respect to enabling their children to acquire new knowledge and skills. In these domains, the parents must themselves possess the desired knowledge and skills, or they must have access to resources outside the family that can provide their children with the experiences needed to develop competence, or both” (p. 190).

Bioecological Systems Theory

BST helped to demonstrate that multiple environmental factors, as well as the interconnectedness of multiple life systems (i.e., human beings, culture) are an integral part of the developmental process and ultimately shape and mold a person over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Additionally, BST highlighted the fact that relationships and social interactions are a crucial component of the developmental process and include four nested 'life systems' (i.e., microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) in addition to the often-overlooked component of time (i.e., the chronosystem). While each of BST's ecological life

systems are interrelated to some degree, the systems also function individually and have a unique impact on a human being's development. In closest proximity to the child is the microsystem which has a direct influence on development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). This system includes human beings (e.g., immediate family members, caregivers, or other familiar role models) with whom the child has the most direct contact, as well as other consistent activities (e.g., daily routines) which facilitate the direct interactions among members. The microsystem also influences a child's development through indirect factors (e.g., parent's personality, individual beliefs, circumstances) demonstrating that "human beings are not only a culture-producing species, but they are also culturally produced" (Bronfenbrenner, 1992, p. 205).

As a child begins to expand her interactions to other familiar contexts in the microsystem (i.e., neighborhood, school, daycare), BST explains that the mesosystem (i.e., single links or connections within two or more facets of the microsystem) provide further influences on the child's development in a relational way (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Moreover, the exosystem provides interactions between various facets of the microsystem (i.e., familiar influences such as the home, place of worship, etc.) and other settings or unfamiliar contexts (e.g., parent's workplace, post office) in which the child may not normally interact. The macrosystem influences development from a pattern of larger societal forces (i.e., overarching beliefs, cultural values, lifestyles, expectations) which include subcultures of the other systems (e.g., government or political systems, education system, religious organizations) as well as the simultaneous integration of multiple systems.

Finally, the chronosystem (i.e., consistency of influences, patterns of interactions over time) plays an important role in determining the overall stability or instability of each life system's impact on development over time. For purposes of this study, the chronosystem includes the stability of influences over the first three years of life and specifically highlights one facet of the microsystem (e.g., the family and the primary caregivers) to investigate how parents and caregivers' perceptions and actions affect a child's communicative attempts over a ten-week period. Other indirect influences of the microsystem (i.e., environmental context, neighborhood, community, religious affiliations, etc.) of which the child and family interacted regularly were also investigated to see whether these relational interactions (i.e.,

mesosystem or exosystem) affected parent agency, behavior, motivations, or even expectations for learning. Looking for trends or patterns in specific family dynamics (i.e., family structure, cultural or societal expectations, socioeconomic status, working status) this study attempted to better understand the larger societal influences that affect a parent's role in the process. Previously, researchers have utilized BST to explain phenomena in K-12 settings; however, since young children have a variety of influences during the formative years, this study explored natural environments and nonacademic factors in early childhood, which helped to fill a gap in the research (Epstein, 2011; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Adult Learning Theory

While BST comprehensively framed the myriad of influences on development, it did not frame the specific research questions of how and why adult caregivers participate in education programs or utilize this information to positively influence language development (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Consequently, this study drew from certain facets of Adult Learning Theory (ALT), and specifically the andragogical assumptions or principles that are based on recent findings in neuroscience (Knowles et al., 2020). Andragogical principles of learning stem from a constructivist paradigm which also aligned with the focus for the study. These principles helped to focus the data collection on the perceptions and actions of adult caregivers. Specifically, the study investigated an adult's preferences for learning, as well as the reasons he or she would modify or transform this behavior based on new knowledge (Knowles et al., 2020). While seemingly different theories on the surface, the BST and ALT frameworks complemented each other as nested frameworks and formed the lens for the study's blueprint (Yin, 2018). The combination of theories allowed for a comprehensive look at educational influence on adult motivation and agency on a young child's early communication during the early childhood years. The theoretical frameworks also supported previous research findings which demonstrated an adult's (i.e., parents, caregivers) potential to positively enhance their child's development during the formative years (Epstein, 2011; Hart & Risley, 1995). Lastly, ALT guided the study's design and specifically focused on adult parents and caregivers who were responsible for their own agency and decision making, an area that was only minimally represented in the published academic literature on parent education.

For purposes of this study ALT and specifically the andragogical model or framework of principles serve as an umbrella term for the ideas or assumptions that acknowledge an adult's unique needs for learning as compared to a child or adolescent learner (Knowles et al., 2020). Advancements in neuroscience have confirmed the musings of many philosophers on this matter, that adults continue to learn new information throughout their lifetime (Knowles et al., 2020). While this study did not draw on all aspects of ALT, it utilized the principles of andragogy that highlighted "the growing body of knowledge and technology in regard to adult learning" (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 347). This focused the study's investigation on the primary caregiver's perceptions, motivations, and agency during a critical period of child development. Specifically, the andragogical framework helped to create a study that focused on an adult's reasons for participating or completing a parent education program, as well as their motivations for changing behavior or applying this new information to their lives using their own funds of knowledge (Moll, 2015). Andragogical principles state that adult learning is 1) a self-directed process that is also 2) transformative and influenced by emotions (Knowles et al., 2020; Merriam, 2001). Recent findings in neuroscience have demonstrated that positive emotions act as a catalyst for processing information during learning situations while negative emotions have the opposite effect (Knowles et al., 2020). This tenet of andragogy supported the study's strategic look at the perceptions of parents and caregivers during the learning process in relation to how it affected or transformed their early parent-child communicative attempts.

Knowles and colleagues (2020) specified that there were multiple definitions of the term 'adult' (i.e., biological, legal, social, psychological) and clarified that the andragogical model referred to the psychological definition of adult; this is based on the tenet that an adult can make their own decisions and are independent or responsible for their own life course. This guided the inclusive definition of participants for this study as well as the sampling strategy. Advancements in neuroscience have also confirmed what many educators have conjectured over time, that prior life experiences are crucial for understanding and applying new information (Moll, 1992; Vygotsky, 1976). As such, andragogical principles state that educators should meet "learners 'where they are,'" to help them make sense of

information and transform their thinking (Knowles et al., 2020, p. 232). This guided the selection of the study's context, a specific parenting program called LENA Start. This parenting program gave value to a caregiver's prior experiences and encouraged them to apply new concepts to their own lives based on their own priorities or cultural practices (for more, see LENA foundation, LENA Start, 2020).

Similar to BST, the andragogical model of ALT notes a nesting of individual learning tenets and the relational overlap that occurs in various settings or situational contexts. Adults 1) need to know why they are learning something before taking part in the situation, 2) have self-concept which increases their desire to be viewed as capable beings, especially in self-directed learning, 3) have many life experiences that add to and help them to organize new information, 4) want to learn things that are relevant to them or apply directly to their lives (i.e., help them to solve a problem, etc.), 5) are often problem or task focused with learning, and 6) are typically intrinsically motivated, but also have external motivations for learning (Cox, 2015; Knowles et al., 2020). While most learners have prior knowledge about some things, adults typically have a myriad of life experiences that act as a foundation for understanding new concepts; using schema, adults often categorize or synthesize new information about these experiences as a crucial part of the learning process (Knowles et al., 2020). ALT guided the questionnaire protocol for this study and helped to focus the investigation on the experiential knowledge of a potentially diverse group of adults (i.e., SES, culturally, ethnically, racially, amount of privilege, learner type, life goals, education levels attained, etc.) to increase their agency and empowerment of new skills (Knowles et al., 2020).

Family Systems Approach

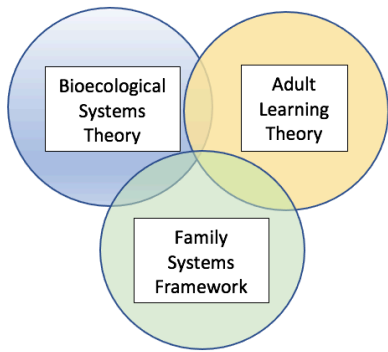
In an effort to combine both of these theories in a practical manner, a Family Systems Approach (FSA) was utilized. This approach is based on the Family System Assessment and Intervention model or framework that Dunst and Trivette (2009) utilized to support families in a capacity building manner. The FSA laid the groundwork for the case as a guide for collecting data about the family network of support in a child's life. The FSA is based on the BST and on Family Systems Theory and acknowledges the value and interconnectedness of all members in a family system, including those who are the primary caregivers but do not live with the child (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Malin et al., 2016; Wayman et al., 1990).

Employing a FSA helped to focus the study's attention on the family as a social unit of connected beings in the microsystem and also promoted the inclusion of all members with whom the child has regular interactions, regardless of their living situation (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Epley et al., 2010; Malin et al., 2016; McKenna & Millen, 2013; Riojas-Cortez & Berger, 2020). Using a FSA also strengthened the design of the individual interview question protocol by highlighting and respecting the participants' culture, knowledge, interests, priorities, and relationships, all of which affect child's early learning or communication (Malin et al., 2016; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019; Wayman et al., 1990). Furthermore, by focusing on positive aspects of influence (i.e., personal strengths, cultural uniqueness, prioritized needs), the study was designed to investigate the needs or desired supports of these learners for the future, all of which have been mentioned as areas in need of research (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Epley et al., 2010). The FSA intervention model guided the study by focusing on each family's 1) structure, 2) interactions, 3) functions or abilities and interests, and 4) changes or stability over time (i.e., regardless of the reason), and inevitably guided the focus of the individual interview questions. As a result, the study was designed to look closer at the family unit's priorities, their utilization of the newly learned strategies (e.g., '14 Talking Tips'), as well as their understandings and preferences for content delivery or feedback from the parent class (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Wayman et al., 1990). See Appendix A for a list of the LENA Start parenting program's fourteen talking tips (for more, see LENA Foundation, 14 Talking Tips).

Finally, the FSA or framework acted as an important connector for the two theories of BST and ALT in the construction of the protocol for this case, as seen in Figure 1. Since each theory used a nested

Figure 1

Interconnectedness of Theory and Application



approach to describing the complexity of human beings during the development or learning process, a FSA helped to highlight this factor for the adult caregivers in the study by focusing the individual interview questions on a variety of life factors that affected their agency and action regarding early communication priorities and for parent education. Moreover, since each theory noted that a complex phenomenon should be investigated from multiple vantage points and from different contexts, utilizing a FSA ensured that multiple aspects of the participants' lives (e.g., barriers, supports) were explored; this was accomplished by collecting multiple types of data in an attempt to investigate the topic from the caregivers' perspectives and in a non-assuming manner. This allowed the case participants to express their thoughts on the topic of early communication in a multitude of ways and for their comments to be taken seriously by stakeholders (Sanders, 2019). Finally, a FSA connected the theories in a way that allowed the case to highlight both objective and self-reported data to comprehensively report on each of the systems of influence on a young child's early communication, even ones that may not have been thought of initially by the researcher (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 177; Freire, 1996).

Statement of the Purpose

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of the early childhood years on academic success. Educational visionaries, child advocates, and policy makers continue to look for ways to provide more equitable opportunities for these young children. While most agree that research-based resources, improved curriculum, and early access to early childhood education can improve a young child's future

school readiness, previous research has often focused on the early childhood teachers, instructional tools, or resources that are provided to young children in classroom settings; the availability and visibility for parent education programs is not always clear and the reasons for enrolling in such programs has been limited (McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Morris et al., 2020). Moreover, information about the perceptions of parents, families, and caregivers has been limited due to less inclusive definitions of family; this is especially true when looking at certain family demographics (e.g., caregivers of color, male caregivers, etc.), certain socioeconomic status levels (e.g., low), or working (i.e., full time employment, part-time employment, etc.) status. Since caregivers and families have a long-term and often emotional investment in their children's lives, researchers cannot forget to include their voices in their research protocols (Bell, 1995; McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Jipson et al., 2018; McKenna & Millen, 2013). The purpose of the embedded, single qualitative case study was to investigate how parent voice might act as a key to unlock information that has been missing or overlooked in past research to better understand the specific barriers and supports that affect parent-child interactions or participation in parent education programs during the early childhood years. Ultimately, the study was designed to better support parents and families, through the enhancement of future curriculum and educational supports, as well as in the development of innovative technological resources or educational services that are more accessible to families from all walks of life.

Significance of Study

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic highlighted a variety of common barriers and inequities that families with young children faced, at a time when the doors to formalized school environments were closed. Necessities such as the availability of quality childcare and nutritious food, were often limited during this time; access to healthcare, internet connectivity, and other family supports were also more difficult to obtain (Gregory, 2020; Kaiper-Marquez, 2020; Martin, 2020, Miller, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2020; for more, see *Growing up poor in America*). When families and children have limited access to basic necessities and educational support, these situations have the potential to negatively affect their overall development and future academic success (for more, see LENA Team Blog; Napolitano,

2022; Williams & Lerner, 2019). While many of these underlying issues were present before the commencement of the pandemic, the global crisis clearly demonstrated that these limitations will not dissipate anytime soon. On the contrary, the crisis highlighted the fact that parents need support of varying degrees during these formative years, now more than ever due to the dynamic nature of a family's needs over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Chen & Greenwood, 2021; Gregory, 2020; Kaiper-Marquez, 2020; McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Miller, 2020). This study explored the perceptions of parents and caregivers during the early childhood years, a topic that has not been covered in depth in past literature. The investigation highlighted the realities of caregivers, as well as the positive supports or barriers that impacted learning opportunities in natural environments (i.e., homes, communities) before young children enter more formalized school settings. The information was designed to aid variety of community stakeholders (i.e., policy makers, educators, curriculum writers, technological innovators) in their efforts to better support parents and families of young children and to create more equitable learning situations in early childhood to combat disparities in school readiness.

Research Questions

To better understand the specific barriers and supports that affect a parent's ability to positively impact young children, this study explored the following research questions, 1) In what ways do specific aspects (e.g., course materials, feedback) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions of a parent's role in early childhood? 2) What reasons do parents (or caregivers) cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old? 3) How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, SES, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term?

Delimitations

The study took place during the fall and spring semesters of the 2021-2022 academic school year. The context and location of the study was a large city in the Southeastern region of the U.S. within an organization whose overall mission was to enhance the school readiness of its youngest citizens (for

more see Virginia Beach GrowSmart, 2021). The organization was chosen due to its location and inclusive approach to public outreach in early childhood, as well as its use of evidence-based curriculum, resources, and tools. Those interviewed in this study were the parents and family members of children who were birth to three years old and who had self-selected to enroll and participate in a free, ten-week group parent education class with other caregivers.

Key Definitions

The following terms are defined for the purposes of this study, 1) parent education, 2) parent coaching, 3) expert coaching, and 4) peer coaching. Parent education is a training or educational program that contains content for adult caregivers; specifically, for this study, parent education programs included content that was relevant to child development (i.e., positive parenting strategies, the language acquisition process, physical or social-emotional development, etc.). Parent coaching is defined as the guiding actions of professional educators or noneducators (e.g., family member, peer) using feedback or teaching strategies to empower adult agency (Rush & Sheldon, 2011). Both definitions align with the theoretical frameworks of BST and ALT as purposeful strategies to help parents solve problems, learn new skills, or to refine existing skills in a purposeful and relevant (e.g., culturally) manner (Morris et al., 2020; Rush & Sheldon, 2011). When parent coaching is combined with parent education, it encompasses a philosophy that values a parent's abilities, priorities, and influence on a child's development. Expert coaching includes the tips and advice of professionals and is often research-based. Peer coaching includes the observations, advice, tips, or comments of adult peers (Rush & Sheldon, 2011).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In chapter two, I will highlight the trends that were seen across the published literature on the subject of parent education and discuss how the qualitative, single embedded case study filled an important gap in the field of early childhood education by exploring the following research questions, 1) In what ways do specific aspects (e.g., content delivery, course materials, discourse, technological feedback, etc.) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interactions? 2) What reasons do parents' (or caregivers') cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old? 3) How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term?

Rationale

While my tacit assumptions valued the role of the family in a child's development and school readiness potential, Moll and colleagues' (1992) research demonstrated the invaluable impact that human resources (e.g., family members, caregivers) had on a child's learning; these family members acted as a bridge to better understanding a child's prior experiences. The researchers also challenged educators and other professionals to tap into the everyday resources that families shared with their children, including the family's belief systems and that of the larger culture to which they belong. To further improve learning experiences for students, Moll and colleagues (1992) recommended that educators enhance "the households' ability to survive and thrive" outside of the formalized school settings (p. 133). This research study met the challenge and investigated the interconnectedness of human development as well as the influential relationships that families and other stakeholders have with young children during the formative years (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). By actively investigating the perceptions, relationship influences, and actions of adult family members the qualitative, single embedded case study filled a large gap in the literature.

Literature Review

In this section, the study's search terms as well as the inclusive criteria for the literature review will be highlighted. The findings will be reported in a systematic manner using a content analysis approach. The literature review will highlight 1) the methodological approaches that the researchers utilized to conduct each study, 2) the context of the studies (e.g., in-person, virtual) and participant demographics, 3) the parent education program types and/or content delivery details (i.e., length, common instructional strategies, etc.), 4) the specific types of parenting feedback or coaching that were highlighted in each study, as well as 5) the overall trends that were seen across the literature. Doing so will show purpose for the study and highlight the ways in which it filled the gaps of our knowledge on the topic.

Search Criteria

A general database search was completed on the Old Dominion University library site for peer-reviewed, academic literature using the initial keywords of, 1) parent education, 2) parent training or 3) parenting program. Next, the Boolean search terms of 4) feedback and 5) coaching, and 6) early childhood were added. All databases on the library site were utilized to find the most current articles from the last two decades, specifically for the years of 2001- 2021. Additional search filters were added for content subject (e.g., parents & parenting, intervention, and peer-reviewed journals) to narrow the search results even further. Finally, I specified that the articles must be published in English, as this is my first language. This resulted in a list of 51 peer-reviewed articles. After reading through the articles, I excluded any that were unrelated to the subject of early childhood education (i.e., studies containing child participants who were older than eight years old) and those that did not discuss or include parents as the primary participants in an education or intervention program. I also excluded articles whose content was focused on specific medical issues (e.g., obesity, diabetes), as well as any comprehensive literature reviews or meta-analyses. This resulted in a total of 30 peer-reviewed, empirical articles for the review (see Table 1).

Table 1

Empirical Articles Utilized in Literature Review

Author(s)/year	Methodology	Name of PE Program/ Location & Context	Program Delivery/ Coaching Type	Parent Feedback
Akai et al., (2008)	Quantitative	My Baby & Me / <i>Indiana, Kansas, Texas, USA</i>	Community-based / <i>Not specified</i>	Dependent on intervention model; Verbal
Azevedo et al., (2013)	Quantitative	The Incredible Years Basic Training Program (IY) / <i>Portugal</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Verbal
Baek-Bullock, (2015)	Conceptual	FAST, IY, Strengthening Families (SF), MIPAdo- CM* & 1 non- specified program / <i>Korea, USA</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Not specified
Barth, (2009)	Conceptual	Triple P, FC	Not specified	Verbal, Video
Breighenstein et al., (2013)	Mixed Methods	Chicago Parenting Program / <i>Chicago, USA</i>	Online-hybrid / <i>Expert coaching</i>	N/A
Brennan et al., (2016)	Mixed Methods	Nurtured Heart Approach / <i>Tennessee, USA</i>	Community-based PE/ <i>Not specified</i>	N/A
Caron et al., (2015)	Quantitative	Attachment & Behavioral Catch-Up Intervention / <i>Hawaii, USA</i>	Community-based & Home/ <i>Expert coaching</i>	Dynamic Video
Dababnah & Parish, (2016)	Quantitative	IYBTP / <i>Southeast USA</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Individualized, Discussion-based
DuPaul et al., (2013)	Quantitative	Community Parent Education/ <i>Northeast USA</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Discussion-based
Feil et al., (2008)	Conceptual	The Playing and Learning Strategies Program / <i>USA</i>	Online-hybrid / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Individualized, Verbal-phone, Online messaging system– computer
Gilkerson et al., (2017a)	Quantitative	LENA Based Program / <i>USA</i>	Online-hybrid / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Verbal-phone; Language ENvironmental Analysis (LENA) reports weekly
Graziano et al., (2017)	Quantitative	School Readiness Parenting Program / <i>Southeast USA</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert & Peer coaching</i>	Individualized, Verbal
Hackworth et al., (2017)	Quantitative	Smalltalk in combination with local intervention programs / <i>Australia</i>	Community-based, home-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Group & Individualized Verbal
Hickey et al., (2016)	Mixed Methods / <i>Process Evaluation</i>	Parent and Infant Program / <i>Ireland, United Kingdom</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Written facilitator feedback forms
Hineman et al., (2017)	Conceptual	Positive Behavior Support as Evidenced Based Support	N/A	N/A
Jespersion et al., (2020)	Conceptual	Impact of Parent Education – common content	N/A	N/A

Knowles et al., (2016)	Quantitative	Not specified / <i>USA</i>	<i>Expert coaching</i>	Individualized, Verbal
Leckey et al., (2019)	Quantitative	Intervention, not specified / <i>Ireland, United Kingdom</i>	Community-based / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified
McAloon & Lazarou, (2019)	Quantitative	Holding Hands Program / <i>Australia</i>	Community-based / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Verbal
McKnight et al., (2016)	Mixed Methods	More Than Words / <i>Ireland, United Kingdom</i>	Clinical setting / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Individualized, Verbal based on taped parent-child videos
Sanders, (2019)	Conceptual	Evidenced Based Parenting Support	N/A	N/A
Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, (2001)	Qualitative	Parent Leadership Training / <i>Southeast, USA</i>	Community-based PE / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified
Stephan & Miclea, (2013)	Quantitative	Social-Emotional Prevention Program / <i>Cluj-Napoca, Romania</i>	Community-based / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified
Traube et al., (2020)	Quantitative	Telehealth Program based on Parents as Teachers / <i>Los Angeles, USA</i>	Online-hybrid / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified
Vismara et al., (2012)	Quantitative	Early Start Denver Model for Children with Autism / <i>USA</i>	Online, interactive / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Nonverbal & Verbal
Vismara et al., (2013)	Quantitative	Early Start Denver Model for Children with Autism / <i>USA</i>	Online synchronous & interactive / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Verbal, Written-online messaging system
Wainer & Ingersoll, (2013)	Quantitative <i>Program Evaluation</i>	Reciprocal Imitation Training / <i>Midwest, USA</i>	Online-hybrid, self-directed / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Not specified
Wainer & Ingersoll, (2015)	Quantitative	Reciprocal Imitation Training / <i>Ontario, Canada</i>	Online-hybrid, self-directed & interactive / <i>Expert coaching</i>	Verbal (remote), Written-online via messaging system
Wilson et al., (2016)	Quantitative	Dads Tuning In to Kids / <i>Australia</i>	Community-based / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified
Yip et al., (2019)	Quantitative, <i>Program Evaluation</i>	6A's Positive Parenting Program / <i>Hong Kong</i>	Community-based / <i>Not specified</i>	Not specified

*Mentalization Improvement Program for Adolescent-Community Model

Study Methodology

Nineteen of the included studies were medical or early intervention education programs that utilized a quantitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The studies ranged from experimental, random control trials (i.e., delayed treatment), to single subject designs which contained an intervention and had either a pre-test and/or post-test (Gilkerson et al., 2017a; McMillian & Schumaker, 2014). Using nonexperimental designs, some researchers attempted to stratify participants into comparable groups for analysis when random assignment was not possible (Akai et al., 2008; DuPaul et al., 2013; Graziano et

al., 2018; Knowles et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2016; Yip et al., 2019). As a result, each one of the quantitatively designed studies used a variety of statistical measures and procedures (i.e., descriptive statistics, ANOVA, MANOVA, etc.) to describe or compare the findings. Four of the studies in this review utilized a mixed methods design, collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data in the process (See Table 1). However, while the researchers used this type of approach in their data collection and analysis, the research reports focused on the quantitative data, highlighting the statistical findings in the format of tables or charts; only a small portion of the article was dedicated to the qualitative portion of the findings and often in the narrative description.

Only one of the research studies from this search utilized a qualitative or interpretative design (Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). The findings from this study were highlighted in narrative format in addition to demographic information about the participants which was shown in a table format. Six of the studies were conceptual in nature. Each gave detailed information about a specific type of parenting program or compared the similarities of existing parenting programs (see Table 1). Finally, three of the articles were evaluations of specific parenting programs; one was a process evaluation of a program's implementation and two were specified as overall program evaluations (See Table 1). Consequently, the data that was collected about these evaluations was a combination of descriptive data, participant assessment data, or data that was evaluative in nature and was used to describe or compare the relationships between the participants' demographics with the results of the parent intervention.

Study Context and Participant Demographics

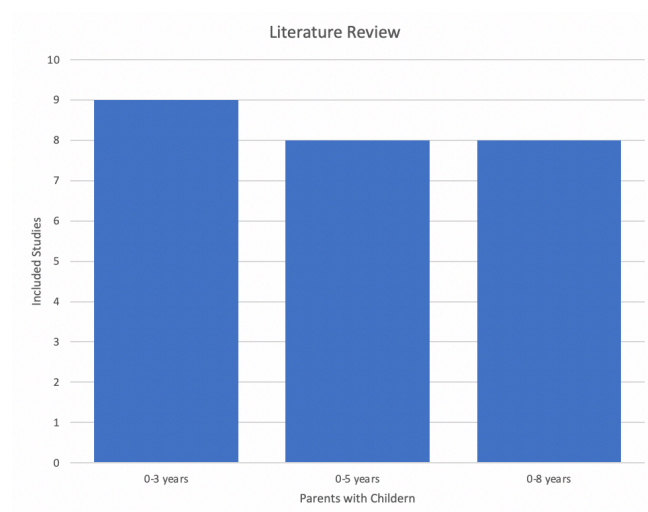
Despite the large number of quantitatively designed projects, only two of the studies were conducted in a well-controlled hospital clinical setting. The other studies were completed in a variety of non-laboratory settings, such as in public buildings or in families' homes. While this research was completed around the globe (See Table 1), the majority of the studies in this review were completed in the USA (i.e., 16 studies). Eight of the studies (see Table 1) were completed in an online or virtual format, across various states (i.e., large geographic coverage of multiple locations) in the USA (Azevedo et al., 2013; McKnight et al., 2016). The online or virtual contexts ranged from hybrid parenting classes that

included both asynchronous or self-directed/self-paced educational learning components and a live facilitator (i.e., in a separate location) or using a chat feature (i.e., for questions during the session), to synchronous, on-demand learning sessions that had access to a live professional facilitator (i.e., in person, in another remote or online location).

Enrolled study participants varied to some degree in their overall demographics (i.e., age, country of origin, gender, race, SES level) and in their initial motivations for participating in the educational program. However, each study in this review included adult study participants who were parents (or primary caregivers) of children ages birth to 8 years old (See Figure 2).

Figure 2

Early Childhood Relevance

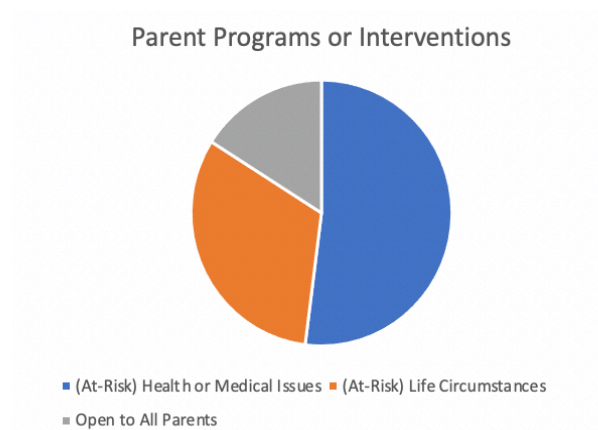


While many of the research studies focused on parents whose children were birth to five years old, a few of the studies also looked at early elementary-aged children, as well; this age range falls within the inclusive definition of early childhood (Azevedo et al., 2016; Leckey et al., 2019; NAEYC position statement, Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001; Wilson et al., 2016). Nine of the studies enrolled parents (i.e., intentionally referred for the parent training programs) who had children that were labeled at-risk for development due various congenital or other medical (e.g., ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, cognitive

impairment, mental health disorders, etc.) conditions (Caron et al., 2015). Other parents participated because of life circumstances such as, family history of mental health problems, history of abuse or domestic violence, incarceration, low education level of the parent, family living in poverty, or young age during parenthood which put their children ‘at-risk’ for delayed development (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

Parent Intervention or Education Program Focus



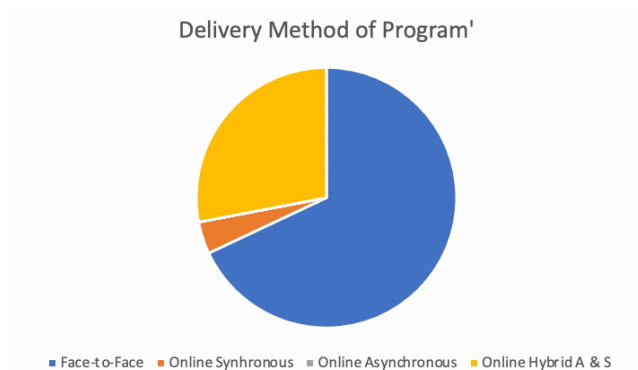
Six of the studies reported about study participants who were middle to high socioeconomic status and eight reported on caregivers who were mainly Caucasian per the limitation sections or report tables. Other articles from the search did not report on certain demographic categories at all. Exceptions to this finding were seen in Breitenstein and colleagues’ (2013) study which enrolled parents, all of whom were labeled as African American or Black, and in Caron and colleagues (2016) study who reported that over half of their participants were of mixed race. Moreover, the participants in this review were primarily female; specifically, they were mothers (i.e., birth, adoptive, foster) or primary caregivers (i.e., nanny, grandmother) of young children. Exceptions to this finding were seen in Wilson and colleagues’ (2016) study which only enrolled male participants (i.e., fathers) and Dababnah and Parish’s (2016) report whose study reported a larger number of male participants than females. In addition, a few of the studies did not mention the gender of the enrolled caregivers at all.

Program Delivery

Many of the community-based parent education sessions, trainings, or interventions took place in the context of an in-person format and ranged in length from two weeks of time to one year. Others were delivered in an online format (See Figure 3).

Figure 3

Program Delivery



Parent sessions were typically one to two hours in length and occurred anywhere from weekly to biweekly for a specific amount of time; at times the programs were labeled by their levels of intensity in the research reports (DuPaul et al., 2013; Sanders, 2019; Yip et al., 2019). Session delivery was offered to participants in group or individual settings, as well as in a hybrid manner which utilized small groups, stand-alone workshops, seminars, focus groups, and individual home visits in addition to more lecture style informational sessions (Azevedo et al., 2013; Back-Bullock, 2015; Dababnah & Parish, 2016; Yip et al., 2019).

Group settings often provided connections and networking opportunities for parents, opportunities for dynamic discussions or reflections of each other's situations, and at times, the formation of community partnerships (Breightenstein et al., 2013; Dababnah & Parish, 2016; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001). Hackworth and colleagues (2017) facilitated group discussions and education sessions in

conjunction with community playgroups for toddlers. They also provided separate group sessions for parents of infants which were smaller and more individualized. Alternatively, DuPaul and colleagues (2013), Graziano and colleagues (2018), and Stephan and Miclea (2013) each offered child intervention (i.e., in the preschool classroom) as well as parent education to see if the combination of interventions would influence children and families to a greater degree.

In general, the in-person community-based interventions included a multimodal approach of disseminating information (i.e., developmental, behavioral, social-emotional) to parents (Graziano et al., 2018); content was commonly delivered to small group sessions through written materials, verbal lectures, video clips, discussion, and role-play or hands-on practice (Armstrong, 2018; Dababnah & Parish, 2016). The individual sessions were typically multimodal as well, but often included individualized direct coaching or two-way communicative question-and-answer sessions to address the parents' unique needs (McKnight et al., 2016).

Virtual or online education programs varied highly in content delivery. Due to the often, self-paced nature of online adult learning, session delivery was reported to be as short as two days in length or as long as twelve-months (Breightenstein et al., 2013; DuPaul et al., 2013; Knowles et al., 2020). Interestingly, in Traube and colleagues' (2020) study, the average parent participation was five months in length even though 24 months of training was made available to the participants. This demonstrates that there may be a maximum amount of training or education that adults are willing or able to participate in consistently when they have young children and other obligations to take care of at home.

Virtual or online sessions utilized multimodal approaches for content delivery despite the physical distance between the parent education facilitators or therapists, and the parents. For example, Breightenstein and colleagues (2013) utilized mobile technology and Android devices to deliver their online training which included videos, reflection questions, and even a live focus group. Similarly, Feil and colleagues (2008) commented on a self-paced approach for accessing parent materials in conjunction with live virtual coaching on their Infant Net website. Using an online messenger feature, the researchers encouraged online networking opportunities for the participants, similar to that which is provided by

public social media sites. Other researchers utilized an online delivery of content material in conjunction with weekly parent phone calls, collaborative problem-solving sessions via videoconferencing, virtual home visits, or written email and online discussions to individualize the material for parent participants (Gilkerson et al., 2017a; Traube et al, 2020; Vismara et al., 2012; Vismara, 2013; Wainer & Ingersoll, 2013; Wainer & Ingersoll, 2015).

Parent Coaching and Feedback

Eighteen of the studies in this review specifically mentioned parent coaching as one of the strategies that was used in the early intervention or education programs (see Table 1). Due to the nature of these types of educational programs, each of the eighteen studies utilized expert coaching from a health or educational professional to enhance the experience for parent participants. However, only two programs utilized peer coaching in addition to the expert coaching; both Dababnah and Parish (2016) and Graziano and colleagues (2018) created peer coaching situations where parents could coach one another based on the information they had learned in the lecture sessions or program materials. Graziano and colleagues (2018) used a dual approach and encouraged simultaneous peer and expert coaching in their sessions which also allowed parents to synthesize what they had learned from the informational session or give advice to their peers. The researchers helped these parents to review and scaffold the new information using a standardized, parent coaching tip sheet.

Parent coaching requires feedback which separates it from parent education alone (Rush & Sheldon, 2011). Seventeen of the studies in this literature review specifically mentioned parenting feedback as a part of the parenting program (See Table 1). Feedback was given in multiple formats; the most popular were direct verbal feedback and video feedback. In some studies, the expert feedback was only given to some of the parents (i.e., control group) due to the study's design (Akai et al., 2008; DuPaul et al., 2013). In general, verbal feedback was individualized for each parent and given to all of the parents as an integral part of the educational program. Akai and colleagues (2008), Caron and colleagues (2015), Feil and colleagues (2008), and McKnight and colleagues (2016) utilized recorded videos of parent-child interactions as a part of the feedback process. In each situation, the professionals gave direct and

immediate feedback to the parents as they watched the pre-recorded videos together. Gilkerson and colleagues (2017) also mentioned giving feedback via graphically displayed informational reports (i.e., LENA reports) and phone calls. Other researchers used nonverbal feedback during live observations (i.e., virtual situations), handwritten feedback on specific program forms, or online messages after watching the parent-child videos from another location (Hickey et al., 2016; Vismara et al., 2012; Vismara et al., 2013; Wainer & Ingersoll, 2013). Finally, a few of the studies mentioned parent coaching and feedback that was accomplished via question-and-answer sessions, during focus groups, or class discussions, while others did not specify the type of feedback that was given to parents at all (Dababnah & Parish, 2016; DuPaul et al., 2013;).

Trends in the Literature

When looking across the literature, there were numerous findings of importance to note. First, five of the studies demonstrated that parent education lowered the stress level for parents of young children, at least in the short run and on completion of the program (Barth, 2009; Dababnah & Parish, 2016; Graziano et al., 2018; Knowles et al., 2017; McAloon & Lazarou, 2019; Stephan & Miclea, 2013). Moreover, the authors noted that parents who completed a parent education program increased their positive perceptions about their child or had more realistic expectations for their child's age or stage of development; this in turn, improved a parent's responsiveness to their child (Brennan et al., 2016; Caron et al., 2015; McKnight et al., 2016). This also led to the short-term improvement of parent-child relationships or even the maintenance of parent-child relationships that were separated by distance due to incarceration or other life circumstances (Armstrong, 2018; Hickey et al., 2016; Stephan & Miclea, 2013; Wilson et al., 2016). Findings also supported the fact that consistent parent-implemented strategies or carryover (i.e., from interventions or education programs) resulted in an improved social-emotional or behavior skills for the young children at the end of the study (Azevedo et al., 2013; Leckey et al., 2019; McAloon & Lazarou, 2019).

In general, parents who were enrolled in the studies from this review had a positive outlook on the information obtained, as well as with their overall experience in the program (Caron et al, 2015;

Smalley & Reyes-Blaines, 2001). However, it is important to note that these findings were measured from data that was collected by parents who had completed the training program. Unfortunately, some of the studies from this search had a high attrition rate, which also supports past findings on the matter (McKnight et al., 2016). For example, Stephan and Miclea's (2013) study had a 43 percent attrition rate, Caron and colleagues' (2015) study had a 30 percent rate of attrition, and DuPaul and colleagues' attrition rate was 27 percent. Undoubtedly, this factor directly affects the findings to some degree and detracts from a full understanding of participants who may have represented the initial enrollment. Some of the authors mentioned the location of the intervention as a possible cause of higher attrition (i.e., locations other than the natural environment or home for young families) which made it difficult for parents without transportation or easy access to transportation, to attend the sessions on a regular basis. However, other lifestyle factors were also mentioned in the literature as barriers to completion of the program, such as busy work schedules. While some factors were minor (i.e., forgetfulness to login to the online program by the deadline) others were more serious in nature (i.e., safety issues of the family's home environment) causing unexpected transitions for the parents in the studies or an inability to continue with the program (Knowles et al, 2016; Traube et al., 2020). Finally, while variable across reports, it is also possible that the intensity or length of the parent education or interventions played a part in the overall attrition rates, especially for caregivers who had young children.

While attrition appeared to be a limitation for some of the studies, enrollment and attendance were also mentioned as factors to consider for future research (Traube et al., 2020). Sanders (2019) noted that enrollment and attendance can be positively or negatively affected by peer influence. Dababnah & Parish's (2016) study, as well as Graziano and colleagues' (2018) study also supported this notion by demonstrating that peer interactions could play an important and positive role in combatting some of the enrollment barriers or dwindling attendance rosters for lengthier education programs which related to providing more equitable opportunities for all caregivers. Some of the researchers in this review attempted to use online or virtual contexts to combat barriers to participation in parent education (see Table 1). Others challenged curriculum developers and program facilitators to make educational content

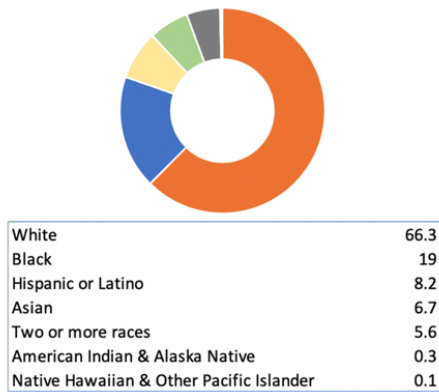
more applicable and relevant to the parents' lives, ensuring that it was culturally appropriate (Baek-Bullock, 2015; Caron et al., 2015). Finally, nearly all of the studies in this review investigated or reported the short-term results of a parent education programs' impact near the end of the class or directly afterwards. The exception to this finding was reported in Hackworth and colleagues' (2017) study which demonstrated the short-term results in addition to the follow-up progress at twelve- and 32-weeks post intervention. Other consistent limitations to note across the studies were the participant demographics of participants who completed the parent education programs; these were often skewed toward participants who were white/Caucasian, middle to high SES, and female.

Discussion and Findings

As mentioned above, regardless of delivery method (e.g., online, in-person) for the parent education programs in this review, attrition, continued enrollment, and attendance were limitations. Ten studies showed a rate of attrition that was twenty percent or higher. As a result, this case chose a study context that had a history of high attendance and low attrition for parent education classes. Moreover, in the literature review, the diversity of participant demographics was mentioned as a consistent limitation. Specifically, parents of color, fathers or other male participants, and those from a variety of SES backgrounds had a limited representation in the literature. This highlights a hole in our understanding about the efficacy of parent education programs and about the caregivers who are enrolling in them. While recruitment tactics, training types (e.g., parent education, intervention, coaching), or facilitator styles may reflect a contributory factor to this finding, detailed information is needed to combat this from happening in the future and supports investigations that focus on how and why a families' interests, culture, work status, or living dynamics may prevent them from accessing or participating in educational programs. This study was designed to fill such a gap and sought to include these types of factors by choosing an area of the country that had a somewhat diverse population (see Figure 5) within an organization that had an inclusive approach for outreach for all parents.

Figure 5

City Demographics



While the studies in this review mentioned some diversity in terms of demographics, the representation of family diversity (i.e., inclusive definition of family member, working status of parents, cultural perceptions) was limited or was not always specified. This qualitative study was designed to investigate how additional factors aided to or detracted from a parent's ability to participate in parent education or to participate in early communication with their young child. While specific sampling strategies were mentioned in the studies from this review, the recruitment tactics were not often highlighted. This study filled a gap in the literature by investigating the recruitment tactics and reasons that adults enrolled in or completed a parent education program. Lastly, eighteen out of 30 studies were completed with a quantitative design and specifically focused on child or parent outcomes as a specific result of the parent education program. However, this type of design cannot answer the research questions that are reflected in the gaps of the literature and are reflected in this study's design. As a result, a qualitative approach was needed to properly highlight the voices of those who are missing from the literature on the topic of parent education.

Conclusion

If professionals do not attempt to enroll a diverse set of participants, or they are not successful at enrolling parents from a variety of backgrounds or living situations, it will be impossible for community stakeholders to fully understand the full range of perceptions, interests, and needs of today's caregivers.

As stated by McKenna and Millen (2013), we need “both parent voice and parent presence” to improve access and equity (p. 9). Alternatively, even if a diverse set of participants are currently enrolled in parent education, adult participants must be included in the written academic reports, or our knowledge will be limited and our ability to improve future curriculum development, technological resources, or better access to resources will be inhibited. To better understand why inequitable situations or disparities in school readiness occur in early childhood contexts, the realities of caregivers’ lives must be purposefully investigated. We must seek out the potential barriers or supports that affect a parent’s ability to enhance early communication, as this appears to be one of the missing pieces of the puzzle for improving equity. In the end, research has shown that parents have the potential to enhance the school readiness of young children (Morris et al., 2020; Sanders, 2019). To enhance this process for all parents, we must ensure that parent education, supports, and resources are accessible and relevant to caregivers from all walks of life. This will allow educators and community stakeholders to indirectly support young children before they enter more formal learning contexts.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Providing more equitable learning opportunities in early childhood and increasing overall school readiness are two areas of education that must be addressed in the field of education before young children enter the formal classroom. However, this requires a community effort from a variety of stakeholders. While some researchers have attempted to address these issues during the early childhood years, the perceptions of parents and other primary caregivers often a child's first teacher, are almost absent from the published literature. Specifically, the voices of parents and other primary caregivers who have more diverse characteristics than those previously researched (e.g., Caucasian, female, middle to high SES) have yet to be amplified. This perpetuates a narrowly focused research agenda, limits our knowledge about the needs of all caregivers and families in our society, and omits important information that could potentially affect the school readiness of students who will enter the public schools in the future. To better understand a complex problem in early childhood related to parent education the study explored the following research questions, 1) In what ways do specific aspects (e.g., course materials, feedback) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interaction or caregiver perceptions of a parent's role in early childhood? 2) What reasons do parents (or caregivers) cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old? 3) How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, SES, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term?

Chapter three describes the research design for this project and explains how this choice was supported by my epistemological stance as well as the overarching theoretical frameworks of the study, ALT, BST, and FSA. The chapter also highlights the population of participants who participated in the study, the sampling procedures, and describes the specific methods that were used for data collection and analysis, denoting the specific protocols that were implemented over the course of the study.

Background and Justification

As mentioned in chapter two, the database search resulted in eighteen quantitatively designed studies, four mixed method studies, and one qualitative study (see Table 1). While many of the research studies from this search focused on the efficacy of various early childhood educational programs or the types of content, delivery, and feedback that were given to parent participants, caregiver and family perceptions were only minimally discussed. The philosopher Paulo Freire (1996) warned educators “not to assume that the obvious is understood” when evaluating a situation or when attempting to transform it (Flinders & Thornton, 2017, p. 177). As a result, a qualitative design was chosen for this investigation to explore the complexity of the phenomenon itself while also remaining open to a variety of other perspectives (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The qualitative study design embraced an iterative process which allowed for inductive and reflective thinking about natural research settings and was optimal given the aims and context of the study. Lastly, since qualitative studies were only minimally represented in the literature over the past twenty years for this topic, a qualitative approach was used to extend the published literature on the topic of parent education.

Epistemology

Social science researchers study problems or phenomena related to education to better understand how to improve learning experiences for students (Noddings, 2016). However, educational problems that involve human subjects are often complicated and intermixed with various other environmental factors or influences which are not always evident in certain situations. As a result, a qualitative, embedded, single case study allowed me to investigate the barriers and supports that parents and caregivers encounter in naturalistic settings (e.g., home, community) regarding early parent-child communication, as well as their perceptions of the caregiver role during the early childhood years. The study was conducted from the epistemological viewpoint of social constructivism and the analysis was conducted using an interpretivist stance (Paul, 2005). In doing so, knowledge was viewed as a culmination of experiences, thoughts and perceptions, all of which are obtained by interacting with other human beings (Paul, 2005). Due to the nature of knowledge itself, various contexts and considerations were acknowledged as well as multiple realities of the caregivers themselves; this included the realities of the participants that were not always

evident on the surface such as family dynamics or make-up, relationship status, SES, and working status (Freire, 1996). Since the acquisition of knowledge can be impacted by ecological factors such as culture, society, value systems, or stability of these influences over time, a qualitative approach was used to analyze the many perspectives of parents and caregivers regarding early parent-child communication (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, Freire, 1996, Moll, 1995).

From a researcher's perspective, the case was viewed as having many 'truths,' ones that were dependent on a person's life experiences or situations, perceptions, and beliefs, all of which were explored during the research process. As Paul (2005) stated, "knowledge and the knower are inextricably linked" (p. 47). This highlights the importance of delving deeply into the participants' perceptions as a part of analyzing their knowledge or understanding about a complex problem. By taking an interpretivist stance, the study was designed to widen my researcher lens during the investigative process and acknowledged that a human being's perceptions were a crucial part of their understandings about the world and should be fully explored in the process of better understanding a phenomenon. Additionally, since observation is an important part of the learning process and helps educators and researchers to better to understand a person's prior experiences, a qualitative research design allowed for this type of data collection to occur during the interview process (Dewey, 2013). In the end, social constructivism specifically addressed the complexity of human development, the learning process, and the multi-faceted influences on a young child's life during the early childhood years, including that of their caregivers (Vygotsky, 1978). This epistemological perspective also supported the overarching frameworks of BST and ALT for the adult caregivers who were enrolled in parent education classes and allowed me to apply educational theory to a current and complex problem in education to better investigate and create my own knowledge about the multiple realities of the enrolled participants (Yin, 2018).

Research Tradition and Design

As this study sought to develop a better understanding about parent perceptions and family influences on early parent-child interactions, it required a qualitative methodological approach and an embedded, single case study design. Michelle Fine stated, "somewhere between epistemology and

reflexivity and design lies the question of ‘how do you think about the relationship between you, your work, and the audiences you’re speaking to, and the participants you’re working with?’ (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 98). I chose case study research to answer a complicated and detailed phenomenon in early childhood education as posed by the above-mentioned research questions (Yin, 2008).

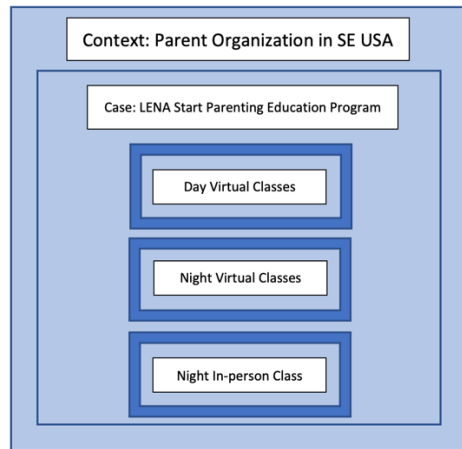
Single Case Study Design

Specifically, a qualitative, embedded single case study investigated the types of support (e.g., course materials, feedback, community resources) that parents and families received from a specific parenting program (i.e., LENA Start) or from other outside sources. The study was designed to observe whether specific barriers or supports affected parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions over a ten-week period. A single case study rationale was chosen to explore the impact of parent education on a specific population of adult caregivers who had participated in three embedded subunits of the same organization and the bounded case (Yin, 2018). Investigating the embedded subunits as a part of the overall case was important for two reasons. First, investigating the multiple realities of participants was crucial to better understanding a complex problem at different levels of the case and allowed for a cross case analysis within the same organization. Second, the embedded subunits helped to strengthen the internal validity and the trustworthiness of the overall case. While this study was not designed to formally evaluate the LENA Start parenting program, its ten-week class was the context for the investigation. The strong analytic component of this design enabled the collection and organization of many forms of data, as well as a thorough investigation and analysis of the participants’ life realities in a focused and bounded context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Per recommendations of Yin (2018) regarding the design of single case study research, this research utilized 1) multiple sources of evidence to enhance the construct validity of the study, 2) logical models of data analysis to increase internal validity, 3) specific theoretical frameworks (e.g., BST, ALT, FSA) to increase the external validity, and 4) a detailed study protocol and blueprint that carefully documented the procedures from start to finish to allow for replication in a different location (see Appendix B).

The combination of participant artifacts, program documents, and interviews strengthened the rigor and findings of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a social science researcher, I had little control over the everyday life situations, problems, or perceptions of the caregivers in their natural settings, so implementing this design was crucial to fully capturing and analyzing the data of importance (Noddings, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Yin (2018) an embedded, single case design allows for the analytic investigation of complex and contemporary phenomena in a descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory manner. In the end, while the findings of single case studies are not generalizable to the entire population, the study was designed to examine multiple facets of a contemporary problem to investigate whether specific supports, resources, or systems of influence (i.e., BST) affected a caregiver's parent-child communication attempts or their perceptions about their role in early childhood in a positive or negative manner.

Study context

A single case study design allows the researcher to investigate common situations (Yin, 2018). At times, embedded subunits of the case can also be studied for a more wholistic view of the case to include analysis at different levels and to maintain the study's focus (Yin, 2018). However, a study context must be chosen to ensure the rigor of the case study's design. This case was bounded by the context of a family-centered, community-based parent education program and was located within a particular organization and in a large Southeastern city of the USA (See Figure 6). The overall mission of the organization is to enhance the school readiness of the city's youngest citizens and to prevent an academic divide from occurring before children reach formalized schooling situations which aligned with the study's purpose and research questions (for more see Virginia Beach GrowSmart, 2021). The organization supports young children and families in a preventative and positive manner by providing a myriad of resources and programs for all children (i.e., ages birth to age eight) and families across the city and attempts to lessen or eliminate any barriers that young learners may experience before reaching school age. This study context aligned with BST, as the organization values and supports the participation of many stakeholders in a child's life.

Figure 6*Case Boundary*

Consequently, the next step in the design process was setting a specific boundary for the case (Yin, 2018). Due to the multi-faceted nature of the community-based program, the single case was bound on one facet of the organization’s outreach, a LENA Start parent education program. This parenting program was geared toward caregivers of birth to three-year old children and supported the focus of the above-mentioned research questions (for more see LENA Foundation, LENA Start). The program aimed to enhance a parent’s communicative skills and ultimately their ‘early childhood literacy’ (i.e., child development, positive parenting strategies) by providing educational resources and feedback; the parenting program valued a parents’ role as “the secret sauce” for increasing conversational turns and for “building babies brains” during the formative years (for more see LENA Foundation, 2020, p. 1). It also served the purpose of attracting the specific population of participants needed for this investigation.

Based on the advice of Yin (2018), three embedded subunits were chosen within the case boundary to be analyzed individually and holistically as a part of the overall case which strengthened the focus of the data collection and aided with the inclusion of multiple adult perspectives and situations as highlighted in BST and ALT (see Figure 5). The parenting class subunits were identical in curricular content and course materials, length of time (i.e., ten-week period for one hour), and had the same class

facilitator. However, investigating the delivery methods and time period ensured that all participants would be included. The first embedded subunit of the case is described as the night in-person class (NIPC). This subunit's class was executed using an in-person delivery method on Monday evenings at six o'clock in the context of a public community center during the fall months. Due to the in-person context, the organization provided dinner to the enrolled participants as well as childcare. The second embedded subunit is described as the night virtual class (NVC). The class content for the NVC was delivered in a virtual, synchronous manner on Monday or Wednesday evenings at six thirty during the fall and winter/early spring months. Due to the online context, childcare and dinner were not provided. Finally, the third embedded subunit is described as the daytime virtual class (DVC). Class content was administered to the DVC participants in a virtual format during the daytime on Thursdays at either ten o'clock in the morning or at noon in the fall and winter/early spring months. The single case was designed to include each of the embedded subunits to ensure that all participants who had enrolled in the program were included in the data collection.

Each of the embedded subunits received live, verbal informational content each week from the same facilitator. The facilitator utilized an instructor's guide during the weekly class sessions that contained scripted content and other identically constructed course materials from the curriculum. During the live delivery of content for each subunit, the facilitator used a PowerPoint (PPT) document that contained visual information (e.g., words, photographs) and video clips from the program's curriculum. After watching the video clips, the facilitator then prompted a live discussion among the participants using an identical set of questions, also included in the PPT. Participants from each embedded subunit also received an identical copy of a parent guide for use during the class sessions. Additionally, subunit class members participated in class discussions during each week's session. The discussions included the analysis of the video clip scenarios and utilized a parent tool called the 'LENA 14 Talking Tips.' Group feedback (i.e., increases in adult word count, parent-child communications, reading participation) was shared with the participants during the live class sessions. Individual feedback was also given to caregivers as they traded in their LENA devices and received a copy of their individual LENA graph

summary report each week. The embedded subunit design directed the study's focus to a commonly shared situation within the case, participation in a self-selected parenting class, and to a specific group of caregiver participants within the organization and helped to answer the above-mentioned research questions.

Chain of Evidence

The study protocol was designed to investigate parent perceptions from different angles using multiple types of data. The following represents the chain of evidence that supported the design of the single, embedded case study and allows for replication in other contexts, if warranted (Yin, 2018). Data for this study was collected over the span of three months, from the first of March to the 31st of May in 2022. Analysis was completed in stages due to the iterative nature of qualitative research and took place over the entire span of the study, during the fall of 2021 through the fall of 2022 (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Participants and Sampling Strategy

A qualitative approach was chosen to help the researcher to better understand the multiple perspectives of adult participants who had enrolled in a self-selected parenting class. As a volunteer for the community organization, I used convenience sampling to obtain information about the research participants for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was designed to include all parents or caregivers who had voluntarily enrolled in the LENA Start parenting program during the fall or winter/early spring sessions of the 2021-2022 academic year; graduation from the program was not an exclusionary requirement as previous literature has shown that attrition from parenting programs is typically high and these voices have only minimally been published in academic literature. While minors were not directly observed in the study, one inclusionary factor was that the adult participants (i.e., eighteen years and older) must be a family member or caregiver of a birth to three-year old child, defined for this study as a person who had a consistent relationship and/or influence on a child's life during the early childhood years and participated in caretaking tasks. The inclusive definition of family member for this study reflects a current perspective in the early childhood education literature and encompasses a wide variety of people who have a personal stake in the well-being of a young child's life or frequent

interactions with the child throughout the week (Riojas-Cortez, 2019). Specifically, this definition includes caregivers who consistently interact with the child, regardless of their living situation and includes adult family members who live either full or part-time under the same roof as the child in addition to other adult caregivers (i.e., nanny, day care providers, extended family members, coworker, etc.) who did not live in the same household with the child.

Individual Interview Recruitment

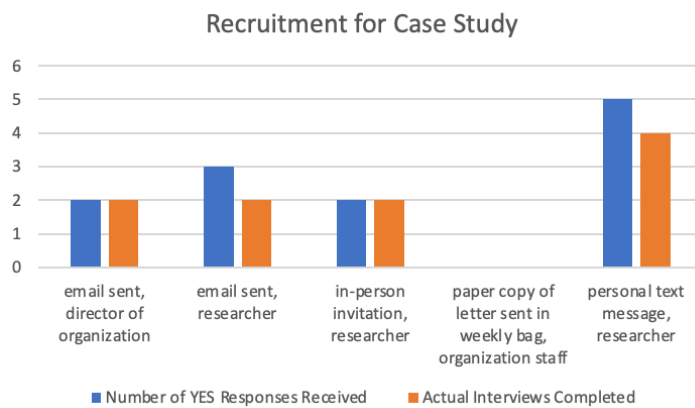
The inclusion of archived program documents (e.g., enrollment forms, pre-class surveys, end of course feedback) in the study's design ensured that all enrolled caregivers' perceptions were included in the findings to some degree. However, the recruitment of individuals for additional participation via individual interviews and/or in the creation of participant artifacts allowed for a more in-depth look at some of the parent perceptions from each of the case's subunits. The following procedures were followed in this recruitment process. First, as a program volunteer for the community organization, I attended a minimum of one class session (or more) as a visitor. This was possible for all but two of the parenting classes that took place during the fall semester. My visitor status allowed most of the participants to be introduced to me, as an ODU graduate student, in an informal manner before receiving a request to participate in the study. Due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and work schedule, I was not able to visit two of the sessions during the fall months, specifically one class that was a part of the NIPC subunit and one class that was a part of the DVC. As a result, the initial recruitment invitation for the fall classes was conducted by the director of the community organization via an email introduction which included a copy of the approved IRB letter (see Appendix E). However, during my attendance at the spring sessions, I was able to briefly explain the name and purpose of the study using the study's IRB approved recruitment letter and was also able to personally invite participants to contact me for the individual interviews, if interested. This personal invitation was followed up with a hard copy of the letter in their weekly bag of class materials.

A second recruitment attempt was made to all participants who had enrolled in the class during the study's time period via a personal text message. This message was sent to their mobile device and

included a copy of the IRB approved recruitment letter. If the potential participants responded to the initial text message, follow-up texts were carried out accordingly, to schedule the individual interview sessions. Finally, a third recruitment attempt was made to each of the enrolled individuals via an email request from my university email account, approximately three weeks after the personal text message. Per the request of the organization's director, the caregivers were only to be contacted two times (i.e., if no response was received) following the in-person class invitation. Final recruitment requests were sent out on May 5, 2022. The following responses were received. One participant responded to the in-person class invitation, eleven participants responded to the personal text message invitation, and two participants responded to the email invitation as demonstrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Individual Interview Recruitment Summary



Methods of Data Collection

This study was designed to better understand adult caregivers' perceptions about their role in early parent-child communication by collecting a variety of data about the unit of analysis. Doing so allowed for a rich description of the case and improved the trustworthiness of the study by aiding in the triangulation process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays and Singh, 2012). While all bounded facets of the case were explored over the course of the study, three types of data were collected and analyzed

separately and then collectively, 1.) semi-structured individual interviews, 2.) archived program documents, 3.) participant-created artifacts. The following subsections provide an overview of the data that were collected.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Individual interviews took place during the months of March, April, and May of 2022 for enrolled caregivers who volunteered to participate. Participants had the option to complete the individual interview sessions via phone call, Zoom meeting, email questionnaire, or through an in-person interview session. Five participants chose to complete the interviews over the phone, three participants chose a Zoom meeting, one participant chose an in-person interview, and one participant chose to complete the email questionnaire due to scheduling conflicts. Although fourteen participants initially agreed to participate in the interview sessions, four participants either changed their minds or did not respond to follow up requests to schedule the sessions for unknown reasons.

The individual interviews took approximately twenty minutes to complete when specifically timing the demographic questions to the participant artifact activity prompt. It is unknown how long the email questionnaire took to complete since the participant did this on their own time. In general, there wasn't much of a time difference between the different types of interviews conducted. In fact, the average length of interviews was the same for both phone calls and Zoom interviews, at twenty minutes. The longest interview was the in-person interview which took approximately twenty-seven and a half minutes to complete, due to some face-to-face child interruptions. During each of the interview sessions, the participants were simultaneously responsible for caregiving activities. As a result, four parents scheduled the interviews during their child's nap time; three of these children woke up from their nap during the interview. Six of the other participants completed the interviews while their children were awake and present (i.e., otherwise occupied with toys, or unoccupied in the arms or nearby vicinity of the parent). At times, the caregivers had to ask their children to be quiet or paused the interview to briefly address an issue, but then continued with questions. During one session, the partner of the participant was nearby and assisted the participant with childcare responsibilities. However, this did not stop the session from having

minor interruptions. As a result, flexibility on the researcher's part was necessary during the interview sessions due to the caregivers' simultaneous responsibilities.

Individual interview participants had the option to view a written copy of the interview questions in addition to hearing them in a verbal manner; five participants utilized the visual aid either in-person, on the Zoom screen, or on their phones. Participants who chose to use the visual aid had fewer requests for clarification about the questions from the researcher. While the requests for clarification or question repetition did not add to the overall length of the interviews, this factor was most common with the participants who were exhibiting active multi-tasking (i.e., childcare responsibilities) behaviors and also chose not to use the visual list of interview questions. Finally, each of the interview conversations was audio-recorded onto a password protected laptop computer. Handwritten notes were also taken simultaneously for back-up records, and also to record my initial interpretations of the participants' responses.

The individual interviews were designed to take place in variety of natural contexts and were determined based on that which was most convenient to the study participants. Individual interviews allowed me to fully experience the participants' responses (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, etc.) and to have a more authentic look at their perspectives than the survey results alone would give (Hays & Singh, 2012). However, allowing study participants to choose the context for their interview session enabled me to respect and honor a variety of life situations and dynamics (i.e., working parent), expression preferences (e.g., written, video, in person), and comfort levels with an unfamiliar researcher and also allowed for a greater confirmability of their responses and reflections in the write-up report (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A specific interview protocol was utilized during the individual interviews and contained a semi-structured set of questions that were constructed using the key tenets of BST, ALT, and FSA (see Appendix B). The semi-structured question format aligned with the study's research questions, but also allowed the participants to discuss other topic-related items that were omitted from the initial design of the questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It also allowed the participants to speak freely about their

perceptions within a structure that fit the protocol of the study. Since I audio recorded the interview conversations, I was able to listen carefully to the study participants' answers during the live sessions, and again during the analysis of the data. The recordings also aided in the creation of a verbatim transcription of the conversations for later analysis (i.e., individual, holistic).

Archived Program Documents

The LENA Start parenting program utilized program documents during the ten-week session to record caregiver information and perceptions about their ability to engage with their children communicatively (i.e., both before and after the completion of the class) and also noted parent feedback about the course itself. These documents were generated and administered by the local organization as a part of the typical parenting program procedures. Since the study was designed to analyze parent or caregiver perceptions about their role in early childhood communication, I collected information from these documents to better understand the population of participants who had voluntarily enrolled in this type of program during the fall and winter sessions. The utilization of information from the archived program documents also eliminated repetitive tasks for the study participants and added to the audit trail of the case; this increased the credibility of the findings, and allowed for future replication, if warranted (Hays & Singh, 2012).

As a part of the study, I collected data from the following program documents 1) LENA Start class's initial participation consent forms, 2) LENA Parent Survey, 3) LENA Start end of course feedback, and 4) the LENA graph summary reports. I was assisted by the community organization's director on two separate occasions to collect this information and did so at the organization's public office. While on site, I made copies or took notes from these documents to analyze individually and also holistically. The consent form was completed by participants upon enrollment and contained self-reported demographic information. The information gathered from these documents painted a picture of the general background of the participants including their self-reported education levels, races, and the languages spoken in their homes.

The pre-class survey was completed prior to the first class and contained perceptions about a parents' initial comfort level, knowledge, and use of communication (i.e., varied use of language: past, future tense) prior to entering the class, as well as their perceptions about general parenting self-efficacy and knowledge of child development. The end of course feedback report contained answers to both closed questions and semi-structured or open-ended questions regarding the participants' overall satisfaction of the class, reasons for enrolling in the class, perceptions about parent-child communication, the ease of attendance and/or barriers to attending class, as well as questions about the delivery method that they had experienced. These questions were answered electronically on graduation day (i.e., week ten) or shortly thereafter. The report was organized by question and also by the various embedded subunits of the case.

Finally, the individual LENA Graph summary reports detailed quantitative data from the LENA recording device that was given to parents as objective feedback over the course of the class. The reports contained a minimum of six days of participation (i.e., requirement for LENA Start graduation) or a maximum of ten days over the course of the program. The summary report specified a brief snapshot (i.e., one day/week) of the individual participants' parent-child communication over the course of the LENA Start class and included the number of adult words spoken per day as well as the number of parent-child conversational turns that had been recorded per day for each day of participation.

The LENA graph summary reports were constructed from data that was obtained by a technological device called the Language ENvironmental Analysis (LENA), a tool that has helped researchers to demonstrate that early experiences are crucial to child development, specifically in the areas of language and turn-taking (Caskey et al., 2014; Gilkerson et al., 2017a; Gilkerson et al., 2017b; Suskind, 2016; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013; Wood et al., 2016). The LENA recording device is essentially, a 'verbal pedometer' of the child's natural environment and was created by innovative engineers at the LENA Foundation in Boulder, Colorado (for more, see LENA Foundation). The device was inspired by the landmark research study from Hart and Risley (1995), as well as the nonprofit's

founder's desire to combat the seemingly inequitable opportunities of young children in early childhood (for more, see LENA Foundation).

Study participants used the LENA device one time per week for ten weeks, as a part of the LENA Start parenting program, to objectively record an audible snapshot of the parent-child daily verbal interactions. Each recording was designed to provide objective feedback to the parents by highlighting the number of adult words, conversational turn-taking opportunities, and electronic noise that were experienced by the participants' young children on a particular day. Using unique and complex computer algorithms, the LENA device recordings were uploaded to a secure, cloud-based program that calculated the information in an objective and factual manner; this information was then transformed into a parent friendly graphic called the LENA report (Xu et al., 2009). As a part of the parenting class, the LENA reports were shared weekly with caregivers, as a part of the program's feedback component.

For this investigation, I collected information about the cumulative daily recording summary data for each of the interview participants. This helped me to triangulate the information which was collected from other methods of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The baseline recording, the middle recording, and the average of the last two recordings were noted for each participant to paint a picture of their parent-child communication style before, during, and after completion of the parenting class. The first recording served as a representation of the family's 'baseline snapshot' for parent-child interactions prior to participating in the parenting class. The middle recording sheet was a representational snapshot of the family's parent-child interactions after half of the parenting classes had been completed. Finally, the average of the last two recordings represented a snapshot of the family's parent-child interactions at the end of the parenting class.

Participant Artifacts

To enhance the creativity of the qualitative study and to utilize alternate or more innovative forms of expression (i.e., more culturally relevant), as compared to quantitatively designed studies, a participant artifact was collected during the individual interview (Hays and Singh, 2012; Hooks, 2004). This artifact was offered as a way for participants to visually display their thoughts, perceptions, cultural

interpretations, or lifestyle choices regarding communication with others in an informal and introspective manner (See Appendix C). The participant artifact was completed at the end of the individual interviews, via sketch, drawing, or word list. Participants were given five minutes to complete their artifact, as well as the opportunity to explain the artifact to the interviewer. This procedure was designed as an informal member check of the researcher's interpretation of the artifact and added to a thicker description of the case (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Data Analysis

The first part of the analysis occurred as I was making the initial decisions about this project and ultimately as I was designing the conceptual blueprint (i.e., determining the study's design, context, research questions, inclusionary criteria, exclusionary criteria) for the case (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). However, since qualitative research is an iterative process, this analysis continued through the rest of the stages of inquiry until the end of the project (Hays & Singh, 2012). According to Ravitch & Carl (2021) taking a reflexive approach throughout the process (i.e., research memos, journaling) is important when conducting qualitative research. Discussion with peers (i.e., debriefing), colleagues, and with mentors from the university committee were also crucial steps in the design. The embedded, single case study design allowed for flexibility (i.e., for unforeseen findings) and minor modifications to the study's blueprint (Yin, 2018). To develop naturalistic generalizations during the interview sessions, I wrote analytic memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) I used a substantive case reporting format to improve the structure and audit trail of the case, as well as enhance its overall trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The single, embedded case study was designed to highlight four sources of evidence (e.g., documentation, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts) of the overall case to better understand the perceptions of caregiver's role in early two-way communication during the early childhood years (Yin, 2018). While each source of data had strengths (e.g., interviews – targeted focus, participant artifacts – introspective, culturally sensitive, etc.), the combination of four sources of evidence for each embedded subunit procured the strongest findings for the overall case and compensated for any weaknesses that one

source of data would have had on its own. Moreover, the protocol of the study, which was based on the Bioecological Systems Theory and the Andragogical principles of Adult Learning Theory allowed me to investigate the types of resources and supports that caregivers receive in natural environments during a critical time of development for communication, as well as their preferred methods of receiving this information or types of support (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Hart & Risley, 1995, Knowles et al., 2020, Yin, 2018). It also aided in the investigation by allowing me to research real-life situations in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

However, collecting four different types of raw data necessitated that a common symbol or code be constructed to aid in the analysis process to best capture the essence of “language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 5). For this study, I utilized two elemental coding procedures (e.g., In Vivo, descriptive) to properly highlight the voices, actions, and perceptions of parents and caregivers of young children who are only minimally represented in the current literature. To begin the analysis process, I coded the archived program documents, individual interview transcripts, participant artifacts from each of the case’s subunits separately and also by specific research question. As mentioned previously, the embedded subunits of the case were determined by the LENA Start session delivery specifics (e.g., time of day, virtual or in-person context) and were designated as, 1) day virtual classes (DVC), 2) night virtual classes (NVC), and 3) night in-person class (NIPC). I utilized two specific forms of elemental coding for the data, a) descriptive coding for the documentation of archived program documents and participant created artifacts, as well as b) In Vivo coding for the individual interview transcripts and end of course feedback (i.e., open-ended questions). This protocol highlighted important information for each group of caregivers and allowed me to see if there were any differences between the embedded subunits. Then to better understand the complex issue under investigation, I analyzed the data using a cross subunit synthesis to interpret the overall findings of the case and to highlight findings that were “a higher conceptual plane” of understanding for the reader (Yin, 2018, p. 197).

Analysis of Archived Program Documents

Analyzing the archived documents supported the design of the study by increasing my ability to paint a picture of the entire population of participants who had enrolled in the self-selected parenting program, even if they didn't participate in the individual interview sessions or graduate from the class. Archived program data from the enrollment/intake forms and the weekly LENA graph summary reports (LGSR) was coded using descriptive codes. For example, using the data from the LGSR, I described the individual interview caregivers' talking or communication styles with three codes, 1) Low (<10th to 30th percentiles) 2) Medium (40th to 60th percentiles), and 3) High (70th to 100th percentiles) upon enrollment to the program, as demonstrated in table four. Percentiles for these codes were determined using previously reported normative data from the LENA Foundation's Natural Language Study which highlighted information from parents of young children (i.e., 2 months to 48 months) who had used the LENA recording device in the past (Gilkerson & Richards, 2008; Gilkerson et al., 2009). Table 2 provides examples of the descriptive codes used for the archived program documents. Other demographic information collected from the enrollment/intake forms or from the individual interviews was also coded using descriptive codes and included the self-reported gender, language, race, relationship status, SES, and working status of the participants, as labeled on the documents/forms. Furthermore, synthesis

Table 2

Sample of Codes for Archived Program Documents

LENA Graph Summary Sheets Adult Words (AW), Conversational Turns (CT)	Related RQ#	Descriptive Code Talk/Communication Style: Low, Medium, High
Baseline AW – 17,181	1	High
Baseline AW – 12,042	1	Medium
Baseline AW – 6,032	1	Low
Baseline CT – 945	1	High
Baseline CT – 497	1	Medium
Baseline CT – 218	1	Low

of the archived program documents in combination with the interview transcripts helped me to triangulate the different types of data regarding the caregivers' perceptions of their role in early communication (Yin, 2018).

Analysis of Individual Interviews

Prior to the commencement of the study, questions were constructed carefully to frame the individual interview protocol and were based on the theoretical frameworks of BST, ALT, and used a FSA approach (see Appendix D). They were subsequently organized by the associated research questions and then analyzed by the academic and IRB review committees at the university for accuracy and understanding. While a pilot study was not conducted, I tested an initial run-through of the questions with a peer to ensure the clarity the questions' intent. Individual interviews were scheduled and completed at the convenience of each study participant and conducted between the hours of ten o'clock in the morning to six o'clock in the evening for all live interviews. However, the time that the email questionnaire was completed is unknown. As the individual interviews were taking place, I noted word or phrase patterns in the participants' answers as an exploratory form of analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). I recorded these words and phrases, or the related concepts of the participants' answers, in the form of analytic memos (Saldaña, 2021). Live interviews were also audio recorded for purposes of transcription and analysis. Table 3 highlights the specific details of the individual interview sessions for each participant.

Table 3

Individual Interview Data Specifics

Date	Participant	Type	Time of Day	Length of Interview (minutes)	Simultaneous Childcare Responsibilities
3/1/22	1	Zoom	12:30 p.m.	21.19	Yes/Child napping
3/7/22	2	Phone	2:30 p.m.	17.00	Yes/Child playing nearby
3/24/22	3	Phone	11:00 a.m.	27.24	Yes/Child napping

3/25/22	4	Phone	11:00 a.m.	14.49	Yes/Children napping & playing nearby
3/25/22	5	Phone	1:30 p.m.	19.35	Yes/Child napping & playing nearby
3/30/22	6	Phone	1:00 p.m.	21.33	Yes/Child in arms & playing nearby
4/1/22	7	Zoom	5:30 p.m.	19.11	Yes/Children playing nearby
4/7/22	8	In-person	4:30 p.m.	27.52	Yes/Children playing nearby
4/20/22	9	Email Questionnaire	Unknown	Unknown	Yes/Homeschooling
4/21/22	10	Zoom	3:00 p.m.	19.11	Yes/Child napping & Child (woke up) in arms

After each interview was completed, I personally transcribed the conversation verbatim within two days of its completion using a combination of a computer software program (e.g., Microsoft Word dictation feature) and personal hand transcription by replaying the voice memo recordings back (i.e., multiple times) to check for accuracy and to tweak any errors from the computer transcription. Once each of the individual interviews were transcribed, I hand coded them individually as follows, during the first round of analysis. First, I used a ‘lumper’ coding procedure to analyze the thoughts of each of the participants separately (Saldaña, 2021). Doing so helped me to clarify my interpretation of each participant’s response to ensure that their intent was captured as accurately as possible. Using lumper codes also enabled me to highlight the concepts that directly related to the research questions. Then, I listened to the audio recordings again, this time with a hard copy of the transcripts in front of me; I listened for any participant emphasized words and coded them with In Vivo words/phrases, if they were not already noted during the initial code formation. Next, I separated the participants’ In Vivo codes by the case’s three subunits and by research question which allowed me to look for visual or frequency

patterns in the participants' words/phrases for each subunit. This process also enabled me to visualize any overarching patterns in the words/phrases that were apparent in the larger group of data for the overall case. Table 4 provides examples of first round coding data for the interview transcripts. Separating the

Table 4

Sample Codes for Individual Interview Transcripts

In Vivo Code	Related RQ#	Resources/Supports
"arrange around us"	1	Intangible/Flexibility
"communicate with us"	1	Intangible/Communication
"I could do it anywhere"	1	Intangible/Class context
"profiles of each student"	1	Tangible/Visual
"you're on track, good job"	1	Intangible/Verbal feedback
"graphs"	1	Tangible/Visual
In Vivo Code	Related RQ#	Motivations
"free books"	2	Extrinsic/tangible
"to help my daughter"	2	Intrinsic/support
"wanting to educate my child"	2	Intrinsic/support
"I'm learning"	2	Intrinsic/intangible
"progress my son was making"	2	Extrinsic/intangible
"recruited at WIC event"	2	Extrinsic/intangible
In Vivo Code	Related RQ#	Family Dynamics/Work status
"my husband"	3	Microsystem/nuclear family
"my daughter"	3	Microsystem/nuclear family
"systems engineer"	3	Employed/out of house
"online reselling"	3	Employed/working from home
"volunteer"	3	Not Employed
"stay at home mom"	3	Not Employed

In Vivo codes by subunit helped me to categorize the findings for each of embedded subunits of the case before analyzing the data holistically. Doing so also allowed for triangulation between the multiple sources of evidence during each step and later for the cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2018). Lastly, I was able to analyze the data from all subunits holistically to construct larger themes for the entire data set (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This allowed me to synthesize the information at a higher level which allowed for the creation of more abstract thematic constructs for the study's findings (Yin, 2018).

Analysis of Participant Created Artifacts

Participant artifacts were coded with descriptive codes as demonstrated on Figure 8. First, I utilized the specific talking tips from the LENA Start program and their associated numbers as descriptive codes (for more, see LENA Foundation, 14 Talking Tips). Since the talking tips were an important focus of the curriculum, it was important to use the same language to code the participants' artifacts. In addition, I utilized other words that were associated with or represented other recommended actions or tips from the parent curriculum such as daily routine in the coding process. These descriptive codes demonstrated how parents were communicating with their child and if/how they were implementing the new information from the curriculum to support their efforts in a natural setting. Using the data from the participant created artifacts helped me to triangulate the caregivers' introspective perceptions to their explicit answers on the individual interview transcripts. Table 5 provides an example of the associated descriptive codes that were interpreted from the participant created artifacts.

Figure 8

Example of Participant Artifact

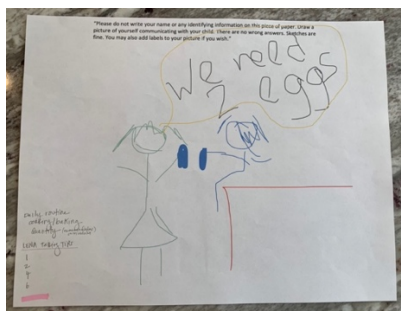


Table 5*Sample Codes for Participant Artifacts*

Participant's Artifact Response	Related RQ#	Descriptive Code
Cooking/baking	1	Daily routine
"We need 2 eggs"	1	Quantity
"We need 2 eggs"	1	Tip 1 - ("Talk about what you're doing & thinking")
"We need 2 eggs"	1	Tip 2 - ("Comment on what they're doing or looking at")
Child sitting at parent's level	1	Tip 4 - ("Get down to their level")
Parent facing child	1	Tip 6 - ("Tune in and respond to what they look at, do, say")

Holistic Analysis

The study was designed to analyze multiple embedded units of data from a single case using a cross-case approach to improve the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Miles et al., 2020; Yin, 2018). As recommended by Yin (2018), I used a replication strategy approach to analyze multiple embedded units of the case in an identical manner which later allowed me to search for patterns across the case as a whole (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021). After completing the embedded analysis of each subunit, I analyzed the four sources of evidence holistically to best describe the findings of the overall case in a cross-case synthesis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). This helped me to construct themes that were exposed from the case to answer the specific research questions. Since the phenomenon of a parent's perception about their role in early communication was highly complex, I analyzed the data first by research question and then constructed multiple themes in the form of analytic memos and metaphors. This allowed me to narrow the results and to expose the most pertinent findings. Table 6 highlights a sampling of the themes that were constructed holistically for the overall case's investigation organized by research question.

Table 6*Sampling of Holistic Themes for the Case*

Research Question #1	The LENA Start parenting program is a bridge for parents of young children, connecting them with information, research, and a network of support (e.g., professionals, peers, tools, resources) to enhance their ability as the child's first teacher.
Research Question #2	'It Takes a Village' to raise young children; parents are longing for their village in an individualized and transient society.
Research Question #3	The iceberg of community resources is not always fully visible to families with young children which decreases access to these benefits.

Finally, to synthesize and narrow the findings in practical manner that would also aid in real-life application for educators, policy makers, and other stakeholders, I formed a set of thematic constructs for the case. The thematic constructs were organized by research question and highlighted the overall assertions for the case study investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final assertions for the single, embedded case study can be found in chapter four.

Study Safeguards

The following safeguards and precautions were taken during the study to ensure that the anonymity and the well-being of the research participants were protected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). At the onset of the study, I met with the volunteer caregivers and introduced them to the purpose of the study, fully explaining the study's requirements and clearly stating that no money or payments would be given in exchange for their participation. Second, volunteers were given a copy of the Internal Review Board (IRB) approved consent form either electronically or in the form of a hard copy. Ample time was allotted for each participant to review and sign the consent forms. I was present during this time to ensure that any questions or concerns were addressed promptly and in a clear manner. Additionally, the consent form was the only document in the study that contained identifying information; all other identifying information was removed from other documents upon receipt, when applicable. At the time of signing, participants were given the opportunity to pick a pseudonym for the study. However, none of them chose to do so. Consequently, I decided to use a number system in the report write up. Upon receiving the signed consent

forms, I assigned a number to each of the individual interview participants. This number was handwritten on the back of the consent forms and served as the only link to individual participants' identities. These numbers were written in numerical order on a second piece of paper for use during analysis, but this sheet of information would not be identifiable by anyone other than the researcher. The consent forms were then locked in a cabinet for the duration of the study and will be kept there until no longer needed; after this point they will be shredded. Furthermore, all hard copies of study related program documents were stored in a secure location and electronic files were also stored on a memory storage device that was designated for the study and kept in a secure location unless it was actively being used. Additionally, the personal laptop used for this study was password protected, fingerprint locked, and kept in a secure location when it was not in active use. Finally, to ensure the anonymity of all study participants, the analysis of all collected documents, audio files, etc. were analyzed in a private location.

Ethical Considerations

At the commencement of the study, I did not foresee any harm that would come to the volunteer participants based on the study's protocols and content focus. However, as a preventative measure, the study was designed with specific safeguards for the data collection and analysis period to protect the participants' anonymity during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each step in the process was carried out with the utmost of care and discretion and was thoroughly considered as an important part of the study's protocol. However, at times, interview questions can bring up information or topics that might be sensitive to the study participants, based on their individual backgrounds or life experiences. This could unknowingly but potentially bring about minor psychological harm. To prevent this from happening, and as a part of the consent form and questionnaire protocol, I made sure that participants understood that all questions were optional and could be skipped for any reason during the interview session.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Research has shown that the language ability of young children is often predictive of school achievement, communication, literacy skills, and improved social emotional skills (Beecher & Van Pay, 2021; Gilkerson et al., 2018; Gunderson & Levine, 2011; Patel et al., 2021). However, this language is not learned in isolation, but in the dynamic homes and communities of young children, and often with familiar caregivers and family members (Begus & Southgate, 2018; Jipson et al., 2018; Neal & Neal, 2013; Saylor & Ganea, 2018). Previous published literature on parent education has focused on child developmental progress instead of on the characteristics and voices of the adult parents and caregivers who attended these classes or has been completed for evaluative purposes (Elmquist et al., 2022). To investigate a complex phenomenon in early childhood related to parent education, I highlighted the missing voices of parents and caregivers of young children who enrolled in a self-selected parent education class to answered the following research questions using a qualitative interpretative approach, 1) In what ways if any, do specific aspects (e.g., course materials, feedback) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions of a parent's role in early childhood? 2) What reasons do parents' (or caregivers') cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old? 3) How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term? In chapter four, I describe the single embedded case study by first highlighting the three embedded subunits of the case taken from six sources of collected data, as listed in Table 7.

Table 7

Data Collection for the Case

Type of Data	Number of Participants	Brief Description of Data	Type of Analysis
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<u>Archived Program Documents:</u>			
1. Enrollment/Consent Forms	27	General Demographic information (e.g., race, languages spoken, etc.)	Descriptive Coding
2. Pre-class Parent Survey	26	Questions about parenting self-efficacy & communication styles	Descriptive Coding
3. LENA Graph Summary Reports	10	Objective, computer generated data from LENA technological device (e.g., adult words/day, parent-child interactions/day)	Descriptive Coding
4. End of Course Feedback Questionnaire	21	Semi-structured questions (e.g., course delivery, attendance logistics, information learned, wonderings)	Descriptive & In Vivo Coding
5. Individual Interviews	10	Semi-structured questions designed using ALT & BST	Descriptive & In Vivo Coding
6. Participant Created Artifacts	3	Expression via sketch/drawing	Descriptive Coding

Second, I detail the findings holistically across all embedded subunits using a thematic approach to fill a gap in the previously published literature. Descriptive coding was utilized on the archived program documents and on the general demographic information that was obtained from the interview transcripts. In Vivo coding was applied to the individual interview transcripts, as well as to the semi-structured participant answers from the end of course feedback questionnaires. The results provide educators, researchers, and community stakeholders with valuable information to fill a much-needed gap in our knowledge about the important aspects of support that parent education appears to have provided for the participants in this case, *Accountability*, *Empowerment*, and *Inclusivity*.

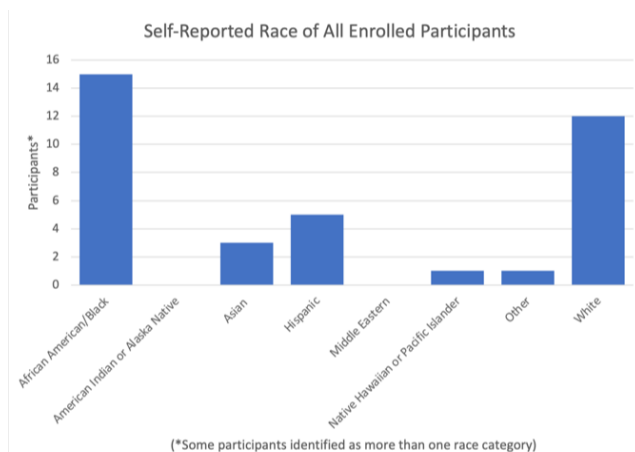
Study Participants

During the study's data collection period, the community organization hosted five different LENA Start parent education sessions for caregivers of young children. Three class sessions were offered in the fall of 2021 and two sessions were offered during the winter/early spring months of 2022. The ten-week parent education sessions focused on early communication and were offered to caregivers throughout the city at no cost. A total of thirty caregivers enrolled in these parent education sessions on a volunteer basis; This fills a gap in information that is needed on self-selected participants who enroll in parent education, as this population was found to be the smallest group of caregivers that were included in previous academic literature.

As a part of the enrollment process for the parenting class, each of the caregivers completed an enrollment/consent form that detailed self-reported demographic information. Data obtained from these program documents was used to paint a detailed picture of the participants who enrolled in the community program which added to the overall description of the single embedded case (Yin, 2018). This data reflected a slightly more diverse group of participants as compared to large city's overall racial demographics. More importantly, the data highlights a group of caregivers that represent a more diverse sampling of participants, specifically for self-reported racial demographics, as compared to previously published academic literature and is highlighted in Figure 9. In addition to racial diversity, the

Figure 9

Self-Reported Race of All Enrolled Participants

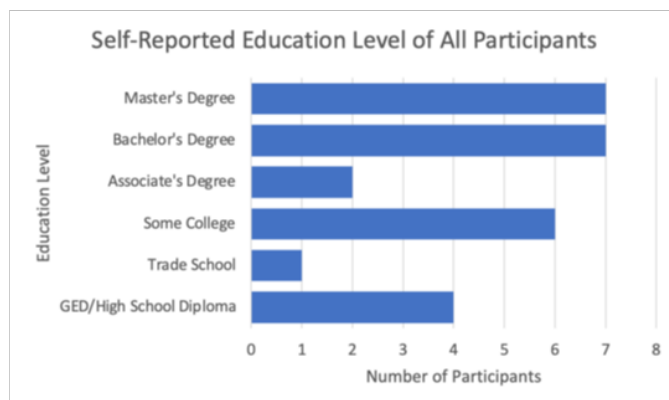


overall group of caregivers from this study represents a fairly diverse sampling of participant education levels as well as for languages spoken in the home. This also adds to the published literature about caregivers who self-select to enroll in parent education. Specifically, when filling out the enrollment/consent forms, caregivers reported a combination of six different languages that were spoken in their homes including English, Jamaican Patois, Japanese, Spanish, Tagalog, Ukrainian. My status as a program volunteer also allowed me to observe other languages that were not listed on the enrollment forms (e.g., Italian, Russian). This finding demonstrates that the young children in these homes had multiple influences from the microsystem that impacted both the language acquisition and communicative styles of their caregivers during the early childhood years before reaching school age, and is consistent with census information about the growing diversity of students in the USA (for more, see USA census data).

When looking at the highest level of education attained, seven of the participants had earned a master's degree or higher and seven had also reported that they had earned a bachelor's degree in some field. Two of the participants earned an associate's degree, six of the participants had attended some college but did not earn a specific degree, and four of the participants reported that they had earned a GED or high school diploma, as shown in Figure 10. None of the participants from this group of

Figure 10

Self-Reported Education Level of All Enrolled Participants



caregivers had obtained less than a GED or high school diploma. This finding highlights the fact that caregivers from various educational backgrounds are interested in the learning more about early communication. While parents with similar characteristics may have participated in parent education classes in the past, their voices or presence were not documented in the final report write-ups. Lastly, data collected from the archived program documents noted that two of the enrolled caregivers identified as the grandmother or the nanny of the young children, and not the parent figure. Moreover, my status as a volunteer also noted that other class participants identified as the young children's fathers or in one case, an aunt. This is an important finding because it shows that additional members of the microsystem who fill the role of caregiver also choose to enter self-selected parent education programs even if they were not officially enrolled.

The community organization had a low attrition rate for the parenting classes over the ten-week period. Twenty-seven out of thirty caregivers completed the program and also met the somewhat rigorous requirements for graduation. Demographic information about these participants was included in the findings for this study, when available. While the 90% retention or graduation rate was typical for the investigated program context, this finding was much higher than other the parenting education classes that were noted in published literature (Caron et al., 2015; Du Paul et al., 2013; Elmquist et al., 2021; Stephan & Miclea, 2013). In the context of this case, only three caregivers cancelled their enrollment status with the community organization at some point during the ten-week parenting session. It is unknown why these participants chose to unenroll or withdraw their consent. However, this status prevented their information from being reported in the overall case findings. Furthermore, twenty-six of the enrolled participants filled out the pre-class parent survey, twenty-one filled out the end of course feedback questionnaire, and three participants completed the participant artifact activity. Each piece of data added to the description of the case and helped to triangulate multiple types of participant responses in the overall case synthesis (Yin, 2018).

While twenty-seven caregivers' information is reported to some degree albeit indirectly, from the archived program documents in the description of the case, convenience sampling was utilized to recruit

participants from this group for the individual interview sessions. Twelve participants initially responded to the study's recruitment procedures and stated that they would like to participate in the study. However, life factors such as traveling for work or death in the family, prevented two of these caregivers from participating on an individual basis. As a result, a total of ten individual participants voluntarily consented to participate in the study via individual interview sessions. The interview transcripts led to additional findings on the topic of parent education and added a thicker description of the case. This led to important knowledge that would fill gaps noted in previously published literature on parent education. Table 8 details the self-reported demographic information of the ten individual

Table 8

Self-reported Demographics of Individual Interview Participants

<u>Employment Status</u>	
Employed (outside of home)	3
Employed (working from home)	2
Not Employed	5
<u>Gender</u>	
Female	7
Male	2
Nonbinary/nonconforming	0
Chose not to answer	1
<u>Highest Education Level</u>	
High School	2
Some College	5
Bachelor's Degree	2
Master's Degree	1
<u>Number of Children</u>	
1 child	1
2 children	5
3 children	3
4 children	1
<u>Relationship Status</u>	
Single	1
Married	9
Separated	0
Divorced	0
Widowed	0
Cohabiting	1
Other	0

<u>Race*</u>	
African American	5
American Indian or Alaska Native	0
Asian	0
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1
White	4
White/Hispanic	1
Some other race	0
<u>Socioeconomic Status</u>	
\$10,000 or less	0
\$20,000 or less	2
\$30,000 or less	0
\$40,000 or less	0
\$50,000 or less	1
\$60,000 or less	1
\$70,000 or less	0
\$80,000 or less	1
\$90,000 or less	0
\$100,000 or less	1
\$110,000 or less	2
Chose not to answer	1

**One participant identified as more than one race*

interview participants and includes their employment status, the status of their living arrangement with a young child (e.g., part-time, full time), their household SES, as well as their relationship status or family dynamics. The information paints a more detailed description of the caregivers who self-selected to enroll in the parent education classes during this study's data collection period and specifically supports the BST's acknowledgement of influential caregivers in a young child's life.

While not specifically questioned about this topic, five of the individual interview participants mentioned that they were affiliated with a specific branch of the military service, and at least one of the participants had a deployed spouse member during the parenting class. Although another participant was not affiliated with the military service, they also mentioned that they were living in the area without the support of family nearby. These findings arose from the semi-structured format of the interview questions and are important to note as they added to the later analysis of the case regarding the microsystem's ability to aid or support the enrolled caregivers with young children.

Lastly, a curious finding of the investigation was that the parenting program only enrolled one parent or caregiver with the program documents in an official manner, even if multiple family members or caregivers from a single-family unit participated in the class. As a result, obtaining accurate information about these auxiliary participants was not possible when viewing the archived program documents only. This type of information was only available through direct conversations with the organization's staff or when speaking to the enrolled participants during the individual interview process. In part, this finding highlights the fact that multiple caregivers may attend parent education sessions in various capacities or with different attendance rates, even if they are not officially recognized or enrolled in the course by the organizer. However, it also demonstrates that these voices may be absent from the findings of this case and other similar published academic reports to date regarding enrollment.

Finally, twenty-six of the program graduates filled out the pre-class parent survey. The survey included three multiple choice questions and nine statements for parents to rate using a Likert scale. Three questions were excluded due to content that was not in line with the study's research questions. While the above-mentioned general demographic information painted a clear picture of the caregivers who enrolled in the self-selected parent education sessions using typical organizational categories, the pre-class parent survey data highlighted additional characteristics of the participants including the caregivers' communicative styles, feelings of parenting self-efficacy, as well as their preferences for discussing such topics with others upon entry into the parenting class, as seen in Table 9. This

Table 9

Pre-Class Parent Survey Data

Parenting Knowledge & Self-Efficacy	Number of Participants	Self-Reported as: Low, Medium, High
<u>Typical Use of Language/Communication:</u>		
Reading Books	19	Low
	3	Medium
	4	High
During Routines	7	Low

Variation of talk	3	Medium
	4	High
	3	Low
	8	Medium
<u>Parenting Self-Efficacy:</u> Skills for parenting	15	High
	0	Low
	6	Medium
	20	High
Knowledge of child development	7	Low
	4	Medium
	15	High
Understanding of child's communicative attempts	2	Low
	7	Medium
	17	High
Knowledge of child development compared to peers	7	Low
	10	Medium
	9	High
<u>Comfort Level of Peer Collaboration:</u> To discuss parent experience	2	Low
	2	Medium
	24	High
To discuss adult-child interactions	2	Low
	4	Medium
	20	High
To discuss child development	7	Low
	6	Medium
	13	High

valuable information added to our knowledge about parents who chose to enroll in a self-selected parent education class. When looking at the twenty-six participants from the case who filled out the pre-survey, the findings show that while parenting self-efficacy and use of language varied among enrollees, their desire to collaborate with others on the topics of early communication and about general parenting topics was high. The pre-class survey data supported the overall findings of the case in a unique manner as detailed below.

Subunit Findings

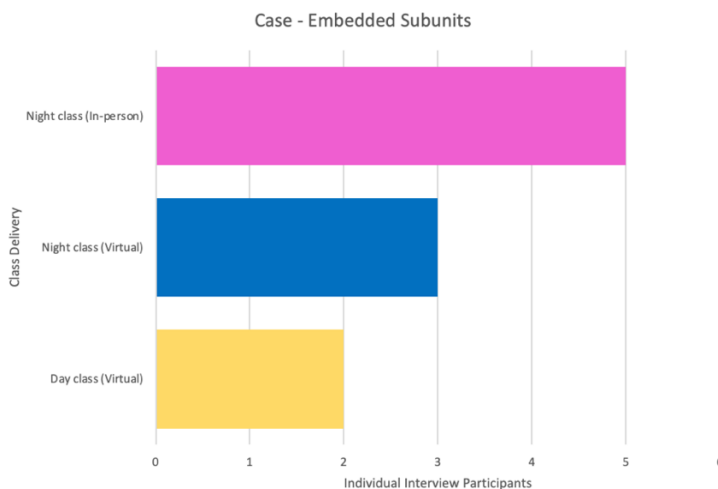
The data from the overall case was analyzed first by research question within the embedded subunits (e.g., DVC, NVC, NIPC) and then holistically. In order to account for variations in session delivery, including the time of day that the class was offered, qualitative analysis was conducted separately to look for potential differences among the subunits and to include and compare the responses of a variety of caregivers' lifestyles (i.e., work status) regarding the resources and supports that were available or needed in the different systems of their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). While previous published literature looked at the delivery method of the parenting classes or coaching techniques, none of these studies looked at or compared more than one type of class delivery from the same organization. As a result, the procedures from this case strengthen the overall findings and add to our gap in knowledge about parent education by including various caregiver perspectives about early communication from a parent education course that was delivered in multiple ways.

Two elemental coding procedures were utilized in the analysis process to solidify different types of raw data for comparison and to best capture the essence of the case's findings (Saldaña, 2021). First, descriptive coding was used in the analysis of the archived program documents, the demographic information taken from the interview transcripts, and the participant created artifacts. Second, In Vivo coding was applied to the individual interview transcripts and to the end of course feedback questionnaire's semi-structured questions to highlight the resources and supports that were readily accessible to the caregivers from the microsystem, as well as those that they were seeking from other systems of influence. The case protocol highlighted important information for each group of caregivers and also allowed for an investigation of differences between the embedded subunits of the case. Finally, to better understand the case findings holistically, analysis was completed using a cross subunit synthesis to construct overarching thematic constructs of a higher level for educators and researchers which added to the trustworthiness of the case (Yin, 2018).

In the end, the bounded case highlights three embedded subunits (i.e., DVC, NVC, NIPC) of twenty-one participants who filled out the end of course feedback questionnaires and ten of which participated in the individual interview sessions, as highlighted in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Individual Interview Participants by Case Subunit



Day Virtual Class Subunit Analysis

A total of eight caregivers were enrolled in the DVC subunit for both fall and winter/early spring sessions. All eight of these DVC caregivers filled out a paper copy of the pre-class parent survey, but only five filled out the program's end of course feedback online questionnaire. Additionally, two of these caregivers volunteered to participate in the individual interview sessions and zero chose to participate in the participant artifact activity. Both individual interview participants were members of a nuclear family unit, were unemployed, and participated by phone interview or email questionnaire. The individual interview participants noted that they had heard about the parenting program by word of mouth and from multiple sources such as a daycare provider or neighbor and also at a community event. These participants expressed a need for professionals and other stakeholders to better support them as parents of young children due to missing or inadequate equipment in the community, such as changing tables, or by providing more accessible educational information. In general, while extrinsic supports such as children's

books were offered by the organization, the DVC participants stated that intrinsic motivations were the main catalyst for enrolling in the class due to a personal desire to improve their own parenting skills or to help their child improve their expressive communication skills. Moreover, according to the end of course feedback, one of the DVC caregivers signed up for the parenting session out of sheer curiosity about the LENA technological device. Finally, while the DVC caregivers mentioned flexibility and a positive environment as positive aspects of the class, the extrinsic tools and resources (e.g., free children's books, LENA summary graphs) and intrinsic supports received from the program were the main reasons given for actually completing the ten-week program.

DVC Results

The DVC individual interviewees told other people about the parenting program while enrolled in the program and after it was over; this included people who were members of the family's microsystem (e.g., friends, neighbors, other parents of young children) as well as those from the greater mesosystem such as church group members and coworkers. As stated enthusiastically by one participant, "I told everyone and anyone" about the program (Interview - Participant 9). This comment demonstrates the value of the program to the participant, as they told both familiar members of the microsystem, as well as strangers or those who were less familiar to them, from multiple systems of influence and regardless of their caregiver status. For example, Participant 3 named people that they had invited to the class which included people from other generations, such as the grandparents of young children that they met in public spaces, or even strangers that they ran across throughout the week when running errands around town. Although the DVC interviewees personally recruited other participants for future parenting classes via word of mouth, when asked about recruitment improvements for future classes, the participants recommended using a variety of visual flyers or tangible pamphlets that could be displayed in community locations like the pediatrician's office/hospital, school guidance counselor's office, or public library.

When asked about positive aspects or supports that they had received from the parenting program, the DVC subunit highlighted verbal encouragement, visuals in the form of weekly LENA

summary graphs, and an inclusive environment as the main factors. Table 10 highlights a sampling of participant responses to support these findings. The DVC participants also mentioned other visual

Table 10

Codes for DVC Responses

<u>Positive Program Aspects</u>	<u>Participant Responses</u>
Verbal Encouragement	“calls...encouraging me to keep going” “texts...keep it going” “they told us...by signing up for this program, we’re already ahead of the game”
Visuals (LENA Summary Graphs)	“You could see the improvement...an actual indicator” “I noticed times of the day where I wasn’t talking much” “Keeps you accountable”
Welcoming/Inclusive Environment	“always made me feel welcome” class was “personal”

aspects of the parenting program that aided them with parent-child communication. Examples of these were class video demonstrations, weekly reminders on LENA recording days via the child’s vest, and the LENA graph summary reports. Alternatively, when the DVC interviewees were asked about specific barriers to participating in the parenting program, neither interview participant acknowledged any factors outright that made it difficult for them to participate in the program. However, in the end of course feedback responses from all DVC participants and when answering subsequent interview questions, external factors such as transportation (i.e., to exchange LENA device from another location), a deployed spouse, traveling to see extended family members, and scheduling were noted by the DVC participant subunit as life factors that made attendance or equipment exchange difficult.

Accountability & Empowerment

The DVC interviewee participants appeared to be surprised at how many of the LENA Talking Tips they were already using prior to attending the parent class as stated by one caregiver, “you don’t even realize that you’re already doing some of these things” (Interview – Participant 3); pre-class survey data supported this finding. However, each of the DVC individual interviewees mentioned that consistent participation in the weekly class sessions had helped them to form new habits and to value back and forth communication with their child instead of just using one way communication. This accountability factor had not only reinforced their prior positive parenting behaviors but had encouraged them to exhibit these behaviors for more hours of the day and in new situations. As stated by one of the DVC participants, “now, I’m being more detailed with how we communicate...[LENA device] it keeps you accountable,” which for this parent included having conversations with their child during additional daily routines such as changing, dressing, and reading books (Interview – Participant 3). Another DVC parent mentioned that they had added early communication to additional routines, such as going to the gym or the grocery store due to the accountability of the class, but that this accountability had also added to a new feeling of empowerment in their ability to do so, “I was using several [LENA Talking Tips], but it pushed me to use more, more often” (Interview – Participant 9). This statement showed that while the LENA graph summary report provided accountability, the class also empowered them to do so more often. Another finding was that the DVC caregivers had a better understanding about the malleability of the brain as stated by Participant 9, “it’s never too early to start...when you put in the time, they thrive” (Interview – Participant 9). By stating this the caregiver showed that they better understood the potential that their caregiver role had in increasing positive early communication which added to their feelings of empowerment for their caregiver role. “There’s always more that you can do to help your baby,” said one participant; talking “helps your child understand what is happening” (Interview – Participant 3). This realization had empowered the caregiver to include more positive verbal interactions with their child during the day to help them understand the activities and schedule/structure of their day, as their child’s first teacher.

Night Virtual Class Subunit Analysis

A total of ten caregivers were enrolled in the LENA Start night virtual classes as a part of the fall and winter/early spring subunit. Ten of these participants filled out the pre-class survey and seven participants' responses were recorded on the end of course online feedback questionnaire. However, it is important to note that my status as a volunteer for the program gave unique insight to the fact that a few of the NVC winter/early spring participants had difficulty submitting their end of course feedback forms online due to electronic issues. Therefore, while they had attempted to fill out the form, it is unknown whether or not these participants attempted to resubmit their forms on a later date or not. Three of the DVC caregivers volunteered to participate in the individual interview portion of the study and two completed the participant artifact activity. Each of the NVC interviewees were members of a nuclear family unit and participated by phone or Zoom interview; two were employed outside of the home and all three had childcare responsibilities in the home when they weren't working.

Each of the NVC interviewees heard about the LENA Start program by word of mouth and expressed a need for the general public to better support parents of young children by providing opportunities that would enhance their ability to raise their child. Each also expressed that they had experienced a lack of educational opportunities for parents of young children. While they were seeking educational support, each of the NVC interviewees mentioned that they had signed up for the virtual class option due to the logistics of working, scheduling multiple activities for themselves or family members, or other personal responsibilities, such as caring for multiple children in the home. While the NVC interviewees stated that it was easy to participate in the virtual sessions, all three interviewees said that they would have preferred the in-person class over the virtual class, if scheduling would have permitted it, due to the implementation of more hands-on activities (i.e., experienced in previous LENA Start class), easier networking opportunities, or to experience a larger sense of community/group peer support during class sessions. As a whole, the NVC interviewees mentioned that the required LENA days (i.e., child wearing the LENA recording device/vest), video demonstrations, and class discussions had aided them with a general accountability for increasing talk and conversations with their young child; the DVC

participants also noted that an acknowledgement of conversational turns and parent empowerment were the biggest take-aways from the parenting program.

NVC Results

The NVC caregivers told other people about the parenting program while enrolled in the program and after it was finished; this included people who were members of the family's microsystem such as pregnant friends, neighbors, other parents of young children in their neighborhood as well as those in the greater mesosystem like church group members or coworkers. As stated by one of the NVC participants, "I highly recommend LENA Start for any parent" (Interview - Participant 6). This quote highlighted the fact that the class was extremely valuable to this parent and that they felt the content or supports of the program would be relevant to any caregiver of young children. Consequently, when asked how they would recommend recruiting future caregivers for the parenting class, the NVC interviewees shared a variety of techniques as demonstrated in Table 11.

Table 11

Codes for NVC Recruiting Recommendations

<u>Word of Mouth/Social Outlets</u>	"email" "hospital...after women give birth...packets" "invite a friend night and enjoy LENA, no pressure" "mommy and me programs" "set-up tables" at in-person school/community events "social media groups" "virtual outlets" "YouTube channels"
<u>Visuals in the Community</u>	"flyers going home with kids or in random places like the park" "pamphlets in daycares" "I wish they had advertised in the library"

When discussing their own motivations for enrolling in the parent class, the DVC participants noted a need for extrinsic support from other parents or professionals and also expressed intrinsic motivations for wanting to help their child to improve upon their expressive communication attempts; this was supported by the pre-class survey data, as well. Furthermore, other intrinsic motivations noted by the DVC participants were gaining new information about parent related topics and having a general curiosity about early communication. Conversely, the tangible resources provided by the program, such as free educational materials, children's books, and LENA weekly graph reports were extrinsic factors that encouraged these parents to complete the parent program, in addition to other intangible supports from professionals or peers through the program's networking opportunities. Finally, when asked about specific barriers to class participation, the NVC interviewees mentioned normal logistics of family life (e.g., multiple parents' job schedules, scheduling/sharing caregiving responsibilities, and/or scheduling multiple family members' activities) as notable factors. On the other hand, when asked about the positive aspects of the parenting program that accommodated for these barriers, the NVC subunit highlighted verbal encouragement and class tools or resources (e.g., LENA summary graphs) as important accountability factors. Other positive aspects of the program were noted as various information that they had gained about early communication, knowledge of different daily routines or activities where they could implement the LENA Talking Tips in their lives, and the specific times that they could focus on communication based on the weekly LENA graph summary reports.

Accountability, Empowerment, Inclusivity

Most notably, two of the participants from the NVC subunit were completing the LENA Start class for a second time after a one-to-three-year break, due to having an additional child. The information shared from these two caregivers specifically added to the study's long-term findings.

Each of these caregivers reported that remembering to use the skills or applying the newly learned skills to everyday life was difficult and that reenrolling in the class had provided accountability for them to do so more regularly. Although Participant six had medium to high self-efficacy about their parenting skills on the pre-class survey, they mentioned the LENA summary graphs as an important class resource that

provided information and accountability for continual improvement, “I wanted to beat myself from my last report; [it provided] competition against myself” when communicating with their child. This statement showed that the class provided an important visual aid of accountability that added to the parent’s self-efficacy regarding their own actions for parent-child communication. Similarly, Participant two had taken the parenting class three years prior with another child. They mentioned that it was difficult to apply the skills learned from the program over time since these skills didn’t come naturally to them; “it’s hard to continue to keep those same habits; you kind of need a reminder, I guess” (Interview - Participant 2). By commenting in this manner, this participant explained that they had signed up for the parenting class a second time, as a refresher of the skills and for the accountability that the consistent participation and resources provided. However, Participant seven, another DVC member who was taking the class for the first time, mentioned that the application of the new skills was difficult for them due to the differences in the “methods of communicating with your child” that they had observed growing up (Interview – Participant 7). In this statement, participant seven explained that while they could cognitively understand the benefits of the new strategies learned, it was difficult for them to implement the skills naturally into their lives without further modeling, coaching, or guidance from peers or class instructors.

As mentioned above, descriptive coding was utilized on the pre-course parent surveys as well as on the LENA summary graphs of the individual interviewee caregivers to note the communicative styles of the parents over the course of the parenting program. When comparing this information to the interview transcripts for NVC participants two and seven, the self-reported communication styles or parenting self-efficacy matched their interview data. Specifically, for Participant two, a naturally low talker on both the self-reported pre-class survey data and on the initial LENA graph summary report, the LENA data showed improvement in their parent-child communications while participating in the parenting class even though their adult words did not increase, as was also seen in a previous study by Elmquist and colleagues (2021). This supported the interviewee’s statements that accountability was crucial for carrying out the skills over time. Similarly, for Participant seven, a low communicator with low to medium levels of parenting self-efficacy on the pre-class survey and low adult-child interactions

on the initial LENA graph summary report, the data over the course of the parenting class showed variable up and down progress in both the number of adult words used and also with the total number of parent-child communications. Analysis of this interviewee's transcripts in conjunction with their LENA summary graphs confirmed that the application of the new skills was still difficult at the end of the class.

Although Participants two and seven had difficulty applying the new skills in the present or over time, feelings of inclusivity in the class in combination with peer advice and/or examples of implementation had helped them to view their caregiver role differently and in an empowered manner. For example, when interacting with their children, both of these NVC participants mentioned enhanced parenting self-efficacy with early communication, "they're [young children] crying for attention; as a parent, the caregiver, we can't really understand, and that makes you feel some type of way" (Interview – Participant 7). However, participating in the group discussions had helped this parent in the following way,

"cause I can hear where everybody else goes to with the process and what I can relate to...I guess it's not as much of a [communication] barrier as I thought. You just have to know what you are looking for" (Interview – Participant 7).

This statement signified the fact that the caregiver felt empowered with the new knowledge gained from peers even if it was still difficult to implement the skills regularly.

Night In-Person Class Subunit Analysis

A total of nine caregivers were enrolled in the LENA Start night in-person class during the fall period. Eight of these participants filled out the pre-class survey as well as the end of course feedback online questionnaire, five of these caregivers volunteered to participate in the individual interviews, and one completed the participant artifact activity. Each of the NIPC caregivers were members of a nuclear family unit and participated in the interview by phone, Zoom, or an in-person session. Two of the NIPC participants were employed outside of the home, two of the participants were employed but worked from within the home, and one participant was unemployed. Four of the NIPC interviewees noted that they had heard about the LENA Start program by word of mouth at local community events such as a public-

school fair, or at Women Infants and Children (WIC) events and two had enrolled based on the recommendations of someone from the microsystem, such as a friend or sister. The NIPC participants stated various reasons for enrolling in the parenting class, 1) “to get out of the house,” 2) to obtain intangible and tangible resources (e.g., information, free dinner, free children’s books), and 3) to receive support in the form of professional advice or childcare (Program Document – Anonymous Participant).

Consequently, the NIPC caregivers came back to class each week or completed the parenting program because of the supports and opportunities that it provided to them. Examples of these supports or opportunities include, accountability, adult interaction, child development research, educational information, feedback, or even play opportunities for their young children, as well as other tangible resources like free books. One NIPC parent stated that they came back due to the content of the curriculum which increased their feelings of empowerment for the caregiver role, “it was amazing information...stuff that I didn’t know that I needed to know” (Interview – Participant 4). This statement discussed the value that this participant had for the information learned in the parenting class, even though they had older children and prior parenting experience and resulted in the application of skills throughout their day. As another NIPC caregiver stated, “there are so many reasons that I came back,” (Interview – Participant 5). This particular NIPC participant had a large increase in their adult words and parent-child interactions over the course of the class and stated many examples of class resources that had impacted or changed their behavior in a positive way regarding parent-child communication in their natural environment. Finally, the interview participants from the NIPC class repeatedly mentioned inclusivity as important reasons for coming back to class each week, as well as accountability. As one caregiver stated, “It’s good to be in that class environment and see other parents...and just be around other parents who are at the same level of raising kids as you are because it...brings a different perspective” (Interview – Participant 8). This statement highlights the fact that this parent was seeking peer support in the form of idea sharing from other caregivers in similar situations but also supports the interview transcript data that peer support was hard to find or absent from this caregiver’s microsystem of support prior to attending the parenting class.

NIPC Results

As a result of their positive experiences with the parenting class, the NIPC interviewees told other people about the parenting program while enrolled in the program and after it was finished; this included people who were members of the family's microsystem such as family members, newly pregnant friends, neighbors, or other parents of young children that they met in public as noted in Table 12. However, it also included members of the greater mesosystem such as coworkers or other

Table 12

NIPC Parenting Responses

<u>Value of Parenting Program</u>	<u>Participant Responses</u>
Reasons NIPC parents told others about the LENA Start class	"I benefited from it...others could benefit from it" "wanted to share" (what they had learned) "you can't go wrong with the information that you learn" "I was proud of the progress that we had made" "they were in the same boat as me...improve on their parenting"

unfamiliar community members when filling leadership positions such as the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) at a local school. When asked about barriers to attending the parenting class, the NIPC participants mentioned personal logistics and other unavoidable external factors of prevention. However, they also mentioned specific supports offered by the parenting program or organization that allowed them to overcome these difficulties, as designated in Table 13. Despite the challenges that

Table 13

Codes for NIPC Parenting Responses

<u>Barriers to Attending Class</u>	<u>Participant Responses</u>
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Personal Logistics	“we were just adjusting to being new parents and getting to class on time” “it was just us working around our schedule for that day” “just getting the kids ready and trying to be early” “we had to rush from one activity to get there”
External Factors	“struggle...it’s kind of late (start time of the class)” “time frame...interfered with bedtime” “keeping them (kids) up late (time of class) was a challenge”
<u>Supports offered by the program</u>	<u>Participant Responses</u>
Intangible	“allowing us to be late” “staff flexibility” “it is offered for free”
Tangible	“childcare” was provided “they offer dinner...you didn’t have to worry about dinner on Monday nights”

various NIPC participants faced each week, they had positive comments about the class. As stated by one parent, “there was always more to look forward to, to go to the class, than there was if we didn’t go” (Interview – Participant 5). This statement demonstrated the value and importance of attending the in-person parent education session for this parent, regardless of other responsibilities or barriers that they were facing in their life.

However, when the NIPC interviewees were asked about how easy it was to implement the ‘14 Talking Tips’ into their day, they had mixed responses as seen by the codes in Table 14 (for more, see

Table 14

Codes for NIPC Parenting Responses

<u>Ease of Implementing the ‘14 Talking Tips’</u>	<u>Participant Responses</u>
Easy	“we just talk about every little thing”

	“I feel like we talk to him non-stop now” Make sure the kids are “involved in helping out” “narrating my life” “You cook everyday, you can talk while you’re cooking” “I found myself talking more, singing more, interacting more” Used the “poster as we went through the day”
Difficult	“It wasn’t easy at first” “you...had to really...read it and think about it a lot, to actually...do it” “before I did not talk to my kids as much...it was always me telling them no” “as the class went on, it got easier to apply into everyday conversations” “it doesn’t necessarily come naturally for somebody to talk to a baby”

LENA Foundation). The NIPC interviewees mentioned that the parenting program provided them with resources to enhance their communication skills as the caregiver of a young child. Examples given by the participants were that the program included current research as a part of the curriculum, group discussions, videos, and text message reminders for reading or other skills each week. One parent mentioned that they appreciated the higher-level material in the class, stating that the “NICU study was the most fascinating tidbit” (Interview – Participant 1). This particular parent had a master’s degree in child development and reinforced that the current research included in the curriculum had added to their knowledge about early communication. Other NIPC parents mentioned that the tangible resources offered by the program such as the free children’s books and the free dinners were actually conversation starters (i.e., with young child) for them, which they had not expected before attending the class.

Accountability, Empowerment, Inclusivity

The NIPC data reinforced the themes of accountability, empowerment, and inclusivity as reasons for graduating from the parenting program. In addition, the participants also mentioned that the biggest

take-aways from the parenting class were 1) the importance of conversations, 2) the importance of brain growth during the birth-to-three-year period, and 3) the parent is a child's first teacher. As one parent stated, "It's more or less the interaction that LENA teaches you; you want that conversation" (Interview – Participant 8). "It's not one-sided communication," said another participant, it's "holding the conversation and letting the child respond" (Interview – Participant 5). In both instances, the NIPC caregivers restated the importance of positive turn-taking interactions as an important part of early communication, as well as their understanding of the caregiver role in that process. Feelings of empowerment rose to the surface of the interview transcripts in a variety of ways. One parent stated, "we were talking, but it wasn't a conversation between the baby and I" (Interview – Participant 10). However, after the class was over the NIPC parent mentioned that they better realized their role in the process and felt empowered to continue with the skills due to the fact that, "everyday activities can be a learning experience." Another NIPC parent stated, "I was learning things I had never known, it really makes a big difference" (Interview – Participant 4). This knowledge gave the parent a sense of empowerment to change their actions based on the research that was mentioned in the class.

During the individual interviews the NIPC participants consistently expressed a need for the greater community to support parents of young children by providing more child-friendly events (i.e., ones that welcomed young children), additional educational opportunities, and in general, providing more support in the form of networking or community groups. As stated by one parent, "it really limits you [not being about to take young children to places in the community] and isolates people with children" (Interview – Participant 1). "You gotta really look for it [activities that are child-friendly]" (Interview – Participant 8). The NIPC participants also mentioned a need for "more opportunities of places where you can take your child" (Interview – Participant 4). In all three statements, NIPC interviewees stated that parents of young children were somewhat limited in activities in which they could participate community wide, and that inclusivity was an important support that they were looking for during this time. Because of this, the NIPC participants felt that limited access to these opportunities had inhibited their ability to participate in in their community to a greater degree, even if public resources may have been available to

them. In fact, lack of access to educational information had interfered with their ability to communicate with their older children in the same manner. As stated, one NIPC participant, the feedback from the class provided opportunities for us to improve, “opening our eyes to what we have missed” (Interview – Participant 8). This knowledge led to empowerment and allowed the participant to feel like they were able to intentionally change their behavior for the benefit of their youngest child. Another example of empowerment was reflected in a change from the pre-course survey results to the end of class behaviors of the NIPC participants. Specifically, upon enrollment to the parenting class, seven of the nine NIPC individual interviewees had self-reported low book reading prior to attending the class. However, at graduation the group star report showed that each family was consistently reading books to their young child throughout the week.

Notably, a few of the NIPC interviewees took their enthusiasm about the inclusivity and empowerment of the class a step further than the other embedded subunits of the case. After the class was over, a few of the NIPC members organized times when various members of their class subunit could get together to visit with each other again. In fact, the participants’ goal for the future was to continue to meet periodically as a group and to invite others from other subunits to recap on the strategies learned from the class. They felt that extended time together would help with accountability for enhancing parent-child communication. One NIPC participant stated their purpose of the extended group, “just show up...’who’s still doing the talking points?’ and everybody can talk about it...it’d be good because you’d still see people you went to class with each week, now you got this like, real community” (Interview – Participant 8). In this statement the interviewee showed the value that they gave to peer connection and also to peer accountability when attempting to use the newly learned conversational skills in the future. As stated by another participant, “it would be great if they had like, one level up for people who even had completed the first stage and wanted to dig deeper” (Interview – Participant 1). This statement confirmed the value that the class had been to this participant, but that additional opportunities would enhance effects of the class over a longer period of time.

Overall Case Findings

The overall description of the case includes the general demographic information of twenty-seven participants who enrolled in a self-selected parenting program in the southeastern USA. Additionally, case findings include the voices of twenty-six caregivers who completed the pre-class parent survey which detailed parent perceptions about communication styles, parenting self-efficacy, and educational collaboration. Twenty-one of these caregivers also completed an end of class feedback questionnaire, and three participants completed the participant artifact activity. Data was collected from the archived program documents of the community organization and was analyzed with descriptive coding procedures. Case data includes both self-reported data from the participants as well as objective data that was obtained from the LENA technological device via summary reports for each of the individual interview participants and details the daily snapshots of language performance data (e.g., adult words & conversational turns) that each participant had over the course of the parenting class. Ten of the enrolled participants also participated in an individual interview session. Interview transcripts and semi-structured questions from the end of course feedback program documents were analyzed using In Vivo coding procedures. Finally, a cross case synthesis was conducted to look at each of the six types of data collected across all three embedded subunits for an overall description of the findings which resulted in three thematic constructs for the case, *Accountability*, *Empowerment*, and *Inclusivity*.

Accountability

The case study investigation was designed to observe whether specific aspects of a ten-week parenting program influenced positive parent-child interactions or perceptions during the early childhood years. Study participants reported that the following aspects of the parent parenting program encouraged them to engage in positive communicative interactions with their child and to increase self-efficacy about their caregiver role, 1) visuals (e.g., LENA graphs), 2) verbal encouragement and 3) other verbal or tangible feedback that was given to the participants based on the data from the LENA graph summaries. Table 15 highlights a sampling of the responses from study participants. These responses are listed from the most reported aspects of the program to the least reported information reported and was taken from the archived program documents and the individual interview transcripts. A few of the participants

Table 15*Descriptive Codes for Behavior or Perception Motivators*

<u>Parent Preferences</u>	<u>Examples of Participant Responses</u>
1) Graphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m a visual person...I liked seeing, not the rise in numbers or the amount, but the change” • “big eye opener...you would think you were talking a lot...no you weren’t” • “it told more detail; having the times, shows you...when you’re communicating” • “you could see the improvement...an actual indicator that you were doing the work” • “knowing exactly at what time of the day we’re talking more or less” • “keeps you accountable...that you’re engaging with your child”
2) Verbal encouragement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “feedback on how to improve...opening our eyes to what we have missed” • “just being encouraging...we were thriving off of it” • Class teacher would tell them, “you’re on the right track; good job” • “calls...encouraging me to keep going” • “private” individualized feedback
3) Other feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receiving star stickers, “it’s something simple...oh yeah, we got three stickers, we’re three for three!” • “texts were refreshing” • Group feedback

mentioned that the overall positive atmosphere of the class was also instrumental in their personal decisions to take more risks or to attempt more back and forth conversations with their child throughout the week. Additional programmatic or curricular aspects of the parenting program mentioned by the

participants were the class videos, class discussions, the research-based evidence mentioned in the curriculum, and the free resources that were provided to them at the weekly sessions like children's books and free dinner from the local community organization.

The individual interview participants mentioned that four main aspects of the class motivated behavior change regarding early communication due to an accountability factor. First, caregivers mentioned that the class made them aware of the specific times of the day in which they could increase parent-child interactions. Certain aspects of the curriculum detailed daily routines that worked as a natural catalyst for communication; this aspect of the program provided real-life examples of when to talk with a young child. However, the LENA summary graph reports which were given to the individual parents each week, highlighted specific times of the day that individual or personal communication goals could be constructed. Findings highlight the fact that parents frequently commented on the effectiveness and accountability factor of the LENA recording summary sheets for their own learning which allowed them to develop additional back-and-forth communication opportunities in their natural environment. As one parent stated, "it told more detail; having the times, shows you...when you're communicating" (Interview – Participant 3). "Knowing exactly at what time of the day we're talking more or less" was mentioned by another parent about the LENA graph summary reports. In both instances, the parents commented on the specificity of the objective data and the importance that this aspect of the program had on their learning. Moreover, multiple parents commented that they appreciated the visual because it highlighted changes in communication from week to week. "I'm a visual person...I liked seeing, not the rise of numbers or the amount, but the change" (Interview – Participant 7). This comment highlighted the value that the caregiver had for knowing specifically how their own actions had influenced parent-child communication, as an accountability factor.

Empowerment

Class videos were specifically instrumental to many of the participants as they demonstrated how to implement the LENA talking tips into daily routines. As one parent stated, "I can actually see the process of how they do such" (Interview – Participant 2). Another caregiver stated that the videos

“explained it in more detail” (Interview – Participant 7). The video “shows you initially, this is how they’re doing it...gives you a comparison” said another caregiver (Interview – Participant 3). In all three statements from caregivers, they highlighted the value of the video demonstrations in their initial understanding of the information. This finding highlights the fact that visual and verbal information from the curriculum alone did not allow certain class participants to understand or visualize how to apply the skills to their own lives. However, it highlighted the fact that the video demonstrations provided multimodal information to caregivers who were processing it for the first time, or who have not had prior experience with these types of communication skills for one reason or another which empowered them to do the same things on their own.

Participants repeatedly mentioned the slogan from the parenting program in the interviews, “talk builds babies’ brains” (for more see, LENA Foundation website). Specifically, the caregivers mentioned that they learned about different ways to communicate with young children even if they aren’t using expressive words yet. As an example, one parent mentioned their recognition of babbling and parentese in the process of communicating with infants after attending the class. “The goo-goo, ga-ga’s, I always associated that with like, playing...but it’s just more than that” (Interview – Participant 8). This statement showed that this parent had a better understanding of communicative interactions that were crucial to language development, even if it wasn’t something that they had recognized as communication before attending the class. Along the same lines, another parent stated that they had originally joined the class because they were “trying to break the language barrier or communication barrier” that they were experiencing with their young child; however, after taking the class they mentioned that there was “not as much of a barrier as I thought, you just have to know what you are looking for” (Interview - Participant 7). In these two statements, the caregiver acknowledged that an important aspect of early communication is the importance of acknowledging all of the expressive communicative attempts that a young child uses early in life. Prior to the class, this participant had not realized that each of these early interactions had the potential to lead to future verbal conversations, but the interview transcripts and participant artifact showed that they now felt empowered to do so.

Finally, the participants commented on the fact that conversations were in fact, a back-and-forth exchange, “not one-sided communication...(it’s) holding the conversation and letting the child respond” (Interview - Participant 3). By acknowledging this fact, the parent realized that part of their job was to look and wait for these responses from their young child. Prior to attending the class, this was not understood, but now the parent had an empowered sense of action. Finally, as a whole, the participants from the case recognized that communication doesn’t begin when a young child has specific words or an understandable language with which to communicate. Instead, the participants commented on the fact that the class had taught them that it was crucial to start early in the child’s life, due to the malleability of the brain. Knowing this valuable information had empowered the caregivers to form personal goals for the short-term according to interview transcripts and conversations with the program staff, due to their realization that they were an active participant in their child’s future communicative success.

Inclusivity

Better understanding the reasons that parents and caregivers enroll in parent education classes is important topic for the educational and community stakeholders to understand. Without this knowledge, human capital or financial resources can be wasted on inefficient marketing or outdated recruiting methods. Moreover, since prior academic literature shows that attrition rates are typically high for parent education classes, it is important for interested stakeholders to better understand the reasons that individuals actually complete these types of courses. This case study investigated why interview participants enrolled in the parenting class, in addition to reasons that they stayed with the class until completion. Findings show that the enrolled participants were personally invited to the class by the director of the local organization as well as by friends, family members, and even strangers in the community. Regardless of who invited them to the class, caregivers specifically mentioned extrinsic and intrinsic reasons for enrolling in the parenting program as demonstrated in Table 16. While extrinsic

Table 16

Codes for Motivational Factors of Enrollment/Participation

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Extrinsic Resources or Supports	<u>Tangible</u> – free children’s books, free dinner, educational resources <u>Intangible Supports</u> – free childcare provided, free information
Intrinsic Reasons	<u>Personal curiosity</u> (e.g., about marketed course material, desire to improve parenting skills/aid in child’s language development or in their knowledge of child development) <u>Seeking Community</u> (i.e., peers with young children) <u>Seeking Support</u> (i.e., educational/professional, personal)

tangible factors were mentioned as reasons for the continuance of the parenting program by a couple of the parents, the majority of caregivers mentioned extrinsic intangible supports (e.g., accountability, group support) and other intrinsic motivations, such as personal learning goals as the most important reasons for continuing with the program until graduation. While the specific marketing and recruitment techniques of the organization were not investigated in detail, an interesting finding of the case was that each of the individual interview participants had been personally invited to attend the class by a familiar person in the microsystem or even a stranger from other systems of influence instead of through more indirect methods. In fact, while four of the participants were invited by a familiar person, six of the individual interviewees had been invited from members of the exosystem at a larger community event. This finding highlights the fact that a personal invitation weighed significantly on the adult participants’ decisions to take part in a self-selected parenting program, regardless of the delivery method of the class, and added to the importance the case finding of inclusivity.

Class discussions were also important learning opportunities for the participants. As stated by one parent, “hearing other parents...how other parents were using the talking tips...other perspectives” were important factors to increasing conversations with their young children, as well as making it more relatable to their own experiences (Interview – Participant 2). Another parent stated that discussions were valuable, “cause I can hear where everybody else goes to, with the process and what I can relate to”

(Interview – Participant 8). A third parent commented similarly, “different families would share what they would do; it would give me ideas of...what I can do in the future” as a new parent (Interview – Participant 10). Each of these statements described the value that the participants gave to other caregivers’ life experiences and perspectives as a part of a collaborative group. While the class’s content appeared to be interesting and informative to the participants in the interview transcripts and end of course feedback questionnaire, the personal and anecdotal information from peers helped participants to visualize their own behaviors for the future and aided in feelings of inclusivity for a group that was focused on early communication.

Systems of Influence on Early Communication

This case study was designed to investigate various systems of influences on a family’s early communication attempts using an ecological approach, both in the short-term and in the long term (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). When reviewing the participant created artifacts and interview transcripts, caregivers from the case reported that they utilized the following LENA Start ’14 Talking Tips’ in their natural environments, as seen in Table 17 (for more, see LENA Foundation). These tips were used during

Table 17

Top Five Utilized ’14 Talking Tips’

<u>LENA Start Tip</u> (listed in order of most parent responses)	<u>Description of Tip</u>
1	Talk about what you’re doing or thinking
2	Comment on what they’re doing or looking at
6	Tune in and respond to what they look at, do, say
10	Take turns – don’t do all the talking
5	Touch, hug, hold

daily routines, as a part of verbal conversations, when reading books, and while traveling to or discussing other common activities that were religious-based or recreational, such as going to church, the gym, or to

the park or other outdoor locations in the community. Prior to participating in the parenting class, only seven caregivers reported that book reading was a strategy that they used for early communication according to the pre-class survey, yet fifteen participants used language during daily routines. However, after the parenting class was over, multiple interviewees mentioned that they used books, and also that they had encouraged other members of the microsystem to do so, when possible. As stated by one parent, “when our family is in town...they read to him” (Interview – Participant 10). “My eight, er, nine-year-old daughter, she likes to read to her [young child] ...she points out all the things that are in the book which really helps” (Interview – Participant 3). Both parent statements demonstrated that language influence was impacted not only by books, but by other members of the microsystem.

Moreover, while the parenting class modeled the use of back-and-forth conversation during daily routines, the participants reported doing so while interacting with various systems of influence and in various locations that included that of the exosystem. While none of the individual interviewees mentioned specific cultural influences on early communication, per say, the participants from this case did not feel supported by the greater community or the macrosystem, as a system or mindset of the cultural importance that regarded communication with young children as important. This finding highlights the fact that while certain systems of influence may offer supports to parents and caregivers of young children, the overall attitude of the greater society can be felt in a nuanced manner. As one caregiver surmised, “it seems like people don’t know or don’t wanna talk to us [when with baby in public locations]...maybe if the community would talk back more, or respond to (baby’s name)” (Interview – Participant 9). In this statement, the caregiver shared the fact that they would feel more welcome and supported as a caregiver if attitudes were different in the greater society or the macrosystem. This finding, whether perceived or not, supported other comments from caregivers from the interview transcripts who felt that the larger community, in general, did not financially or physically support them as parent or caregivers of a young.

However, the parenting class environment provided by the exosystem, which included free resources such as children’s books and family dinner, actually sparked impromptu conversations for some

of the caregivers in the case; these resources and environment ultimately created more opportunities for caregivers to use their newly learned skills with their child over the course of the parenting session. While this was not a part of the actual parenting curriculum, the resources provided by the local organization created additional or alternate impromptu times in the caregivers' day for talking with their young child as well as an inclusive environment that supported this way of thinking. These unscripted opportunities also allowed the participants to receive positive encouragement or individualized feedback from the teacher or peers in a more natural setting, as opposed to the class setting, which helped them to feel more supported from the exosystem and ultimately, the greater macrosystem. Feelings of inclusivity led to further discussions about communication, as well as incidental modeling from the class facilitators or other parents in the group and resulted in parent empowerment for early communication.

Family Dynamics

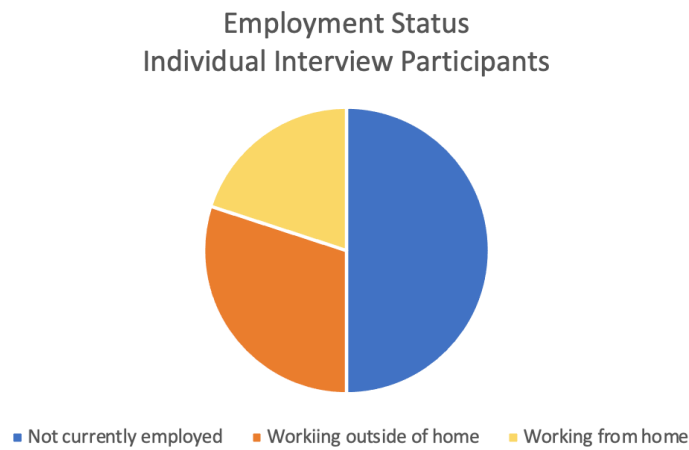
Interestingly, while the enrolled participants were diverse in regard to their education levels, racial demographics, languages spoken in the home, and SES levels, the participants who completed the individual interviews were not diverse in their specific make-up as a family unit or in other words, in their family dynamics which was a surprising finding for the case. Nine out of the ten individual interview participants were married to a spouse and all ten participants lived together full time and/or were cohabiting as a nuclear family unit, regardless of marital status. In fact, eight out of ten interview participants mentioned that their significant other had attended some or all of the classes with them, although they were not officially enrolled. In addition, eight of the individual interview participants had two or more children who lived with them full time and none of these participants were living separately (i.e., part-time) from any of their children. In the words of one participant, "they're always here" (Interview – Participant 2). In this statement, the parent confirmed the living status of their family unit, but also somewhat jokingly, insinuated that they didn't receive much of a break from their children or from childcare responsibilities, except when working outside of the home. It is possible that the enrolled participants from the larger group of twenty-seven participants fell into an alternate relationship or living status, but this information could not be determined from looking at the archived documents alone.

However, through my status as a volunteer for three of the parenting class sessions, I have personal knowledge that there were at least two enrolled caregivers who identified as single parents though the status of their family dynamics or living situations is unknown.

Of noteworthy importance regarding other external influences on this case, five of the individual interview participants mentioned that they were either affiliated with a branch of the military service or had a deployed spouse and were living away from extended family members. Another interviewee mentioned that their family was living a great distance from extended family due to their spouse's occupation, though the proximity to the microsystem for other participants' extended families could not be determined. This case finding highlights two factors of influence on early communication. First, due to distance from important members of the microsystem, six of the caregivers specifically mentioned that their nuclear family members were the only ones to use the LENA talking tips with their child on a regular basis. One of these participants mentioned that they had encouraged extended family to do so when visiting, but that this was infrequent. The second finding is that six of the interview participants had reached out for community support or guidance about early communication during the birth to three-year period from the exosystem, a system that may not have as many familiar people as the microsystem. In one parent's words, they joined the class because they were "seeking community" (Interview – Participant 2). Another interview participant who was not affiliated with the armed services mentioned that they were interested in "the whole networking thing, like a neighborhood community thing or group sessions with children" (Interview – Participant 7). Both caregivers' comments summarized the finding that support from other systems of influence was something that they were seeking. This finding also supported the pre-class survey findings that the majority of participants valued collaboration with peers when discussing parenting issues which had impacted their decision to enroll in the community's parent education class.

Employment Status

Five of the individual interview participants were employed by outside sources and worked either inside of their home from a distance or outside of the home, as designated by Figure 12.

Figure 12*Employment Status, Individual Interview Participants*

Study participants were employed in a variety of jobs and in different locations. Participants were members of the US Armed Services, worked in online retail markets, food preparation, or restaurant businesses, and also as an engineer. A few of these interviewees mentioned that their spouses also worked outside of the home which created a logistical challenge for managing childcare responsibilities, at times. On the end of course feedback responses, one participant mentioned that they had scheduled their LENA Start classes around their work schedule (e.g., lunch hour), but did not specifically name their job title.

Through my status as a visitor or volunteer for the organization, other employed caregivers mentioned that work schedules had determined which parenting class they could join. As stated by one parent, “I took the class on Mondays because it was literally the only day I could do it” (Interview – Participant 7). By stating this fact, the caregiver shared a snapshot of their busy life, demonstrating that their schedule was full of other responsibilities, in addition to their shared childcare duties. However, they had still chosen to participate in the parenting class. While other individual interview participants self-reported their status as unemployed, through conversation, the investigation showed that they were still responsible for providing daily childcare to the young children in their homes. At least one of these participants mentioned that while they were not employed financially, they were a leader and volunteer in

an older child's school which was located outside of the home. Another participant mentioned that while not employed, they homeschooled their older children in addition to providing childcare for their youngest child simultaneously. These findings, as well as the fact that each of the individual interview participants had simultaneous caregiving responsibilities during the interview sessions themselves, highlight the fact that caregivers often participate in multi-tasking activities which can affect their own personal goals for communication with a young child.

Parent Skills/Strengths

During the interviews, the caregivers did not directly discuss information about their parenting skills or strengths with the interviewer. However, when answering the alternate questions, the following skills and strengths rose to the surface of the interview conversations and were documented by the researcher. Multi-tasking skills, prior employment or earned degrees in child development or a previous work history in childcare situations were of noteworthy strengths. Additionally, prior knowledge of parenting (i.e., multiple children) was noted as a strength for various participants, but also an area of difficulty for others which was supported by the pre-class survey results. For example, at least three of the case's caregivers mentioned difficulty with a prior child's communication skills; this had led them to seek out information for their subsequent children which was a strength. Another strength noted was the use of critical reflection in regard to parenting skills or communication strategies. Each of the parents with multiple children mentioned wanting to improve their parenting skills as well as to increase their knowledge base about early communication; doing so would allow them to compare their parenting actions from previous children to that of their youngest child. Furthermore, resilience and perseverance were strengths noted by the researcher. At times, despite working or volunteering for long hours, having additional caregiving responsibilities in the home, juggling busy schedules, exercise, hobbies, and other home responsibilities with multiple family members, the participants had enrolled in the parent education class. In addition, more unique life situations or crises, such as a deployed spouse or death in the family were noted from the interview transcripts; however, these parents still met the graduation requirements and completed the ten-week parenting session; ten which also participated in the individual interview

session and three completed the participant artifact activity. This showed that they valued were able to use various organizational skills and as a result were able to accomplish multiple feats due to resilience.

When viewing the pre-class surveys, three other parenting strengths were noted. The first was the participants' willingness to collaborate with other parents in their community. Signing up for the class meant that the participants made sacrifices or had taken risks to improve their parenting skills. It also showed that the participants had an internal drive to seek out more information about early communication which was a notable strength. The second was the parents' keen use of observational skills to compare and discuss the developmental progress of other same-aged children with others. Participants noted that they used these observational skills to determine their actions and make future decisions according to the pre-class surveys and interview transcripts. Third, many of the parents had the knowledge and motivation to include other school pre-readiness skills (e.g., talking about present/past/future) or actions in their child's daily routines.

A notable finding was that these pre-readiness skills were not always obvious to all of the caregivers in the class. As stated by one parent, "we began to lower the music time and we started to talk to him more" (Interview – Participant 9). This finding highlighted the fact that the caregiver thought that music was more important than talking with their child at an early age. Another caregiver mentioned, "every time she did a lesson, we was like, A-ha!" (Interview – Participant 8). This quote highlighted the finding that caregivers were excited to learn new communication strategies to communicate with their young child. Finally, another caregiver mentioned the fact that the parenting class helped them to see that "there was a lot of TV time" (Interview – Participant 2). Because this parent was able to visualize the electronic noise in their household on the LENA summary graph, they were able to take action, make a personal goal, and try to achieve it which took determination and perseverance to change old habits. However, there were also factors that prevented the LENA '14 Talking 14 Tips' from being implemented in natural settings as noted in Table 18 (for more, see LENA Foundation).

Table 18

Codes for Preventative Factors of Early Communication

<u>Factors</u>	<u>Examples Mentioned by Study Participants</u>
Extrinsic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logistics of daily schedule & responsibilities (e.g., work, other family activities, multiple working parents/caregivers, etc.) • Work demands • Sharing of caregiver tasks (i.e., less time to spend with child) • Lack of opportunities (or accountability) in the larger community to interact with their young child in various types of environments (i.e., regular basis) • More repetition of information (i.e., in different ways) and/or hands-on practice implementing the tips was needed • Confusion about how program incentives worked (e.g., stickers)
Intrinsic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty with application of skills due to prior influences and/or modeling of communication/parenting skills • Lack of knowledge about child development or parenting skills • Reduced energy levels (i.e., due to wellness/mental health or other life responsibilities) • Forgetfulness (i.e., due to multiple responsibilities, or the fact that tips had not become habits/contrary to prior modeling) • Lack of empowerment (i.e., as child's caregiver/first teacher)

Short Term/Long Term Impact

Twenty-five of the study participants were enrolled in the parent education class for the first time. As a result, the information listed above highlights the short-term findings for case. However, two of the enrolled caregivers had previously completed and graduated from the LENA Start class with another child (e.g., 3 years prior, 2 years prior). The information from these participants allows the case to highlight some much-needed long-term data, albeit a small amount; this data also highlighted themes of accountability, empowerment, and inclusivity. When asked about why they were taking the class again, Participant Two mentioned that they had reenrolled for two reasons. First, they needed a refresher on the

information that had been provided, as well as consistent accountability for forming new habits of positive communication with their youngest child. “It was a reminder for me to pay attention to, to what I was doing and what I wasn’t doing...being more aware” (Interview – Participant 2). “I realized there was a lot of TV time” and as a result the parent could “do something outdoors that would involve more talking” (Interview – Participant 2). These comments highlight an important finding of the case and demonstrate that the caregiver chose to enroll in the same parenting class for a second time, due to the accountability, resources, and tools that were familiar to them or for resources that they had valued during their first enrollment. However, participant two also mentioned that inclusivity was an important factor for attending the class until completion again, as well as the main reason that they invited other parents of young children to join the group. When asked if they had told any of their friends about the program, the caregiver responded, “um, a friend of mine, another mother, um, because I knew that she was kind of seeking a community as well” (Interview - Participant 2). This statement supported the theme of inclusivity and demonstrated that being an accepted member of the group of parent peers was one of the motivational factors for rejoining and graduating from the parent education class for a second time.

Participant Six mentioned that they had enrolled in the class for a second time because their youngest child was not making the verbal progress that they had expected. Specifically, the participant mentioned that reenrolling would allow them to use the LENA technological device and to receive the visual LENA summary graph reports that were provided as a part of the program. “It shows you more of when you’re communicating the most and what you’re doing at that time; so it helps you to, uh, do better on the next go around...I always felt like I wanted to beat myself from the last print-out” (Interview – Participant 6). This comment highlighted the importance of the parenting program’s tools for this parent as they provided an important accountability factor for communicating with their young child, as well as a feeling of empowerment and external motivation to focus on early communication with a child who was struggling to communicate verbally. Participant Six went on to say, “if you want to improve, you should be able to receive constructive criticism” (Interview – Participant 6). In this case, the parent commented on the fact that they had received feedback in addition to the visual aid of the LENA graph summary

report which provided the necessary information they were looking for to aid in their back-and-forth communication attempts with the youngest child. However, when this participant was asked about recruiting future members for the class, they also mentioned inclusivity as an important recruitment tactic, “every mom has a ‘mom group’ ...invite them from that...invite a friend night and enjoy LENA; no pressure” (Interview – Participant 6). By stating this, the participant demonstrated that the group provided acceptance and belonging for caregivers of young children which was an important part of why they had attended the parent education session for a second time.

In the end, chapter four contributes to a better understanding of the topic by describing the case as a whole, as well as the individual embedded subunits of participants who were enrolled in a ten-week parent education class during the data collection period. The results highlight a comprehensive summary of six types of raw data for the case which clearly demonstrate the themes of accountability, empowerment, and inclusivity across all embedded subunits, both in the short-term and in the long-term, filling a gap in our knowledge about an important problem in education. A final analysis of the data, as well as the specific implications for educators, curriculum writers, and future researchers will be discussed in chapter five of this book.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Language is not learned in isolation, but in the dynamic homes and communities of young children and often with familiar adult caregivers and family members (Begus & Southgate, Bronfenbrenner, 2005; 2018; Jipson et al., 2018; Neal & Neal, 2013; Saylor & Ganea, 2018). As a result, research has highlighted the importance of guiding and supporting the entire family as a unit during this crucial time of development (Eply et al., 2010; Dunst, 2000; Morris et al., 2020). While the topic of parent education has been investigated to some degree with quantitative research designs, the focus of these studies was on the young child's short-term developmental progress instead of on the insights and perceptions of the adult parents and caregivers who attended the classes. Without this knowledge, community stakeholders, curriculum writers, educators, and researchers can only make conjectures about what resources are needed to support this population of adults as they raise the next generation of students (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). To investigate a complex phenomenon in early childhood related to parent education, I highlighted the missing voices of parents and caregivers who enrolled in a self-selected parent education class to answer the following research questions using a qualitative interpretative approach, 1) In what ways if any, do specific aspects (e.g., course materials, feedback) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions of a parent's role in early childhood? 2) What reasons do parents' (or caregivers') cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old? 3) How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term? In chapter five, I will discuss the educational significance of the study's main findings, as well as the implications for educators, researchers, and other community stakeholders who aim to improve access and services for families with young children during the first three years of life. I will conclude the chapter by noting the limitations of the case study design as well as the current gaps in our knowledge about parent education that may need to be investigated in the future.

Drawing upon Bioecological Systems Theory (BST) and the Andragogical model of Adult Learning Theory (ALT), the study was designed to investigate the multiple realities of adult caregivers who had chosen to enroll in a parent education class on the topic of early communication (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Knowles et al., 2020). To better understand a parent's perceptions about the caregiver role and also their motivations for enrolling in and completing a parent education class, I framed the study's questions on a capacity building intervention model, or a family systems approach (FSA) which acknowledged that families with young children have a variety of strengths, priorities, and resources that could aid them in early communication with their child (Dunst & Trivette, 2009) BST, ALT, and a FSA supported a qualitative design and helped to frame the investigation by acknowledging the complexity of human development and the learning process, as well as multiple systems of influence that impact a person's experiences, motivations, interest, and agency in the process. Furthermore, BST, ALT, and a FSA allowed me to investigate how multiple stakeholders or systems of influence could positively impact, support, and enhance "the households' ability to survive and thrive" outside of the formalized school settings (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). Finally, investigating the perceptions of adult caregivers who self-selected to enroll in a parenting class allowed me to research an important gap in the published literature and to highlight their preferences for learning as well as any barriers that this population of adults might face during the first three years of life to improve retention rates for future parenting classes. From an epistemological standpoint, I viewed the phenomenon as a complex problem in education, one that would need to be investigated by searching out the many 'truths' of a caregiver's life experiences, situations, perceptions, and beliefs (Paul, 2005). The qualitative approach ensured that, from the researcher standpoint, I would not make assumptions about what these caregivers' realities might be or the systems of influence that could potentially play an important role in supporting them on this journey.

Methods

The study was designed to investigate whether specific barriers or supports affected early parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions about their role during the early childhood years over a ten-

week period. In addition, the study specifically observed whether multiple systems of influence had the potential to impact a child's language acquisition or communication skills in natural environments before reaching school age, as well as an adult caregiver's ability to participate in education programs during the formative years. Most of the previously published literature on the topic of parent education has followed a quantitative design and has focused on caregivers who were referred to or mandated to complete such programs due to the fact that their child was at-risk for one or more areas of development. As a result, the final research reports focused on the child's developmental progress after the caregiver had completed the education program instead of on the parents' perceptions about the process (Caron et al., 2015).

Consequently, a qualitative design was utilized to fill a gap in the academic literature on the types of investigations that have been carried out on the topic of parent education and to better highlight caregiver voices about their needs and priorities during the early childhood years. An interpretative approach allowed me to explore and better understand the perceptions of adult caregivers, as well as the potential impact that parent education could have on language development or early communication, areas that prior research has shown to improve school readiness, academic performance, and social skills (Beecher & Van Pay, 2021; Gilkerson et al., 2018; Gunderson & Levine, 2011; Patel et al., 2021; Suskind et al., 2016).

More importantly, previous research on parent education reported on the findings of this topic with a somewhat limited population of caregivers. With the exception of two studies by Breitenstein and colleagues (2013) and Wilson and colleagues (2016), a comprehensive literature review on the subject of parent education showed that the previous findings on parent education reported on a narrow population of participants who were defined as middle to upper class females who were not employed outside of the home. As a result, our knowledge on the topic of parent education to date has been somewhat skewed by these homogeneous perceptions of caregivers, as compared to other topics of study, such as parent intervention (Suskind et al., 2016). The study design and the inclusion of three embedded subunits for this case allowed me to research the perceptions of caregivers whose lifestyles would potentially be different from those previously published on the topic. The embedded subunits, which were

based on the delivery method of the parent education classes and the times of the day at which they were offered, allowed for a variety of caregivers to participate, including working parents, parents from a variety of SES levels, races, and genders. In the end, the embedded subunits also helped to strengthen the internal validity and the trustworthiness of the overall case (Yin, 2018).

Description of the Bounded Case and Context

The single embedded case study was bound first, by an early childhood focused community organization in a large Southeastern city of the USA whose focus was to improve the school readiness of the young children in the community. Second, the context of the case itself was bound within the larger community organization on one facet of the program's outreach, a group parent education program that was provided free of charge to families with young children, ages birth to 3-years-old. This context bounded on the LENA Start parenting program included parenting classes in public locations around the city and also included an online virtual context due to COVID-19 precautions (for more, see LENA Foundation, LENA Start). Five separate, yet almost identical sessions of the parenting program, were offered to parents of young children during the fall and winter/early spring months of 2021 and 2022 and focused on the topic of positive early interactions. Each parenting session was ten weeks in length, utilized the same LENA Start parent curriculum, had the same requirements for graduation (i.e., listed below) as well as the same parent educator who used a scripted instructor's guide to lead each session.

Graduation Requirements of Parenting Class

Within the boundary of the case, ninety percent, or twenty-seven out of thirty caregivers of young children completed a self-selected parenting program in a Southeastern city in the USA and met the somewhat rigorous requirements for graduation to do so. Graduation requirements included the following actions by the enrolled parents or caregivers, 1) participants filled out an enrollment/intake form prior to entering the program, 2) participants had perfect attendance for the first four classes offered during the ten-week course and also, 3) had an overall 80% individual attendance record over the ten-week period. In addition, participants had to 4) complete a minimum of six daily, individual recordings or audible snapshots of the family's parent-child communications in their natural environment. These recordings

included a twelve-hour minimum period of time during the young child's typical waking hours, not counting naps or other normal sleeping patterns, using the LENA technological device (for more, see LENA Foundation, technology). Finally, 5) parents or caregivers were required to answer questions on three occasions using a developmental milestone screening document that consisted of parent-reported data about their child's early communication milestones.

Make-up class sessions were available to participants if a class session was missed and were offered via in person, phone recap, or Zoom meeting delivery. In addition, participants were required to exchange their individual recording devices with staff members at the community organization's local office, or at another predetermined location, such as a public building or at the class's location, prior to attending the subsequent week's session. Parent participants were also encouraged to complete additional program documents, but these were not mandatory for class graduation. These documents included a pre-class parent survey of twelve multiple choice or Likert scaled questions and an end of course feedback questionnaire that consisted of thirteen multiple choice or semi-structured questions. The pre-class survey was completed on a piece of paper and the end of course feedback was submitted electronically on the last day of the course.

As mentioned above, parents were required to record a weekly snapshot of their parent-child interactions using the LENA technological device (for more, see LENA foundation, technology). While eight recording days were offered to all participants over the course of the ten-week period, user misunderstanding or misuse of the LENA technological device such as, inserting the device backwards into the child's vest or wearing the device in an extremely loud environment, and technological malfunctions were taken into consideration and resulted in the fact that only six recordings were required for graduation. Finally, it is important to note that while each of the graduation requirements had a specific purpose in the overall objective of the class's curriculum/program, the sheer number of requirements for graduation is mentioned in this section to show the level of engagement and dedication that each of the caregivers from this study put forth over a ten-week period to learn more about early

communication. This information adds to the descriptive data of the case and begins to paint a picture of the enrolled participants for the qualitative investigation.

Description of Study Participants

The bounded case included data from a total of twenty-seven participants who completed the parenting class, in some capacity, via archived program documents and indirect participation. Twenty-six of these participants filled out the pre-class parent survey and twenty-one filled out the end of course feedback questionnaire. Ten of these caregivers also volunteered to directly participate in the individual interview sessions either during their enrollment in the parent education class (i.e., beginning at week 6 or later) or after the parent class session was completed. Three of these participants also created a participant artifact as a form of expression.

The study participants from this case had more diverse characteristics than have been previously reported in studies focused on parent education regarding their working status, race, SES level, and number of languages spoken in the home with two exceptions (Breightenstein et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2013). As a result, this fills a void in the academic literature by successfully highlighting the voices from parents of color, parents of various genders who were from various SES levels, and who also utilized various languages in their home. While one might argue that the participants from the case could be have had more diverse characteristics in some regard, the convenience sampling of the bounded organization mimicked the population of the city in which it was conducted and allowed for all twenty-seven participants' voices to be heard and documented, even if direct participation was not possible. By not limiting the participation to a specific demographic group, cultural group, or to those with the means to participate (e.g., due to transportation, employment status, finances, etc.) the study highlights a variety of caregivers from different walks of life that may experience resources or supports from different systems of influence as caregiver. While the findings of this case are not generalizable to the entire population of parents or caregivers, the findings share insights for future educators, curriculum writers, and community stakeholders to consider when attempting to meet the needs of today's families with young children.

Data Collection & Analysis

A qualitative research design allowed for six types of datum to be collected from the fall and spring semesters of the 2021-2022 academic school year to best describe the case and to properly highlight the voices of parents with young children who enrolled in parent education during the fall and winter/early spring months. Both Institutional Review Board and city-specific approvals were obtained prior to the collection of any data. Active data collection for the study commenced on March 1st and was completed by May 31st. A combination of archived program documents from the community organization, individual interview transcripts, and participant created artifacts were collected for the single embedded case study. Archived program documents included a pre-course parent survey of twelve questions (e.g., multiple choice, Likert scale) that detailed the perceptions of caregivers regarding language usage with their young child, parenting self-efficacy, and peer collaboration prior to enrollment. Additionally, LENA Start enrollment/intake forms were collected which included general demographic data (e.g., race, highest level of education attained) about the program's enrollees. Moreover, weekly LENA graph summary reports were collected which detailed objective information about the individual interview participants' parent-child communications over the course of the parenting program. The weekly LENA graph summary reports (LGSR) were obtained via the LENA technological recording device, a tool that recorded twelve hours of auditory information over the course of the participant's day, one time per week over the course of the parenting class and for a minimum of six recordings (for more, see LENA foundation, technology). The summary report detailed the number of adult words and parent-child interactions that had taken place by the participants and their young child over the course of twelve hours. Finally, the archived program documents included the results from an End of Course Feedback Questionnaire (e.g., multiple choice, semi-structured questions) from the community organization.

Convenience sampling was utilized with all enrolled caregivers during the fall and winter/early spring parenting education sessions to recruit participants for the individual interview sessions using an IRB approved letter via email, text message, or in-person delivery, in addition to alternate family member or caregivers who were listed on the organization's program documents. This ensured that all recorded caregivers had the same opportunity to share their voices about parent education or early communication.

Individual interviews included twenty-two semi-structured individual questions were posed to these participants via email, phone conversation, Zoom meeting, or in-person setting and lasted approximately twenty minutes in length. Lastly, a participant artifact activity (i.e., draw/sketch) was offered to all interview participants and to highlight the participants' understanding of early communication with their child in an alternate manner to promote the acceptance of different forms of expression (Hooks, 2004).

Analysis of the data was performed separately for each embedded subunit by research question and then holistically to best describe the case and to compare the subunits for similarities or differences of significance (Yin, 2018). A combination of two elemental coding procedures were used during the case analysis to increase the validity of the study and to compare multiple kinds of data in a cohesive manner (Miles et al., 2020; Saldaña, 2021). Descriptive coding was utilized on the four types of archived program documents and on the participant created artifacts. In Vivo coding was used on the individual interview transcripts and on the semi-structured questions of the end of course feedback responses. These procedures allowed me to look closely at both the embedded subunits of the case and to perform a cross-case synthesis which would best describe my interpretations of the case as well as the overall findings (Yin, 2018).

Discussion

The main findings include three themes of support that the parent education context appeared to have provided for the caregiver participants of this case, *Accountability*, *Empowerment*, and *Inclusivity*. Table 19 details an overview of the cross-case synthesis of interpretations that attempted to answer the above-mentioned research questions about caregivers who enrolled in a self-selected parent

Table 19

Cross Case Synthesis of Embedded Subunits

Embedded Subunit	Accountability	Empowerment	Inclusivity
DVC	Visuals (e.g., LENA summary graph reports	Educational Information	Shared common goal with peers in the group

	w/ specific times of day, LENA vest)	Verbal feedback & encouragement Video demonstrations	
NVC	Required attendance over extended period (i.e., with focus on communication) Visuals (e.g., LENA summary graph reports w/ specific times of day, LENA vest)	Educational Information Group Discussions Resources (e.g., children's books) Verbal feedback Video demonstrations	Seeking membership & networking of like-minded group of peers
NIPC	Group Interactions Visuals (e.g., LENA summary graph reports w/ specific times of day)	Educational Information Group Discussions Resources (e.g., children's books, free dinner & childcare) Verbal feedback & encouragement	Flexibility Positive welcoming atmosphere (i.e., young children welcome) Shared common goal with peers in the group

education class. The following sections detail the results and interpretations of this cross-case synthesis, as framed on BST, ALT, and a FSA and demonstrate the resources, supports, and barriers to early communication and access to parent education as reported by the participants. Following the thematic interpretations are two final sections of the chapter that detail the unexpected findings of the case, as well as the implications and significance for today's community stakeholders, curriculum writers, educators, and researchers whose goal is to better support families with young children and to provide access to more equitable opportunities during the early childhood years.

Accountability

The weekly LENA graph summary reports (LGSR) provided by the parenting program enhanced caregiver accountability for early communication over the ten-week period by providing visual and tangible snapshots of information about the hourly parent-child interactions that had occurred over a one-day period. This timely and consistent weekly feedback, sent via text message (i.e., approximately 1 day

after device was given back to organization) and later paper copy, provided accountability for the participants in multitude of ways. First, the LGSR displayed objective data that was recorded by the LENA technological device and processed by the associated program's algorithm. This data was void of potentially biased interpretations that a human being might give, yet also gave specific information about the times of the day that the caregivers were using one- or two-way communication with their child. In essence, the tool provided a visual representation of the caregivers' talking or communicative attempts with their young child and detailed the specific, hourly increments of time that this had occurred. Across all subunits, the participants of the case mentioned that this tool provided accountability for them and helped them to better understand their actual communication, as seen in Table 20. Because they had personal knowledge of their daily activities, the tool also allowed them to

Table 20

Accountability via LGSR

Caregiver Comments about LGSR	Type of Accountability	Implications based on Interview Transcripts
"you get a head count of how many words you are actually speaking; this way you can help them"	Visual	Goal setting
"what helped me was to write down [personal goals] around the time frames"	Visual	Action to improve future communication
"getting a conversational turn from them [older child] is way more evident; it's easier to see and hear compared to a newborn...[LGSR] was a big eye-opener...you would think you were talking a lot; no you weren't"	Visual	Realization
"knowing exactly at what time of the day we're talking more or less"	Visual	Realization
"it told more detail; having the times shows you when you're communicating"	Visual	Action to improve future communication
	Visual	Realization; action to improve future communication

"I'm a visual person. I liked seeing, not the rise in numbers or the amount, but he change [based on knowledge of day's activities]"	Visual	Reinforcement of actions
"You could see the improvement; it was an actual indicator that you were doing the work"	Visual	Realization; action to improve future communication
"I noticed the times of the day I where I wasn't talking much. It helped me improve"		

set personal goals for future communication. This finding supports the ALT framework by demonstrating that caregivers who were ready and motivated to learn about early communication, made new personal goals based on the information received from the program, essentially putting knowledge into action (Freire, 1996; Knowles et al., 2020). Moreover, because the information was given directly to the caregivers via text message, participants could view and process the information in the privacy of their own homes, if they desired, before meeting with the facilitators or peers and ask questions about it later. Participants were able to use their prior knowledge of their daily routines to form these questions which also supported the Andragogy in Practice Model of ALT, by showing that adult learners bring a variety of experiences to learning contexts. In fact, some of the interview participants mentioned that they would bring specific questions to their peers or to facilitators at the next class demonstrating attempts at individual growth, supporting the nested approach to learning in ALT which includes individual situational differences or needs as a part of motivation to learn. These specific inquiries may not have happened if the information had only been given to participants during in the public group sessions. As supported by one participant's comment, "I enjoyed that they [teacher] went over it [LGSR] with us in class or before class and always answered our questions" (Interview – Participant 10).

Three of the interviewees also mentioned the LGSR as accountability in the form of intrinsic personal competition. After viewing the LGSR, they mentioned, "I've got to step it up more [talking/communicating]" (Interview – Participant 1). Finally, the LGSR allowed the class participants' interest and motivations about early communication to be piqued, resulting in the creation of new parent-child interaction goals, with the asking of more questions, or increased wonderings about the topic. This

accountability was individual to each participant and could be interpreted by each caregivers' prior experiences, educational background, and to the newly acquired information from the class, which was an important tenet of the ALT. If warranted, the case participants were able to adjust their actions or lifestyle choices based on their personal communication goals, family priorities, or needs. In Vivo codes demonstrated that the hourly times noted on the LGSR gave the caregivers specific information to alter their daily actions, if necessary, or to improve the natural environment's environment in ways that promoted more positive communications. Participants mentioned that the times increased agency in turning-off electronic distractions or attempting to engage in more conversations at a specific time of the day. This supported the frameworks of ALT and FSA by showing that the adult caregivers from this case were able to change their behavior due to the LGSR which allowed them to evaluate their own progress and to do so based on their individual or family's priorities (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Knowles et al., 2020). Without the LGSR and the educational information from the parenting class, this may have been more difficult to do. In the end, the LGSR provided participants with a week-to-week objective look at the changes that had taken place in their lives, based on their own actions, and also provided participants with interim accountability or encouragement between sessions. When comparing the participants' comments to their LGSR results, it confirmed their efforts in this regard.

While the visual accountability factor was by far the greatest response from the caregivers in this case, personal accountability was also mentioned as an important factor by some of the participants. The parent education class provided a context that allowed the participants to be held accountable to other human beings in an extrinsic manner, in this case to their peers. In Vivo codes showed that attending the group sessions was an important accountability factor for the caregivers across all subgroups in addition to the two caregivers whose information showed more long-term implications of the class that will later be discussed in conjunction with the third theme of inclusivity. This supports ALT in addition to Flint and colleagues (1999) notion, that discussions and group or teamwork add to adult learning and add to the considerations noted by Knowles and colleagues (2020) regarding more culturally responsive practices. While personal accountability was important to all participants, two parents specifically mentioned that

they continued with the educational program until graduation due to the personal accountability that it provided them each week.

Empowerment

The parenting program provided educational information for parents of young children and many “a-ha moments” according to Participant 8, supporting ALT’s tenet that adults use prior knowledge to filter new information that is received (Knowles et al., 2020). These realizations, whether new ideas or reminders of previous skills learned, aided parents with early communication by providing a sense of empowerment according to the individual interview transcripts and end of course feedback questionnaire. In Vivo codes highlighted various ways that the parent education class provided a sense of empowerment for the participants. First, the class videos were valued across all embedded subunits of the case. The videos gave valuable visual demonstrations of the two-way communication following the instruction of each session and highlighted real parents (i.e., not actors) who had young children at different stages of development. The videos also highlighted parents from a variety demographics, stages of life, and living situations which helped parents relate to the task of communicating with their child during the day. As one parent stated,

“It doesn’t necessarily come naturally for somebody to talk to a baby; so then you add those classes and those videos, and it’s showing you *how* to talk to your baby...the videos definitely helped because the teacher will say, ‘okay talk to your baby while cooking,’ but then the video will *show* you talking to your baby while cooking, and now I have an example of talking, on what you do when you cook dinner (Interview – Participant 5).

In essence, class participants were able to observe other parents on the video, authentically using the skills that were introduced during weekly sessions, in the context of daily routines, and also in a variety of naturalistic settings (i.e., kitchen, park, living room, crossing the street) which provided positive motivation for some of the case’s participants to try the same strategies at home. This supports ALT and Caine and colleagues’ (2009) statements that positive motivations impact learning and agency. As seen in the above-mentioned comment, videos helped case participants vicariously relate to the early

communication of other parents which empowered them to do the same with their own children. In Vivo codes showed that these videos provided a demonstration or a way to see the new skill in action for many of the participants; this made the skills seem more relatable to their lives, even if they had not experienced the same type of communication modeling throughout their own lives which supported ALT and the fact that adults bring unique learning experiences to learning situations which can be supported by a variety of learning strategies in adult education (Knowles et al., 2020).

Finally, class participants were also encouraged to actively analyze the videos for specific communication strategies from the curriculum (i.e., LENA Talking Tips) and also for areas that could be improved upon, from their perspective. This strategy led to discussions which aided some of the participants to better understand or transact with an understanding about the reality of early communication supporting ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). The videos also served as discussion prompts for the weekly class sessions and encouraged participants to comment on and apply certain pieces of information that they had taken away from the video and class session. In essence the discussion groups created a safe space for participants to talk about and process what they had learned individually, but also collectively. In Vivo codes showed that participants across all subunits benefitted from one another's perspectives adding to a sense of empowerment about parent-child interactions. The videos challenged the participants to compare their own daily routines with those in the videos, as an initial way of applying the new information to their own situation supporting ALT's premise that adults scaffold new information to prior experiences. For example, one of the videos had a father reading a book to a 3-year-old while also holding an infant. The participants in the class session who had multiple children made a connection to this video due to the multi-tasking nature of the father's actions and mentioned its value to them in the interviews. One participant mentioned that they enjoyed watching the videos with peers because they could hear how the more experienced parents would handle the communicative situation. This aided them in thinking about how they might handle a similar situation in the future with their own child who was younger. As stated by another participant, "the class videos [were beneficial], cause I can actually see the process of how they do such, and I would also say the discussions, cause I can hear where everybody else

goes [with their understandings or application of the information]” (Interview – Participant 7). This led to feelings of empowerment with the new material, especially if the communication strategies were new to the caregiver. Interestingly, two of the fathers in the study mentioned that they had misunderstood or misinterpreted their child or children’s attempts at expressive communication prior to enrolling in the class. The knowledge learned from the class led to empowerment by helping them to realize some of the crucial observatory signals that they had missed before enrolling in the class. This demonstrated that their ability to better recognize their child’s early intentional communications and to follow these up intentionally appeared to be directly related to the fact that each had begun to process this new information based on prior experiences, as mentioned in ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). As stated by one of the participants,

“man, we really missed that with our first two...like the stuff we missed or barely caught, now we like, actually see what they was saying about conversational turns...you don’t really know what they’re [baby] saying when they’re responding to you, and it’s doing more for them [baby], trying to stay in and talk to them...that was like, the big, the biggest gem that I took from the class” (Interview – Participant 8).

In making this statement, the participant recognized the information learned as a valuable piece of information that they were now attempting to apply in their natural environment with a subsequent child due to a new sense of empowerment.

Finally, the context of the parent education class enhanced opportunities for the caregivers to receive support in the form of encouragement. In Vivo comments highlighted the positive atmosphere of the parenting class, as well as the positive words or verbal praise that participants received for their communication efforts from both peers and class facilitators both of which support the role of the environment as important factors for learning in ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). The interview transcripts highlighted that these factors led to feelings of empowerment for the participants. In essence, by being honest about their own parenting successes or fails, the participants were empowered to take risks with early communication and showed agency in a prioritized family or personal goals throughout the week, as

mentioned as a strategy in FSA (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). In Vivo codes also highlighted positive personal kudos in the form of tangible stickers as empowering for some of the participants. “Stickers, it sounds, so, so childish” said one parents (Interview - Participant 5). Yet, not receiving the small reward of a sticker was a discouragement to other parents as mentioned in the interview transcripts. Interestingly, some of the caregivers proudly displayed their sticker sheets in their household or told their friends or family members how many they had accumulated over the course of the class. The sticker represented an accomplishment, something that the parents could be proud of, as well as their attempts at implementing back and forth communication in their natural environments. In essence, the stickers were a visual reminder of a personal goal that had been met, whether it was to add book reading to their day, the singing of more songs, or just talking during times that they were usually quiet, such as in the car. As stated by one of the parents, “it was refreshing to like, get a star” (Interview – Participant 8). In the end, while not all of the participants mentioned the use of stars as valuable them personally, this finding adds to our knowledge about the value of receiving a visual/tangible form of feedback in regard to adult empowerment and should not be overlooked by those who are attempting to support parents of young children during the birth to three years, further supporting brain research on motivations for learning and as noted in ALT (Caine et al., 2009; Knowles et al., 2020).

Inclusivity

Caregivers enrolled in the parenting class out of a general curiosity about early communication, because they were experiencing personal difficulties communicating with their young child, or due to their newly attained status of a parent of a young child. This case finding directly supports the tenets of ALT which notes that adult learners engage in educational situations for personal reasons that are often spurred on by a crisis or a novel situation (Knowles et al., 2020). However, general knowledge about early communication was not the only reason that the participants enrolled in the group parenting class. In Vivo codes highlighted the fact that the caregivers from this case were seeking support in other forms. Specifically, participants cited the need for support in the form of other human beings, such as peers or other professionals. The In Vivo word that was used multiple times by participants across the embedded

subunits was community. Participants were seeking a community of support to learn with, to converse with, and to network with about early communication, one that valued their role as an adult caregiver and learner according to ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). While the data collection period took place shortly after the larger societal COVID-19 social distancing period, only one caregiver mentioned the global pandemic in their interview responses. Each subunit of participants regardless of class subunit/delivery method, showed that they valued the new group of peers which had essentially formed in the context of the parent education class. Prior to the parent class, the caregivers of young children in this bounded case felt “isolated” (Interview – Participant 1) and were “craving” (Interview – Participant 5) emotional, peer, professional, and educational support, in addition to other tangible resources from the exosystem. In essence, parent participants were longing for their village in an ever increasing individualized and sometimes transient society (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Clinton, 2006). Participants from this case perceived a lack of support from the greater macrosystem or society in multiple ways, as a result of their status of a caregiver of young children as shown by In Vivo codes from the individual interview transcripts. Consequently, the magnetic pull of inclusivity with peers and professionals from a like-minded group brought them together in the context of the parenting class. This supports ALT in that the climate of learning is extremely important to adult learners as well as BST which highlights the fact that relationships between systems of influence are important for overall support (Knowles et al., 2020). Interestingly, the graduates of the parenting program were found to be the organization’s best advocates for future recruitment, as all but one of the case’s participants appeared to have been highly vested in the program. This was noted in the individual interview transcripts as well as in the end of feedback questionnaire data but was also seen in the actions of each of the individual interviewees’ as they each made it a personal quest to continue to invite and include more caregivers to the parent class.

Furthermore, interview data showed that the participants were invited to attend the parenting class by various members of the microsystem as well as by members from the greater exosystem. Invitations were extended by familiar friends and family members, from the staff members of the local community organization, as well as from strangers in the neighborhood or larger community (i.e., who had previously

taken the class). Public events were the context of many of these personal invitations and were often sponsored by local community organizations, such as schools, libraries, or other early childhood focused groups (e.g., WIC), in addition other public spaces in the community such as a local recreational park. However, regardless of *who* invited them to the class, the In Vivo codes from the interview transcripts noted the importance the personal invitation in the process; this appeared to be a crucial part of the decision-making process for the participants to enroll in the parenting class according to the interview transcripts. In fact, feelings of inclusivity to a group of like-minded peers was important to the participants of this case, especially because many of them did not feel welcome or included in the larger community when their young child was present. As supported by one of the interviewees' comments, "we're all moms; we're all in this together" (Interview – Participant 3). This comment showed that the collaboration of peers' experiences and similar situations was important to the adult caregivers in the case as a form of inclusivity.

In the end, the flexibility of the class appeared to be the glue that held this type of inclusive learning environment together over the ten-week period which supports one of the main premises of Andragogy in ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). Flexibility for arrival times allowed for the complicated lifestyles of parents and caregivers to converge each week and fostered personal and communal learning to take place without judgement. The flexibility fostered inclusivity and feelings of self-efficacy of the adult caregiver role according to interview transcripts since caregivers were encouraged to participate in ways that made them feel comfortable, using their cultural lens or experiences, in a safe space that enhanced discussions and community to occur. If community and inclusivity are truly some of the missing pieces of the puzzle for creating more equitable opportunities in early childhood, educators and other community stakeholders must do a better job of communicating their support to this population of caregivers through the greater macrosystem as well as in the exosystem. However, feelings of inclusivity and belonging cannot be accomplished by words alone. Adequate physical resources must be in place in all public facilities that service families with young children which demonstrate an unwritten sense of inclusivity. In addition, opportunities and activities must be present and easily accessible in the

community to welcome families with young children and in a variety of locations. In doing so, the various systems of influence can provide a context for the networking and collaboration that were seen as a valuable part of the parenting class for this case and support prior research on the topic of parent partnerships (Epstein, 2013).

In the end, while this study was completed at the tail end of a COVID-19 social distancing time period, many of the barriers or issues mentioned by the participants do not appear to be caused by the pandemic but were only heightened for parents of young children which supports the literature on this time period (Gregory, 2020; Kaiper-Marquez, 2020; Martin, 2020; Miller, 2020; Darling-Hammond, 2020; for more, see *Growing up poor in America*). The sentiment of isolation was mentioned across all embedded subunits of the interview transcripts in regard to their status as caregiver of a young child. This raises a red flag of awareness for all stakeholders who value the next generation's ability to function successfully in society. In the words of one of the participants, "share with us, communicate with us, support us" (Interview – Participant 4). In stating this so passionately, the caregiver highlighted things that parents of young children from this case were looking for, at least in the context parent education classes, and inclusivity was at the heart of the matter.

Implications

The parenting class was a bridge for parents of young children, connecting them with new information, current research, and a network of support (e.g., professionals, peers, educational tools, feedback) to enhance their ability as a child's communication partner filling a gap in previous research on these topics (McCurdy & Daro, 2001; Moll et al., 1992). The positive and inclusive class environment provided new information, or the reminder of previously learned information for some, about communication and invoked new ways of thinking, changes in behavior, and a new outlook on the caregiver role regarding early parent-child conversations based on family priorities, as well as accountability according to In Vivo and descriptive codes supporting ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). The visual tools of the education class helped participants to better understand the importance of two-way

conversations in natural environments and provided tangible accountability for them over the course of the class, as demonstrated by the interview participants' performance graphs in Figures 13 and 14.

Figure 13

Individual Interview Participants' LGSR Adult Words

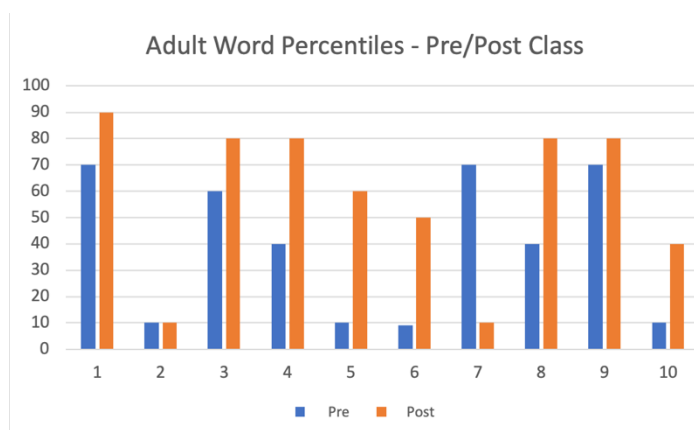
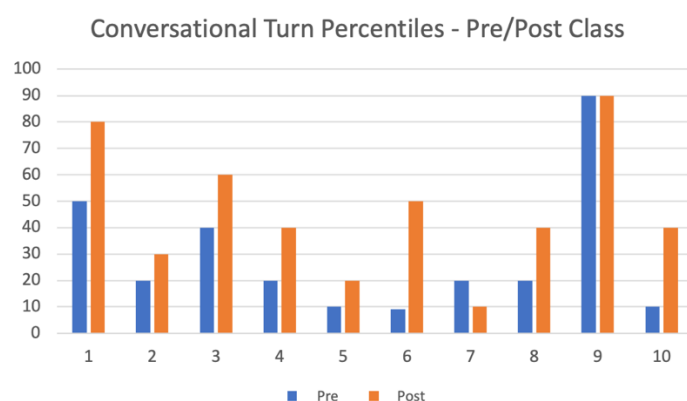


Figure 14

Individual Interview Participants' LGSR Parent-Child Interactions



While the class aided the majority of participants to increase in adult words and also in two-way conversations, In Vivo codes highlighted the fact that the supports and resources received in the class also helped participants to better understand the malleability of a young child's brain and gave them a sense of

empowerment in their role of caregiver, as an important communication partner for young children which led to agency and goal setting based on family priorities supporting FSA. Parents from different education and SES levels alike commented on the value of the information learned from the class, noting parent empowerment as one of the key take-aways from the class. This was seen in both the In Vivo codes, as well as in the participant-created artifact expressions. As summarized by two of the participants, “We help our babies’ brain grow...that’s as simple as communicating with them, talking” (Interview – Participant 3). “When you [caregiver] put in the time, they thrive” (Interview – Participant 10). Both comments highlight the fact that parent empowerment was an important aspect of the parent education class for these participants in addition to others across all embedded subunits.

Positive Influences That Promote Two-Way Communication

Caregivers from the case used four main LENA Start tips in their natural environment during daily routines to enhance back-and-forth communication. The tips and skills utilized most frequently by the study participants were ones that the participants had heard of (or utilized) before enrollment in the class. Moreover, the tips that were easier to assimilate for the individual interviewees were the ones that came naturally or were easier to incorporate into their daily routine or current cultural practices. In Vivo codes demonstrated that the participants relied heavily on the family dynamics of the microsystem, and in this bounded case, their immediate family or nuclear unit, to attend the parenting sessions each week or to implement the recommended talking tips into their natural environment. Although most of the families had multiple children of various ages living in the home (i.e., full-time basis), both caregivers appeared to take responsibility for the implementation of the LENA Talking Tips according to individual interview transcripts, with a goal of promoting back-and-forth communication regardless of their participation in the class which supports prior research on caregiver co-partner relationships (Malin et al., 2016). According to the interview transcripts, this was often accomplished at different times of the day or in a different manner, due to personality differences, comfort with the strategies learned, or extraneous work and life obligations which acknowledges the FSA intervention model (Dunst & Trivette, 2009). However, the descriptive and In Vivo codes consistently showed that the adult participants utilized the tips in the ways

that were most comfortable to them due to familiarity with the tips, prior modeling of these communicative skills, or the prior modeling of similar parenting strategies.

Interestingly, multiple interview participants mentioned that talking had become new way of life for them and also a family affair. For example, interviewees who had other children in the household stated that they had encouraged other household members to participate in two-way communication with the youngest child as well. Two of the interview participants mentioned that all of the children in their households were benefiting from the new or improved focus on back-and-forth communication and that the collective motivation of the family's microsystem had been an important investment for all involved.

Due to multiple family responsibilities for adult family caregivers, In Vivo codes also highlighted the fact that adult participants from this case often collaborated or shared the childcare tasks in their natural environments. As a result, multiple members of the microsystem implemented the talking tips in addition to various multitasking behaviors in the process. While some of the caregivers adjusted the overall household schedule to include some of the talking tips into their daily routine, others attempted to use the skills during already planned activities or hobbies, such as going to the gym or birthday parties. These parenting strengths resulted in perseverance in attaining a joint goal or priority for the family unit by increasing or enhancing their two-way communication with their youngest child. For the participants in this case, this happened regardless of their relationship status, family dynamics, or life situations (i.e., deployed spouse, distance from extended family). In fact, interview transcripts and researcher documentation showed that multiple members of the microsystem attended all, if not some of the parenting sessions for the participants in this case, when possible, over the ten-week period. However, even if both parents were not able to attend the parenting classes due to other obligations, interview transcripts highlighted the fact that the enrolled participants shared recaps or gave reminders about the strategies learned in the class sessions so that both parents could aid in the implementation of the talking tips with consistency throughout the week. As noted by one interviewee to their spouse, "hey, it's a LENA day, we gotta make sure we're communicating with her" (Interview – Participant 3). Similarly, another participant mentioned, "when the vest was on...it was time to talk" (Interview – Participant 8).

Regardless of their buy-in for class attendance or regular use of the strategies, these parents commented on the fact that communication was a serious business and that their joint focus was fully recognized on days that communication would be recorded. This consistency and a joint focus of household goals for enhancing parent-child communication led to positive outcomes for most of the families in the study.

Finally, the participants' willingness to learn and or seek new information was a strength and a common finding from the case that was true across all embedded subunits supporting the tenets of ALT. Three of the interviewees mentioned that they had some type of background in child development or work experience, yet they were still attending the sessions to refresh their memory or to glean new tidbits of information. Alternatively, while other participants did not have any background knowledge on this topic, according to the pre-class parent survey responses, they were also focused on improving their own parenting skills for the benefit of their child, as shown by enrollment or completion of the class.

Barriers to Early Communication

While the case findings show an objective gain for adult words and turn taking interactions for most of the individual interview caregivers, it also demonstrated that specific barriers prevented the implementation of some of the talking tips or for back-and-forth communication for other participants, regardless of their internal or external motivations to do so. These barriers or negative factors applied to both the short-term and the long-term period. In Vivo codes highlighted the fact that cognitive dissonance was the major barrier that prevented caregivers from implementing the talking tips consistently or when attempting to increase turn-taking interactions with their young child. Additionally, although the parenting class provided some basic coaching to the participants, the application of the newly learned skills was a barrier for a few of the caregivers both in the short-term and for some over longer periods of time supporting the ALT tenet that adult learners bring different life experiences to learning situations (Knowles et al., 2020). Interview transcripts highlighted the fact that some of the skills were brand new to these participants or that they had different types of parenting or communication skills modeled to them when growing up. Other interview participants mentioned a limited amount of observation opportunities of the new skills before attempting to implement the strategies at home. While the

information was interesting on a cognitive level as presented, a few of the participants mentioned difficulty with application in their natural environments. As stated by one participant, “some [talking tips] are easy, some not so much;” “I see it, but I, I still might have a hard time [long pause] applying” (Interview – Participant 7). Another participant, who had previously taken the LENA Start class in person, mentioned that hands-on practice had aided them in applying the tips more efficiently, “instead of just watching stuff in the virtual class, when I took the class with my other child, we got to do stuff like pretend to cook, or we did use something, um, to demonstrate and to use our skills” (Interview – Participant 2). This showed that online delivery of the class was more difficult for this parent when attempting to practice the skill supporting ALT’s mention of individual learner differences (Knowles et al., 2020).

Second, personal logistics such as transportation, busy schedules, unexpected life situations or crises, memory, or personal motivations were highlighted in the individual interviews and end of course feedback questionnaire as barriers to back-and-forth communication. Participants mentioned these factors as barriers to accessing information about the talking tips, when attempting to implement them consistently in their natural environment, and when accessing the feedback from the technological device. Furthermore, while unavoidable life factors such as spousal deployment or personal crisis (i.e., death in family) were not necessarily surprising factors that prevented back-and-forth communication, memory was a notable factor to the researcher. Participants across all subunits mentioned that when they did not have a visual reminder of the talking tips in front of them, such as the LENA Talking Tips sheet, or the LENA vest, they often reverted to old habits of communication even though they understood the importance behind using them. The visual reminders and active participation of the class jogged their memory and gave them accountability and motivation to continue using the tips even if they were not a part of their typical daily routine, according to a few of the interview participants.

Interestingly, and in support of the short-term findings, two of the caregivers from this case who had previously taken the LENA Start class with another child, both mentioned that they were taking the class for a second time because they needed a reminder of the tips, in addition to wanting the

accountability factor and community benefits of participating in the class again. This finding demonstrates that for some caregivers, personal motivation, knowledge, and perseverance were factors that were not strong enough to alter their old habits of behavior without the consistent practice or reminders of the parenting program, especially in the long-term. And to support earlier sentiments of all embedded subunits, this finding seemed especially applicable to new communication skills or actions that were in opposition to old habits. In fact, many of the participants across all embedded subunits mentioned that they wanted the parenting class to continue or be extended past the ten-week session due to the fact that they had limited access to other such resources on a regular basis.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that none of the individual interviewees initially mentioned any barriers to participating in the class or to implementing back-and-forth communication. It was only through deeper conversations about topics that were relevant and familiar to them that this information was made available. This highlights the importance of investigating complex problems in education in more than one way (e.g., quantitatively, mixed method, qualitatively), in multiple contexts, and using different types of data. Using an interpretative qualitative approach allowed me to investigate this topic from multiple angles and from numerous participants' perspectives in a way that adds to the research on parent education (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By analyzing various types of data in an interpretative manner, the study design allowed for individual expression and voice to serve as important insights for the case (Hooks, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Most importantly, the above-mentioned findings, including the fact that the adult caregivers in this case were willing to alter their behaviors and/or add to the responsibilities that are already on their plate when their motivations were supported in part by the greater community, is something that could not be answered by quantitatively constructed questions. However, these findings add to our knowledge about supporting families and caregivers during the early childhood years with parent education.

Study Significance

The single embedded case study was designed to investigate a multi-faceted problem in early childhood related to parent education in a qualitative manner. By collecting and analyzing multiple layers

of data about caregivers of young children and highlighting their voices in the process, the case aimed to look closer at caregiver strengths, barriers to early communication, and also at the aspects of parent education that might act as a catalyst to improve overall early communication, school readiness skills, or access to community resources and services for the birth to three-year-old population. This study adds to the literature in multiple ways. First, it highlights the voices of a diverse demographic of parents or caregivers (e.g., educational level, gender, race, SES) who have been minimally represented in the academic literature about parent education to date and helps stakeholders to better understand their unique needs with early communication, supporting future program development (Knowles et al., 2020). The study highlights the fact that caregivers from this case were craving additional supports (e.g., educational, emotional, tangible resources) from other sources and systems of influence due to the distance between the caregivers and the other members of their microsystem which Bronfenbrenner (2005) mentioned as a current and important issue to research. While potentially situational for this case, knowledge about transient families such as the military population or those living a distance away from their microsystem has been piqued, and points to the fact that these dynamic life factors may prevent today's families from receiving the comprehensive amount of support or resources that they may have received from the microsystem of the past, supporting Heath's (2012) study. It also suggests that researchers may need to research today's microsystem in more depth due to ever-changing circumstances using a Family Systems Theoretical framework to look closer at the interconnected relationships of the family as a social unit, and specifically that of today's microsystem (Malin et al., 2016). It is possible that the definition of the microsystem may need to be altered to some degree, to include fewer members of influence in this sphere, or to include distance and/or access to technology as notable markers of the system's dynamics for young children. In either case, bridges must continue to be built or extended in an alternative manner, to ensure that families and caregivers are aware of and can benefit from the community resources that are already available to them, a problem that appears to persist with this population of adults over time (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). However, after listening to the voices of caregivers and parents of young children from this case, community stakeholders and educators may also need to alter the resources that are currently

available to families with young children or continue to investigate improved ways for today's families to better recognize and access these resources. Doing so will help to meet the unique needs of certain populations that may be more transient or living a great distance from the rest of their microsystem.

While social media, marketing, and more visual or passive methods of exposure to this educational information or programs (e.g., pamphlets, fliers) are helpful, the participants from this case demonstrated that personal relationships and in-person invitations or recruitment strategies should not be overlooked. These types of recruitment strategies were highlighted as the interviewees' number one reasons for enrolling in the self-selected parenting program. This type of recruitment strategy takes physical effort from a variety of stakeholders who are willing to be a positive welcoming face on the ground level and who will meet families of young children in close proximity to where they reside/live, or play (e.g., parks, local schools, community recreational centers, medical offices, public libraries, etc.) to encourage access to resources and feelings of inclusivity. While these types of efforts may be more labor intensive than other methods, according to the interviewees from this case, it was the most effective method of recruitment. In fact, interview transcripts noted that while the caregiver participants attempted to invite other parents to the program, they often didn't know where or how to find the information about future classes. Consequently, while they told others about their parenting class's day and time, they were unfamiliar with how to direct new families to future classes. This study also highlights the fact that parent education programs have the potential to provide an inclusive context that can aid in overcoming financial or physical barriers that families with young children may experience due to limited access to transportation, childcare, Wi-Fi/internet, computers, smart phones or other types of services.

Secondly, the study adds to our knowledge of future curriculum writing and to the implementation of quality curriculum that is already available to educators and families today. While ALT notes that learner difference would benefit from a multimodal approach to learning, access to this information, as well as strategies and skills must improve and extend beyond initial exposure to the information. In essence, a 'one and done' approach may not be enough for parents to form long term habits without the assistance of additional resources, supports, and positive feedback. This is especially

true for parents who have had limited, different, or counterintuitive parenting strategies or techniques modeled to them in the past. While the parenting program from this case study was designed to guide parents over a ten-week period in an accessible manner (i.e., free, multilingual materials), not all of the parents were successful in increasing verbal parent-child interactions as seen in Figures 12 and 13; regardless, the community organization provided additional resources and necessary supports for the participants in the form of children's books, peer networking, and childcare services so that they could access the information which led to feelings of empowerment despite visible progress. This case notes that knowledge alone was not enough for all the interviewees to apply the information successfully (i.e., self-perceived) in natural environments, or at least in a way that withstood the test of time, as was seen in the two parents who were taking the class for a second time. This case demonstrates that some caregivers need more individualized coaching strategies or guided, hands-on practice, especially when supporting them with the implementation of the new skills or strategies in their natural environment. Whether these services are provided to caregivers from a distance, as was seen in Azevedo and colleagues' (2013) and McKnight and colleagues' (2016) studies through online portals such as, FaceTime, Skype, Zoom, or accomplished in person at the residences, or in public communal areas (e.g., parks, libraries, recreational centers), some caregivers need coaching or active practice with communication skills in a setting that is relevant and conducive to their home culture, resources, and routine to fully grasp its implementation in a meaningful way. Other caregivers may benefit from the individual or personal coaching of an educational professional or knowledgeable peer or mentoring access in the form of continued group discussions in various settings (Baek-Bullock, 2015; Yip et al., 2019). Lastly, the community organization not only provided an inclusive context for the parenting program, but it also provided resources to the caregivers such as children's board books to extend the longevity of the program's benefits, which were found to be multi-functional for participants in this case. These tangible and intangible resources sparked important two-way conversations with the parents and young children during the class period (i.e., free dinner), but also widened the perspectives of the class participants for how to use these materials based on peer and professional comments. Additionally, as highlighted in the interview transcripts from this case across all

subunits and in the conversations with parents who were taking the class for a second time, an important finding was that periodic refresher or extension courses may be beneficial for enhancing the benefits of parent education programs for longer periods of time.

Third, this case study highlights the fact that while there may be an iceberg of resources available to community members who have young children, they be untapped due to patrons not realizing that they are available for one reason or another. In Vivo codes showed that while the caregivers from this case were seeking a variety of community supports, they were unaware of other resources that were available to them or felt uninvited or unwelcomed at such events because they had young children. As stated by one of the caregivers, “I would say, give more opportunities of places where you can take your child...a lot of places you can’t take all the babies...so that really limits you” (Interview – Participant 1). Another participant commented on the fact that their family had difficulty finding child-friendly activities and events, “we look at um, whatever’s going on in our community, whether we driving and see something, and we’re like, okay, yeah, we can take the kids to that” (Interview – Participant 8). Moreover, a finding across all subunits on this topic was that the parents of multiple children wished they would have known about the parenting class when their other children; each felt as if they had missed out on important knowledge and research that would have potentially given their older children a better head start on life, prevented communication difficulties, or improved their ability to communicate with others before entering school.

Fourthly, while the findings from this case highlight the short-term impact of the course in depth, the long-term impact was also explored through the interviews of parents who had previously completed the class (e.g., 3 years prior, 2 years prior) with another child in the family. This information, while only a small portion of the reported data, fills an important gap in the literature regarding the long-term impact of parenting programs, specifically that the caregivers from this case were seeking consistent and extended opportunities to learn with a community of like-minded peers. To them, this was the key to the longevity of carrying out the new skills learned, until “it becomes a habit” (Interview – Participant 2). In

this statement, the participant highlighted the fact that some caregivers may need more reminders or practice over time to feel more comfortable with implementing the skills on their own automatically.

In the end, this case study investigation highlights the fact that even well thought-out, researched based parenting programs may only begin to scratch the surface of parent wonderings and cravings for the support (e.g., community, educational tools & information, current research, tangible resources) that may be needed from multiple systems of influence during the birth to three years. For the participants in this case, the parenting program provided information, accountability, inclusivity, and a sense of empowerment for caregivers who were interested in learning more about communication. Yet many were still craving more information. While the class appears to have been a good starting point, community stakeholders of all realms need to collaborate to create more equitable opportunities for families with young children bridging resources from all systems of influence to the ones that need it. It is impossible for one program or organization to meet the diverse needs of families with young children alone. Moreover, international crises (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, war) only highlight these needs for families with young children and often exacerbate their effects over time for families who are more transient. Overcoming these factors will require community stakeholders, educators, and researchers to think outside of the box to meet the ever-changing needs of families with young children. As this case highlights, multi-tiered community supports from various systems of influence are needed to uncover and fill the deficits that may be present in our current ecological systems of support for caregivers of today's young children to impact and compensate for societal changes, attitudes about young children, and other issues that evolve or surface over time.

Unexpected Findings

Most noteworthy, the community organization had a low attrition rate for the parenting classes over the ten-week period. Twenty-seven out of thirty caregivers completed the program and met the somewhat rigorous requirements for graduation. While the 90% retention or graduation rate was typical for the investigated program context, this finding was much higher than other the parenting education classes that were noted in published literature, including other LENA Start parenting classes that were

held in different locations of the country (Caron et al., 2015; Du Paul et al., 2013; Elmquist et al., 2021; Stephan & Miclea, 2013). Flexibility (e.g., allowing make-up classes, late arrival, device exchange) and tangible resources (e.g., free board books and dinner, childcare provided) provided by the community organization, as well as attitudes of inclusivity from the staff members and caregiver participants appear to have been important factors in the low attrition rates for this case according to interview transcripts adding to the literature on factors of program completion for parenting classes.

Second, while multiple members of each family often attended the parent classes each week, the female caregiver was typically the caregiver to officially enroll in the class per my perusal of the enrollment forms and through conversations with the community organization's staff members. This factor is important to consider when comparing attrition rates and enrollment demographics in the published literature, as the official enrollment may not accurately reflect the recorded attendance of all caregivers who participated in the parenting education classes. As a researcher, I tried to compensate for this factor by personally inviting each caregiver that was listed on the program documents (i.e., two per family) to participate in the individual interview sessions and even extending invitations to other members who were present during the parenting sessions, regardless of their official enrollment status. While two of these alternative caregivers (i.e., not parents) initially responded to my text invitation to participate, neither completed the individual interview session. However, a personal invitation with a third caregiver helped me to procure an additional interview participant for the case. Moreover, the male participants for this case only participated after receiving an in-person invitation from me after being introduced by the parent educator or the spouse of another caregiver. This highlights the fact that invitations or participant follow-up may vary for different genders of participants regarding unknown researchers and may depend on the characteristics (i.e., gender) of the researcher, due to participants' comfort levels with interactions with these individuals in natural environment contexts.

Finally, a unique finding from the case highlights the fact that many of the participants were living a distance from extended family members that would usually be considered part of the microsystem due to work location or other responsibilities (e.g., military, civilian). As mentioned above, the reality of

these situations is that the microsystem of the past may not be able to support caregivers from these more transient families in the same manner, especially if this influence over the birth to three-year period is in fact, unstable or intermittent, an important part of the chronosystem in BST (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Consequently, future investigations could look at the alternative ways that the microsystem gives support to caregivers from a distance, specifically to the nuclear family unit if they are separated from other members over time and explore if these types of support are effective. Moreover, community stakeholders may need to address the unique areas of need for more transient families with additional support and from other systems of influence. The case's interview transcripts showed that relocating to a new area presented various challenges for the more transient families (e.g., isolation, lack of knowledge, availability of childcare, awareness of community supports) and prevented them from implementing the talking tips as consistently as they may have wanted, due to limited access or knowledge of programs that would support them. It appeared that the more transient families and caregivers also faced unique challenges in finding community supports and often navigated the early childhood years without a compass that may have been guided by others in the microsystem for more permanently located families. In this case, the relationships and connections provided by the mesosystem appear to have been a critical bridge to connecting the much needed, supports and resources (e.g., microsystem, exosystem) to families with young children. However, the case also highlights the fact that supporting the unique needs of transient community members, while admirable, could be more difficult for local communities to accomplish if they are unaware of this need or if they do not have the funding or resources to do so effectively or on a regular basis to add stability.

Parent Education Recommendations

While this case did not evaluate the specific parenting program utilized by the organization, important factors for the improvement of any parenting program were highlighted by the caregiver patrons of the investigation based on the tenets of ALT (Knowles et al., 2020). First, while case data demonstrates that the educational material, programmatic tools, and delivery methods increased awareness of early communication in a thought-provoking manner for caregivers of young children and

aided in initial enrollment and empowerment, the environment of the class was an important factor for caregivers' completion of the class. A sense of inclusivity, community, and flexibility provided relational support for caregivers that in some cases, outlasted the education class. In fact, two of the caregivers mentioned the fact that they had started to form a group outside of the parenting class (i.e., after the class was finished) with their class members and other like-minded peers to reconnect and to discuss early communication. The parent educator of the organization also mentioned a similar situation. When they were a parent in the class (i.e., three years prior), they had formed an online Facebook group for their group to reconnect after the class was finished, both online and in various locations around the community. As a result, future parent classes should not overlook the benefits of hosting these types of classes in different types of environments in which adult caregivers can feel comfortable and welcomed, supporting an important tenet of ALT.

Second, providing scaffolding opportunities of various levels for caregivers in parent education is important. Due to the wide ranges of ability, prior experiences, and languages spoken by the attending caregivers in this case, a 'one-size fits all' curriculum may only touch the surface of needs that adult learners may have upon enrollment. Moreover, due to individual, cultural, and personality differences of adult learners mentioned in ALT, parent education programs may need to offer extended levels of information (i.e., more basic, enhanced), practice opportunities, additional professional support or coaching, or peer mentoring opportunities to caregivers of young children during class periods and afterward the class session are completed due to unique learner needs. This extended knowledge and support could also serve as a bridge to help caregivers to access other supports or community resources in a way that might support the family as individual members and also as a social unit (Dunst & Trivette, 2009; Malin et al., 2018). Including community partners or other stakeholders who are invested in supporting the family during the early childhood years in these endeavors would have the potential to increase equitable opportunities. A need for extended learning opportunities and additional levels of educational information and support were supported by In Vivo codes for this case and highlight the Andragogical principle of ALT that when adult learners are motivated to learn information that is relevant

to their lives and helps them to solve problems, they will be enthusiastic to participate and according to the participants in this case, continue to participate in such opportunities (Knowles et al., 2020). Moreover, the data from this case shows that curriculum may need to be tailored differently for various types of caregivers. While research has shown that the female or mother caregiver role and influence should not be overlooked in regard to communication development, today's caregivers include a combination of fathers, grandparents, friends, and other familiar caregivers who may have different motivations or interests for participating in parent education (Hart & Risley, 2004). Eliminating the chance to enhance the interactions of other caregivers in the process is counterintuitive and only highlights a narrow agenda of interactions that the child has during the early childhood years. As a result, different recruitment strategies, program incentives, educational tactics, or levels of support may need to be considered by current educational programs or when creating future curriculum to meet these diverse needs. However, this means that all caregivers who are involved in the young child's life need to have a voice in the construction of such programs as well as in the feedback of their implementation. Allowing all caregivers to participate in parent education programs at different levels of involvement or in different ways may increase completion rates as well as buy-in or motivation for the content, regardless of lifestyle, family structure, or living status with the young child. However, recording these findings in the academic literature will be crucial for the success over time.

Finally extending the related resources and supports of parent education classes, such as those offered by this community program, free childcare, free dinner, and free books, could add to a more experiential-based learning experience in parent education. In this case study, these types of tangible supports, although not part of the official parent education curriculum, aided families in more ways than initially thought of by this researcher (i.e., recruitment for program) and demonstrated that parent education and support can go hand-in-hand for creating additional learning opportunities that are relevant to an adult learner's lives even if they were not a part of the original design. These types of findings may have gone unnoticed with a different study design but appear to be a crucial to adult learners for extra practice and application of the content (Freire, 1996).

Study Limitations

The single embedded case study provides an interesting look at a smaller population of parents and caregivers in the Southeast region of the United States who enrolled in a self-selected parenting program. While the embedded subunits of the case provide a more comprehensive look at families with young children from this case and extend our knowledge on both virtual and in-person parenting programs that are focused on improving communication from the same community organization, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of caregivers. Additionally, while the curriculum and facilitator of the parenting class were the same for all three subunits of this case, it is possible that group discussions and different personalities of caregivers altered the conversations about communication in different ways among the embedded subgroups. This cannot be determined with the data that was collected for the case. However, it was dually noted that the evening parenting class sessions, regardless of delivery method, typically contained two or more caregivers per family, in addition to siblings, grandparents, and a nanny while the daytime classes typically had one caregiver present. These extra caregivers could potentially have added perspectives, comments, or actions to enhance or detract from the curriculum. Third, while all enrolled participants from each subunit were included in the recruitment procedures for the study and contacted in the same manner, the three enrollees who stopped participating or who didn't complete the parenting program and/or complete the graduation requirements were not able to be contacted due. As a result, their perspectives, voice, or reasons for quitting the program cannot be shared or investigated. These unique perspectives would add important information to the existing data regarding life factors or barriers that may have prevented participants from finishing the class or for better understanding how caregivers from various family dynamics attempted to implement the newly learned communication skills in their natural environments. This information would aid professionals in better understanding the reasons for attrition or even alternative perspectives on the benefits of parent education class, the curriculum, or the inclusiveness of the group.

Areas for Future Research

This case highlights the fact that, while there may be community resources available for families with young children, these resources are not always easily identified by those that need them most. Future research could investigate the best procedures for marketing, recruiting, and reaching this population of caregivers more effectively, especially for those who were not able to finish the program. Secondly, the study highlighted the fact that the parents of young children in this case were looking for extended, albeit periodic or even more frequent refresher or extension courses (or networking outings) after the completion of an educational program during the birth to three-year time period. Future research could focus on the construction of these types of programs by investigating the optimal educational material to be covered, the length of time or number of sessions to offer per year, as well as the optimal context or setting (i.e., community locations) to aid caregivers in the continuance of positive communication habits with their young child. Alternatively, future research could investigate the impact of extended access to the LENA technological device and/or the LENA graph visual tool in regard to improving continuity of strategies or individual coaching for caregivers over time. In doing so, research could investigate whether or not it is possible to create new habits based on family priorities, with consistent practice and application of the more difficult talking tips in naturalistic settings, as was highlighted by the participants in this study. Lastly, researchers could investigate or compare the supports that are currently available in various communities (e.g., communication, pre-readiness skills) to maximize already existing resources for families with young children or to enhance similar opportunities in alternative cities that do not have these resources readily available to create more equitable opportunities, or access to these types of programs, for all families of young children during the early childhood years.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LENA START '14 TALKING TIPS'

1. Talk about what you're doing and thinking.
2. Comment on what they're doing or looking at.
3. Name things that they're interested in.
4. Get down to their level: face to face
5. Touch, hug, hold
6. Tune in and respond to what they look at, do, and say.
7. Wait for their response.
8. Imitate them, and add words.
9. Make faces, use gestures.
10. Take turns – don't do all the talking.
11. Repeat and add to what they say and do.
12. Follow their lead, do what interests them.
13. Encourage them, be positive.
14. Be silly! Relax and have fun!

APPENDIX B

SINGLE EMBEDDED CASE STUDY PROTOCOL

Purpose of the Case Study:

To investigate a complex phenomenon in early childhood related to parent education to provide more equitable learning opportunities in early childhood by increasing overall school readiness through parent education about the topic of two-way communication.

Research Questions:

1. In what ways if any, do specific aspects (e.g., course materials, feedback) of a ten-week LENA Start parenting program influence positive parent-child interactions or caregiver perceptions of a parent's role in early childhood?
2. What reasons do parents' (or caregivers') cite for engaging in and completing a self-selected parent education programs for children birth to three years old?
3. How do various influences (i.e., family dynamics/make-up, parent skills/strengths, work status) promote or prevent a family's implementation of the LENA Start '14 Talking Tips' both in the short-term or in the long term?

Theoretical Framework:

Epistemology – Social constructivism with an Interpretivist analysis

Bioecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005)

Adult Learning Theory- Andragogy (Knowles et al., 2020)

Family Systems Approach to frame interview questions (Dunst & Trivette, 2009)

Design & Procedures:

- Qualitative, single embedded case study
- Reflexivity considered
- Case boundary & study context – local community organization in SE USA that was focused on improving the school readiness of its youngest citizens (e.g., early childhood age)
- Further boundary set on one facet of community organization, LENA Start Parenting Classes
- Three embedded subunits included individual parent classes that were carried out during the fall and spring semesters of the academic school year, organized by class delivery method & time of day (e.g., day virtual class, night virtual class, night in person class)

Study Safeguards:

- The study's design, purpose, and related protocols was approved by the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee in addition to the context city prior to the commencement of the study & any collection of data.
- The highest level of precaution was taken to ensure that the anonymity and the well-being of the research participants are protected throughout the research process.

Sampling:

- Convenience sampling utilized with all enrolled participants of the organization who enrolled, participated in, or completed the LENA Start parenting program during the fall & spring semesters of the academic school year 2022-2023
- Inclusive criteria – participants must be adult parents or caregivers of a birth to three-year-old child who was enrolled in the parenting class during this period
- Recruitment should take place via email from program director &/or researchers, phone (e.g., call, text message) from researcher, and/or in-person invitation; for this case, all recruitment attempts included the study's IRB recruitment/informational letter
- Per the organization, participants were only able to be contacted two times in total, using two different types of communication delivery, if no response was received

Data Collection:

- Archived program documents (e.g., pre-class parent surveys, end of course feedback forms, intake/enrollment form) for all participants, in addition to the weekly LENA graph summary reports for individual interview participants
- Individual interviews that utilized a semi-structured questionnaire protocol, were delivered in-person, over the phone or on a Zoom meeting/calls, or in an email response if the first were not convenient to the participants
- Participant artifact protocol (e.g., sketch/drawing) to express thoughts about early communication

Analysis:

- Two elemental coding procedures were utilized
- Descriptive coding on archived program documents, demographic data from individual interviews, & participant-created artifacts
- In Vivo coding on individual interviews & end of course feedback responses to open-ended/semi-structured questions
- Initial analysis completed on each of the embedded subunits separately
- Holistic analysis completed on all data using a cross case synthesis
- Thematic presentation of findings, discussion, implications, study significance, and recommendations for future research

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT ARTIFACT ACTIVITY

Project Title: Creating More Equitable Learning Opportunities in Early Childhood by Highlighting Parent Voice

After the individual interview questions have been asked, the participants will be asked to draw a picture that will serve as an introspective artifact for the study. The following prompt will be given:

“Please do not write your name or any identifying information on this piece of paper. Draw a picture of yourself communicating with your child. There are no wrong answers. Sketches are fine. You may also add labels to your picture if you wish.”

APPENDIX D

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Project Title: Creating More Equitable Learning Opportunities in Early Childhood by Highlighting Parent Voice

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to start the interview by collecting some demographic information. Then, we’ll move on to questions about your experience with the LENA Start parenting class. If there are ever any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, we can skip these questions.”

Give participants a checklist containing demographic information/questions (e.g., gender, ethnicity/race, household income level, relationship status); checklist is located at the bottom of the document.

- *“Do you have any children that live with you? If yes, how old are they & do they live with you full-time or part of the time? If no, why did you enroll in the LENA Start class?”*
- *“Who else lives in your household (either on a regular or part-time basis) or assists you with weekly childcare responsibilities?”*
- *“Are you currently working outside of the home? If yes, what is your occupation?”*
- *“What is the highest level of education that you have completed?”*
- *“How did you hear about the LENA Start parenting program?”*
- *“What made you want to participate in the program initially?”*
- *“What kept you coming back to class each week?”*
- *“Did you tell any friends or family members about the program after you started? If yes, who did you tell and why? If no, why not?”*
- *“If you told friends about the program, did they sign up for the class, as well? If yes, did they sign up for the same class as you? If no, why didn’t they sign up?”*
- *“Were there any life factors that made it difficult for you to attend class each week? If yes, what were they? Did anyone help you to overcome these barriers?” (If no, move to next question).*
- *“Were there any resources or supports offered to you by this program (or from the community) that helped you to overcome these barriers? If yes, what were they?” (If no, move to next question).*

- *“In general, what could educators or other community members do to support you as a parent of a young child?”*
- *“How easy was it to use the LENA Talking Tips in your daily life? Please give me an example.”*
- *“Did any other family members or caregivers use the LENA Talking Tips during the week? If yes, how did they use them? If no, why not?”*
- *“What types of feedback did you receive each week from the teacher of the parenting class or from the LENA organization?”*
- *“Did you prefer a certain type of feedback over others? (e.g., LENA graphs, verbal, etc.) Why or why not?”*
- *“Did viewing weekly LENA recording graphs help you to increase parent-child communication during the week? If yes, can you give me a specific example? If no, why not?”*
- *“Were there specific parts of the LENA Start Class that supported or helped you to increase communication with your child (e.g., class videos, book, discussion)? If yes, what were they? If no, what would have made the material more relevant to your life?”*
- *“When your child was wearing the LENA device, did you think about parent-child communication more than other days of the week? If yes, tell me how? If no, what were your personal goals on LENA recording days?”*
- *“Which forms of feedback or instruction could you have done without?”*
- *“In your opinion, what were the ‘biggest take-aways’ from this parenting class?”*
- *“Is there anything else that you would like to discuss, that I didn’t ask about?”*

(Demographic Questionnaire/Checklist)

Please select your race (check all that apply):

☐ African American or Black
 ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
 ☐ Asian
☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 ☐ White
 ☐ Some other race

Please select your gender:

☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Nonbinary/Nonconforming

Please select your relationship status:

☐ single ☐ married ☐ separated ☐ divorced

☐ widowed ☐ cohabiting ☐ other

Please check the box that is associated with your current household income level:

☐ \$10,000 or less ☐ \$20,000 or less ☐ \$30,000 or less ☐ \$40,000 or less

☐ \$50,000 or less ☐ \$60,000 or less ☐ \$70,000 or less ☐ \$80,000 or less

☐ \$90,000 or less ☐ \$100,000 or less ☐ \$110,000 or less ☐ \$111,000 or more

APPENDIX E**IRB APPROVED RECRUITMENT LETTER**

January 1, 2022

Hello LENA Start Parents,

I am a Ph.D. student at Old Dominion University who is pursuing a degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Early Childhood Education. I am interested in studying a parent's role in early childhood. The name of my project is: Creating More Equitable Opportunities in Early Childhood by Highlighting Parent Voice.

My goal is to interview LENA Start participants to better understand the influences, barriers, and supports that are experienced by caregivers during the early childhood years. The brief interviews can be completed virtually (i.e., Zoom meeting), in-person, or by filling out an email questionnaire.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at the following email address, jsill@odu.edu or text me at (757) 513-5187 at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,



Julie Sill, M. DEHS.

jsill@odu.edu

757-513-5187

VITA

Julie Dawn Sill is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Old Dominion University in the Darden College of Education and Professional Studies, located at 1226 W. 43rd Street, Norfolk, Virginia 23508. During her time at Old Dominion University, she pursued a Doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction with an Early Childhood focus in the Department of Teaching and Learning and anticipates graduating in December of 2022. While attending Old Dominion University, Julie maintained a 4.0 grade point average, received the Linda Z. Bamforth Award in Early Childhood Education, and was inducted into two higher education honorariums on campus, Phi Kappa Phi and Kappa Delta Pi. Julie also participated as a Graduate Assistant for the Department of Teaching and Learning and had the pleasure of mentoring preservice teachers both in the field and in the undergraduate classroom. Julie also participated virtually in a year-long service internship with the mEducation Alliance in Washington D.C., presented a session at the mEducation Alliance's annual conference in 2021, completed three IRB approved qualitative research investigations, and served as a reviewer for the Family and Community Partnerships SIG for the AERA 2023 annual conference. Julie originally graduated from Grove City College, in Grove City, Pennsylvania with a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and Elementary Education in 1998 and again in 2008 from the University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, Texas with a master's degree in Deaf Education and Hearing Science.

Since graduation, Julie has worked in various contexts with young children (birth to three years old) and their families, preschool-aged children, elementary students, with undergraduate students, and with graduate preservice teachers in six different states around the United States. Julie is a passionate educator and advocate for the early years and aims to help students of all ages to be independent, life-long learners. In her spare time, Julie is a wife, mother, daughter, and sister who values family connections as well as travelling around the world to experience life from as many perspectives as possible. She feels that these experiences will help her to be a more well-rounded person, to be a more empathetic educator, and to be a better advocate for her students in the future.