

Factors Influencing the Language Use
of Preschool Children in a
Child/Parent Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This study examines factors that influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program. The Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was initiated to address concerns for at risk children and their families in the community of Nipawin, Saskatchewan. The families invited to participate in the program were identified as having preschool children who were potentially at risk for school success.

The language experiences of four preschool children were observed as they participated in one nine-week child/parent education session. The parents, caregivers and preschool teacher were interviewed regarding their views about the language experiences of the children.

The factors that emerged as having an influence on the children's use of language in the preschool program were: play center activities, direct instruction, authentic experiences, parent/caregiver involvement and teacher efficacy. Results showed that the children in the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project experienced a program that understood the language needs of young children and the powerful influence of a supportive family.

Implications are drawn concerning the benefits of providing opportunities for language development and use during the crucial preschool years in a child/parent education program. Recommendations for further research suggest recognition of the effects of early language intervention on young children with difficult life circumstances.

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CHAPTER ONE

OUR FAMILIES

Introduction

A changing society has influenced the current generation of children in profound ways. Progress in technology, knowledge, and communication has affected people differently, allowing for diverse lifestyles. The overwhelming new developments in society are complicated with issues of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and home literacy (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). A rapidly changing society makes for a broadened range of background experiences among children. As the needs of families become more varied and complex, the challenge of providing opportunities for all children to reach their potentials for success becomes an increasingly daunting task.

Family backgrounds and life circumstances put some children at risk for obtaining the stimulation and encouragement necessary to achieve in school. Researchers have found that it is possible to predict accurately, while children are still in primary school, which of them are more likely to eventually drop out of school and which of them will probably graduate from high school (Howard & Anderson, 1978). The challenge in responding to the needs of at risk children is now supported with new knowledge about the types of services that can be effective in changing long-term outcomes

for young children. As well, there is a better understanding of the developmental continuum that begins before school and continues into the early years of schooling. This knowledge can help educators and others devise programs to help such children succeed in school.

Family and school represent the primary environments in which young children grow and develop (Coleman, 1991; McCain & Mustard, 1999). Shifts in beliefs, values, and attitudes have contributed to significant changes in the structure of the family, but the family unit continues to be an essential factor in the development of the physical, emotional, and social wellbeing of children. Researchers recognize the preschool years as a critical stage of development (Bloom, 1964; Corson, 1988; McCain & Mustard, 1999) for a child's intellectual, social and emotional growth and confirm the fundamental importance of quality parent-child interaction during these early years.

A key predictor of success in elementary school is a child's language ability in the primary school years (White, 1991). As Chall and Curtis (1991) state in a discussion about responding to the individual differences among language learners, children with difficulty in language skills are at risk not only for success in school, but for personal, social and civic wellbeing as well. Wells (1985) suggests that the quality of the child's conversational experience is more important than social class or family background in accounting for variation in language development. The essence of preschool education is to lay the foundation for the potential for success in school and later life. Considering the powerful influence of a supportive family environment, a possible response to language delay is language intervention during the crucial preschool years, with tandem

primary goals: first, to build the language skills of the child; and second, to educate parents in providing an environment to foster their young child's language development.

Program

During the spring of 1998, the Nipawin Early Childhood Team was organized in an attempt to address concerns for at risk children and their families. The team included the following coalition of community groups: Social Services, North East Health District, Town of Nipawin, Nipawin School Division, Nipawin Day Care Cooperative, Metis National Eastern Region II, and Nutrition for Kids, Inc. The team applied for and received a grant from Associated Entities through Saskatchewan's Action Plan for Children. The grant allowed the team to initiate and implement a program entitled "Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project".

Social workers from Nipawin and public health nurses in the North East Health District estimated that there were at least 25 high risk families in the Nipawin, Carrot River, and Choiceland areas in the fall of 1998. The purpose of the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was to reduce or remove participation barriers by providing a program that combined a quality preschool experience with a strong parenting component.

The program leaders designed the child/parent education program to host three nine-week sessions during the school year. The preschool sessions were scheduled for two days per week from 9:15 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. During the first hour of the half-day preschool, activities were planned for child/parent involvement. The next hour included workshops planned for the parents and caregivers about issues such as health care, stress, budgeting,

and cultural sensitivity. While the parents were attending the workshop the children continued in the preschool.

Each preschool group included a maximum of 10 to 12 children aged three to four and their parents or caregivers. The families invited to participate were identified by Social Services, Community Health Services (usually public health nurses) or the Nipawin Early Childhood Team. Families were identified as being in need of this service and unable to access other existing services. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Child aged three to four years.
2. Parents' agreement to attend and participate with their child in the group or to provide another adult participant who was involved with the child's daily life.
3. Completion of an application form containing health information.
4. Recommendation from Community Health Services or Social Services based on the needs of the child and his/her family.
5. Parent's agreement that the child's social skills and language development be assessed before the program.

An individual with training and experience in teaching preschool children was hired to participate in the planning and to lead the preschool program. A second person was hired to assist with the children's groups. The parents' and caregivers' program was planned and led by the Nipawin Early Childhood Team or by other professionals invited to participate. Transportation and child care for siblings were provided where needed.

Through an early intervention approach to at risk families the planning group hoped that long term dependency on social systems would be

reduced. Specifically, they anticipated that children's language and socialization skills would improve along with increased support to parents.

By targeting preschool children, there should be a reduced need for special education in school systems or, at the very least, earlier identification of learning needs. Juel (1988) suggests that if we wait for readiness skills to emerge, and do not intervene, the young child in at risk situations will not have success in school. The Nipawin Early Childhood Team established an intervention program as one approach to breaking the cycle of school failures in families and making education a less adverse and more valued pursuit.

Need for the Study

As a primary school teacher, I am constantly amazed at the amount of learning accomplished in the earliest years of a child's education. Indeed, Beadle (1970) reminds us that about one-half of a person's intellectual development takes place between conception and age four, and about one-third of whatever academic skills children have attained by age eighteen develop between birth and age six. Corson (1988) discusses the "critical period" for language development as the time that begins with the onset of babbling and ends at puberty, suggesting that the limits of future language potential are established for the child during this growth period. We now recognize that the kind of experiences the brain is exposed to in the first years of life dramatically influences how it performs for the rest of its life (Kotulak, 1996; McCain & Mustard, 1999). As more and more is written about the early development of the brain and this crucial time for learning, educators must be increasingly vigilant in promoting the needs of children,

educationally and socially. The care and education of young children should be of the highest priority.

Chambers, Arami, Massue & Morrison (1998) describe the profile of a child at risk as a “constellation of individual, family and school factors” (p.358). These factors include children with low self esteem and poor attitudes toward school; parents with little education who fail to support or encourage learning; and schools with inappropriate or insufficient programs. Chambers et al. (1998) stress the importance of prevention and early intervention rather than waiting for learning deficits to accumulate before providing remedial or special education services.

Goleman (1995) writes about emotional intelligence, a term he uses to explain the competencies of self-awareness, self-discipline, and empathy. He claims that intervention comes too late in the teenage years and is “the equivalent of solving a problem by sending an ambulance to the rescue rather than giving an inoculation that would ward off the disease in the first place” (p.256). He affirms that a child’s readiness for school depends on the basic knowledge of how to learn and lists the “capacity to communicate” as one of seven key elements of this readiness.

In their early years study entitled *Reversing The Real Brain Drain*, McCain & Mustard (1999) discuss the benefits of quality programs for early childhood development and parenting for families from all socioeconomic levels. They describe the powerful new evidence from neuroscience about the early years of development from conception to age six. They confirm that by providing a base for competence and coping skills in the early years of life, school performance, health and behavior will improve the future for all citizens of Canada.

Researchers such as Berrueta-Clement, Schweinhart, Barnett, Epstein and Weikart (1984) discuss exciting results of the effects of a quality preschool program such as the Perry Preschool Project. This early childhood program has provided for potentially improved lifestyles of children through an increase in further education, training, and employment, reduced crime, delinquency and welfare subsistence, and fewer teenage pregnancies.

By focusing on aspects that influence the language use of the young participants involved in the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project, this study can provide documented evidence that will help governments, educational administrations and the general public appreciate the need for social and financial support for young children and their families. My intention is to describe a program designed to support the families of at risk children. An awareness of the effects of such a program will assist in advancing the services to preschool children who are potentially at risk.

Research Question

The major question for this research is: **What factors influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program?** In this study I describe a program designed to address the following guiding questions:

- What characteristics of a preschool program encourage children's use of language?
- How does the interaction between young children and their parents/caregivers affect the children's language use in a preschool child/parent education program?

- How is a teacher most effective in motivating children to use their language in a preschool program?

A focus on the design of a particular program is essential to help understand what factors influence children's language acquisition and communication. As experienced by Howell, Harrison, Stanford, Zahn, & Bracken (1990) in evaluating commercially-produced preschool language curricula, issues such as teacher education levels, experience, instructional procedures and teacher motivation and enthusiasm, may be more important than specific curricula used to enhance children's language skills. Efficacy is significant and therefore the nature and type of an early childhood education program has to be heeded when evaluating effectiveness (Elkind, 1996). In this research, finding out what motivates the children to exchange feelings, ideas, and understandings with others will hopefully indicate significant factors for promoting communication skills.

Purpose of the Study

The primary aim of this study was to determine factors that influence the language use of a small group of children in a preschool child/parent education program. This research was conducted to provide a broad perspective of the language experiences of preschool children who may be at risk when they enter school, and to point to features that promise more effective intervention in assisting and teaching children during this optimal stage of learning.

The families invited to participate in the child/parent education program were identified by Social Services, Community Health Services or the Nipawin Early Childhood Team as having preschool children who were

potentially at risk for school success. The study is a naturalistic inquiry, in that the reality being studied is that of the participants (Borg and Gall, 1989). This study was site specific and although the purpose was not to generalize the results to all at risk children in preschools, examining the factors influencing children's language use in this study may contribute to an understanding of the need for child/parent programs in similar settings.

Related Terms and Concepts

A description of the related terms and concepts regarding a child/parent education program follows. The definitions are presented within the context of the present research.

At risk: The term "at risk" is used for those children whose family backgrounds and life circumstances make it uncertain that they will obtain the stimulation and encouragement to graduate from high school. As well, at risk refers to those children whose circumstances increase the possibility of them leaving school with inadequate levels of reading, math and social skills. Circumstances that brought families to the program in the present study include economic pressures, single parenthood, and substance abuse.

Child/parent education: The term "child/parent education" refers to a program designed to offer families opportunities and resources to help their children achieve school success. The program carried out in the present study was a preschool program that included parent/caregiver involvement for the first hour of the daily session, followed by an hour in which the children continued in the preschool while the parents/caregivers attended a workshop about issues such as health care, stress, behavior management, and budgeting.

Language delay: The term “language delay” refers to children who develop language skills in a normal sequence, but their skills are delayed enough to place them behind their peers (Leverett & Diefendorf, 1992).

Language use: The term “language use” refers to the children’s use of language to interact with others in the context of the preschool situation. In the study, the participants were observed to determine what particular factors within the preschool program appeared to influence the children’s language use.

Preschool program: The term “preschool program” refers to structured education for children three to four years of age. In the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project the children and their families attended a nine-week session scheduled from 9:15 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. two days per week. The families were invited to attend one of three sessions offered during the school year. However if numbers permitted, they may have attended more than one nine-week session.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

A child's success in school can be viewed as a sequence of events consisting of several language-related skills that create a connection between family and school. School achievement is linked to a child's success in learning to read, while learning to read is connected to oral language development and oral language development stems from an environment that is linguistically stimulating (Heath, 1983). The quantity and quality of children's language experiences in their preschool years is profoundly important. Vygotsky (1978) maintains that what children learn depends on the company they keep, the activities they engage in together, and how they do and talk about these activities. Opportunities for children to paraphrase, expand responses and share books with adults provide the link between oral language development and literacy skills (Morrow, 1995).

The major question for this research was: What factors influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program? The intent of this chapter is twofold. First, a discussion of the significance of preschool children's language, and second, a look at what research says with respect to preschool child/parent education programs. I use the three

guiding questions connected to the major question to associate the literature review with the research study. Stated again these are:

- What characteristics of a preschool program encourage children's use of language?
- How does the interaction between young children and their parents/caregivers affect the children's language use in a preschool child/parent education program?
- How is the teacher most effective in motivating children to use their language in a preschool program?

The anticipated outcome of this review is to provide an enhanced understanding and appreciation of the language needs of preschool children who have been designated as being at risk for school success.

Related Literature

Children's Language

It is through language that children learn about their world and then communicate their understanding to others around them (Howell et al., 1990). As children talk they learn to manipulate oral language and experiment with words to convey meaning. Most children by age four use the basic form and structure of their language appropriately (Cohen, Stern, & Balaban, 1983). But like all development, the combination of environmental support and individual differences in ability brings children of the same age to different levels of language facility. The years from age two to five are especially crucial in the process of acquiring language. This is the period of time when a child's vocabulary expands from 250 words to 3000 words, and he or she learns the rules of putting words together properly to speak in

complex sentences (Beaty, 1990). During these years language environment has a significant effect on the child's overall progress.

A young child's language ability is fundamental to his or her learning. Language skills are required for interacting in the learning environment and for comprehending curriculum content. Unfortunately for some children, language and perhaps, more specifically, language at school, is an unpleasant challenge. Children who have very few literacy experiences or little experience with group participation often have difficulty when they enter the school system. Some children have a hard time making the transition from their informal home language to formal, decontextualized classroom language, while others come from homes where the environment and language are different from the school environment (Wallach and Miller, 1995). Naturally, as these children struggle to function in the learning tasks and activities within a large group setting, their self-confidence is put to test. When children who exhibit language delay are placed in a classroom that is heavily dependent upon language competence, they are vulnerable to academic problems. Fitzgerald and Karnes (1987) state that "perhaps the most debilitating characteristic of young at-risk and developmentally handicapped children is a lack of functional communication or a delay in the acquisition of early language skills" (p.31).

A familiar theme in the world of education is 'learning how to learn'. Naisbitt and Aburdene (1982) assert that learning how to learn is the single most important thing children acquire in school. Learning involves many things, including the ability to manage large amounts of information in efficient and effective ways, the ability to express what is known, and the ability to record information for future use. Language processes are

recognized as the basis for learning to read and language learning is considered an important part of learning to read (Morrow, 1997). Children who listen and speak effectively are able to interact successfully with others and develop effective learning strategies and literacy skills (Carrow-Woolfolk, 1988). Through the implementation of the Common Essential Learnings in the Saskatchewan English Language Arts Elementary Curriculum Guide (Saskatchewan Education, Training and Employment, 1992), teachers are alerted to the strong and direct link between the school and the outside world and the need to make this connection through the child's language.

The Bristol Study (Wells, 1985) was an investigation of the language development of 128 children over two and half years, with a subgroup followed through primary school. It was found at preschool entry that all the children had well-developed language skills. For about 90 percent of the population in the study there was no clear relationship between family background and level of language development attained. There was no sign of "verbal deprivation" so often assumed to be characteristic of lower socioeconomic status children. However, an important finding was the strong relationship between knowledge of literacy at age five and all later assessments of school achievements. It was determined that if some lower class children did have linguistic disadvantage, it was in relation to the relatively low value placed on literacy by their parents. This was indicated by the parents' own very limited use of these skills, by the absence of books in homes, and by the infrequency with which they read to their children. As a result these children came to school with a very limited understanding of the purposes of literacy and little knowledge of how to obtain meaning from

print. And, unfortunately, they experienced considerably more difficulty in learning to read and write.

The relationship between reading and oral language is evident in studies of children who are early readers. It has been found that early readers score higher on language screening tests than children who were not reading early (Morrow, 1997). Early readers come from homes where rich language and a great deal of oral language is used. Parents who read to their children on a regular basis promote naturally occurring reading ability in their children. Children who have had a variety of experiences develop a rich oral language and establish a strong relationship between the spoken and written word that often quickly and easily translates to the ability to read the written word (Clements & Warncke, 1994). These findings indicate that an early childhood classroom with an enriched language environment can benefit all children.

A number of educational authorities have acknowledged the interrelationships among spoken language, reading and writing. Durkin's (1966) study of early readers showed that a home experience with a family that encouraged, nurtured and responded to the children's reading interests proved to be an impressive factor in their later reading achievement. In Loban's (1976) longitudinal study of 211 children from kindergarten through twelfth grade, there was a strong relationship between oral language proficiency and achievement in reading and writing. Smith (1985) describes reading as an active, constructive process in which one applies the knowledge of the language system to make meaning from the written language. Adams (1990) tells us that children who come to school with thousands of hours of guidance about print such as storybook reading,

message writing, and letter identification have an advantage for literacy learning.

Children who have insufficient language skills often have negative experiences while attempting to use language, creating a fear of speaking in the classroom (Apps, McIntyre, & Juliebo, 1996). Children with language difficulties are unable to follow the flow of communication during various subject disciplines. These children often become observers as they are unsure of how to express their wants and needs to the people surrounding them. Studies have shown that six-year-olds who score poorly on measures of language and higher mental abilities will fall further behind in each of the elementary years (White, 1991).

Apps, McIntyre and Juliebo (1996) analyzed a small group of primary children to identify differences in language and to develop strategies that would help classroom teachers provide an environment in which language would flourish. They consider it essential to understand the signs of weak oral language so that children who evidence them can be accommodated with the warmth and support that encourages risk-taking without fear of ridicule. Characteristics of language proficient children include:

- the ability to seek consensus,
- being more tentative,
- having a large experiential background,
- using supporting evidence when conversing, and
- listening to others.

The characteristics of language deficient children include:

- being more confrontational,

- being absolute in opinion,
- using knowledge he/she has been told,
- having little use of examples and supporting evidence,
- listening very little, and not able to restrain self in conversations.

(p.19)

Teachers have the opportunity to identify expressive and receptive language problems by observing children's social interaction with peers and adults. Children's expressive language problems can be alleviated by teachers as they support their children's opinions, help them to generate solutions to problems, and encourage their use of exploratory talk (Barnes, 1992). Teachers can assist children with receptive language problems by using gestures or giving visual or tactile cues along with verbal instructions (Howard, Shaughnessy, Sanger & Hux, 1998).

Children are born into a community of language users and their language development is central to their membership of that community (Wells, 1985). It is through interaction with others that children learn the language of their community and how to use language for a variety of purposes with different people in different situations. Children demonstrate meaning and function of language through everyday acts such as talking on the telephone, asking for milk at the dinner table, reading labels at the grocery store and conversing about the day's events (Howard, et al., 1998). The motivation to learn language and to learn through language comes primarily from within the child, but it is the contribution of others that enables the child to encounter new knowledge and skills and make them their own (Wells, 1985). Where learning takes place mainly through linguistic interaction, especially in the early years, the style of interaction

that a child regularly experiences has an important influence on how she or he develops learning strategies and attitudes. The adults a child is with during the preschool years and early years of schooling have a particularly influential role in either facilitating or restricting his or her development.

It is critically important to enable all children, regardless of their family backgrounds or personal characteristics, to have the best possible language experiences as they begin their pathway to “communicative competence”. Pinnell and Jaggar (1991) define communicative competence as “the totality of knowledge that enables a speaker to produce speech that is socially appropriate as well as grammatical in culturally determined contexts, and to understand the speech of others in those contexts” (p.697).

Language is learned from models and through use. When opportunities for both are available to children, language develops, broadens, and deepens (Cohen, et al., 1983). Children have the right to the opportunity to develop to their full potential and the opportunity for lifelong learning so they can transform with the changing world. To allow language delay to occur in young children when it could be prevented infringes upon this basic right. Because children are dependent on others for their rights, families and teachers are obligated to provide for them (Myers & Kotchabhakdi, 1988).

The Preschool Program

There is a window of opportunity in a child’s life that holds his or her greatest learning potential. This window exists only in the child’s earliest years. Preschool experiences have an impact on a child’s language development. Young children like to talk. They come to school having had three or four years of practice talking and listening. Even children who are

designated as having a language delay feel comfortable expressing their desires to the people closest to them. However, their communication skills have been limited to the home environment and its variation of extended experiences. When young children come to school they are suddenly put into an environment that hosts a variety of communicative situations, some that are very different than they have been accustomed to. These differences can be problematic for children with language difficulties (Heath, 1983; Wallach & Miller, 1988; Barnes, 1992). Some of the reasons are as follows (Howard, et al., 1998):

- School language is less reliant on context and does not have similar settings and routines that home conversations have.
- Teachers are often communicating with 25 children simultaneously, contrasting with the normal turn-taking flow of the one-to-one adult-child conversation in homes.
- Children have less opportunity to initiate conversations or discussions at school because the teacher often controls the topic.
- Limited information about children's personal life experiences may restrict teachers' understandings of references to past events.
- The school culture requires a certain form for narratives that may not parallel that of children's home cultures.

Children's behavior and comfort level in the classroom can bear heavily on their confidence in language skills. A survey of kindergarten teachers revealed their beliefs that the essence for success in kindergarten was the importance of such skills as the ability to communicate needs and thoughts (Elkind, 1996).

Language is the most important means of social interaction (Corson, 1991). A child uses language to learn about the world. The oral language functions that Halliday (1973) has categorized provides a range of everyday language uses:

- *Instrumental*: Language is used as a means of getting things done;
- *Regulatory*: Language is used to control the behavior of others;
- *Interactional*: Language is used by children to interact with others;
- *Personal*: Language is a form of individuality.
- *Heuristic*: Language allows one to explore the environment;
- *Imaginative*: Language is used to create one's own environment;
- *Informative*: Language is a means of communicating information.

Halliday (1978) stressed the importance of children experiencing the full range of language functions in the school environment. In a study of children's uses of language in primary classrooms using Halliday's seven categories, Pinnell (1975) found that the critical difference in fostering a range of language functions was the teacher's adept ability to invite children to use language for a variety of purposes.

Andrew Wilkinson (1971) coined the term "oracy" in the 1960's in England as a parallel to literacy, stressing the importance of speaking and listening skills. Oracy has a significant role in language development in school. Teachers understand that language is the central achievement necessary for success in schooling. Corson (1988) maintains that the nature of the school curriculum determines what constitutes knowledge, what knowledge is passed on through language, and ensures that students' achievement of knowledge is "displayed" in the form of written or spoken language. Talk is the primary expressive mode of language. It makes sense

then to develop a preschool child's most crucial language skill if talk is to be used by teachers in evaluating a child's learning.

Maclure, Phillips, & Wilkinson (1988) call for the view "oracy as a tool for learning". This notion advocates an indirect approach to fostering development of students' language abilities. In this view, talk is the medium for learning in every subject area of the curriculum, not just language arts. The assumption is that, through talking, students construct knowledge and, at the same time, develop skill in different modes of discourse. When children are given the opportunity to practice and use language with other children during work and play they develop understandings of cooperation, independence and competition (Black, 1979).

Encouraging Children's Language Development and Use

A developmentally appropriate program provides an environment that contributes to the overall development of the children who participate and encourages language development. The preschool teacher is required to make decisions about the well-being and education of children based on:

- what is known about child development and learning;
- what is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of the individual children in the group; and
- knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live (Bredekamp, (1997).

Children's language development in a preschool environment is accommodated with the understanding of some basic principles of early language learning provided by Ward (1997):

1. Human beings are predisposed to learn language easily.
2. Language is learned through using it in interaction with others.

3. Children learn the patterns of language through hearing many examples rather than from explicit teaching.
4. Although we can discuss the underlying rules of language as discrete systems (syntax, vocabulary), language is learned in use, and all systems learned together. (p.2-3)

A preschool classroom that is “talk-friendly” has an environment that calls for communication (Booth & Thornley-Hall, 1991). The teacher focuses on establishing and maintaining surroundings that help children realize the importance of communication. The classroom that is talk-friendly motivates children to develop their oral communication skills in a variety of situations. Children need to understand that their ideas are valued and respected. Language is learned through hearing and using language. An environment that creates opportunities for authentic and productive communication assists young children in their growth towards becoming effective and confident speakers and listeners.

The most important characteristic of a talk-friendly classroom is the warm and accepting climate. Ward (1997) suggests that ongoing social talk and the children’s participation in planned discussions indicates a comfortable learning environment. Children become more willing to engage in formal language discussions if they have gained confidence in themselves as communicators in relaxed occasions. For young children to become confident talkers they need to understand that they are free to make mistakes without being immediately corrected. A sense of trust is built by sharing talking experiences that have been upsetting or unpleasant for others or the teacher. An emphasis on listening skills helps all children see that what they have to say is as important as any other language user’s talk.

Preschool classrooms are made up of a variety of learners. Although children learn early to adapt their language to different people and settings, when they enter school they are involved with differences in routines and with people they have not yet encountered. Here is where they learn to be interested and tolerant participants during conversations. Teachers need to be sensitive to different cultures, divergent learning abilities, and to gender equity. All children should feel valued and respected in the classroom. With these differences in the classroom children will learn from experience how to adjust their language. However, explicit teaching is required on occasion when appropriate language needs to be learned quickly. A talk-friendly classroom provides an environment fostering a sense of fellowship among children, which hopefully they transfer into society as they grow to become competent communicators.

Research supports the integration of speaking and listening, and the development of language curricula that provide students with opportunities to use language for a wide variety of purposes, in different situations, and with different audiences. As children talk, they learn to manipulate the oral language and experiment with words to convey meaning. Young learners benefit from playing with words orally before and while they are encountering them in print (Clements & Warncke, 1994). Spoken language is used to form social relationships, to communicate, and to learn. When discussing the components of language arts curricula, Pinnell & Jaggar (1991) suggest five principles for oral language teaching that should be considered (p.710):

1. *Children should be offered many opportunities to engage in talking.*

Through interaction with others, children learn the functions of

- language, the structure of different forms of spoken discourse, and the social rules that govern how language is used in different contexts.
2. *Children should be provided with opportunities to engage in many kinds of talking.* The most effective techniques for promoting oral language development are small-group student discussions and project work, informal conversations between students and their peers and teachers, language games, storytelling, creative dramatics, and role-playing.
 3. *Oral language teaching should provide opportunities for children to develop the skills necessary to use language for the full range of social and intellectual functions.* Teachers need to consider: a.) The language tasks children require in order to be successful in mastering particular content, and b.) The kind of context or situation for working and learning so children will be assisted with the required language patterns.
 4. *Teachers need to be aware that context plays a central role in language use and learning.* Teachers must be aware of the language environment in their classrooms and understand the conditions that may foster or hinder oracy development. Those who believe children bring their own knowledge to new learning situations will base instruction on the assumption that students do have knowledge upon which different forms of discourse can be built.
 5. *Teachers must understand that oral language is one means by which students gain access to learning and display their competence.* Teachers' awareness of oral language evaluation is a step toward

finding ways to provide greater access for and participation from all students.

Child/Parent Preschool Education

A child/parent education program is a proactive approach to addressing the needs of at risk children and their families. The children are provided with a preschool environment to accommodate their natural curiosity while the parents are given the opportunity to develop the skills and the confidence to help their children. The children's language use is encouraged in the context of interactive experiences and the involvement with their parents or caregivers is crucial to the children's success and attitude toward learning.

The rationale for parent involvement in a young child's education is based on the assumption that because a child spends the majority of time with his or her parents or family, services to that child's family should provide the greatest impact on that child's development (Robinson, Rosenberg, & Beckman, 1982). Early education programs stress parent involvement because they recognize the "importance of the family, rather than the school, as the ultimate source of children's values and behavior" (Cole, 1986, p.91), and because "sound early education is an extension of the home, not of the school" (Elkind, 1986, p.636). A child/parent education program provides parents with an active opportunity to make a difference in the language development of their youngsters by turning at risk learners into empowered learners (Come & Fredericks, 1995).

The child/parent education program described in this research was developed in cooperation with the parents, emphasizing the benefits of their support in the education of the children. In this study, The Preschool for

Child/Parent Education Project evolved from a belief that parents, no matter what their social or economic standing, have the potential for making an educational difference in their children's lives when offered sincere opportunities for becoming an important member of the educational team (Come & Fredericks, 1995).

In Schorr's (1989) discussion of early interventions to reduce intergenerational disadvantage, the author outlines the attributes of effective programs.

1. *Successful programs are comprehensive and intensive.* They provide a wide array of services, delivered flexibly and coherently. For children who are potentially at risk, the odds of school success depend on adequate staff/child ratios and on the program's ability to provide health, nutrition, and social services, to work successfully with parents and to focus on children's developmental needs. These are the children for whom quality childcare in the preschool years can make the difference between a high and very low chance of school success.
2. *In successful programs, staff have the time, training, and skills necessary to build relationships of trust and respect with children and families.* Leaders of successful programs know that *how* services are provided is as important as *what* is provided. Professionals in these programs emphasize collaboration, listening to parents, exchanging information rather than instructing, and readiness to help parents gain greater control over their own lives and to act more effectively on behalf of their children.
3. *Successful programs deal with the child as part of a family, and the family as part of a neighborhood and community.* Successful

programs generally evolve into an explicitly two-generational approach. The successful preschool enlists parents in collaborative efforts to give children reasons to learn.

4. *Successful programs cross long-standing professional and bureaucratic boundaries.* In the most effective programs, staff apply their ingenuity to getting people *into* the program, not keeping them out. Nurses, social workers, teachers, and physicians collaborate to provide family support. (p.366)

In a report on the benefits of preschool programs, Schweinhart, Berrueta-Clement, Barnett, Epstein & Weikart (1985) maintained that a good early childhood program teaches children two things: how to be good learners, and how to work with adults who are not members of their families.

Good preschool programs have both short- and long-term positive effects on at risk children (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1985). Longitudinal studies of preschool programs designed for children considered to be at risk have found to produce significant positive long term effects. Head Start, a child development program launched in 1965 for preschool children from low-income families, has supported millions of children and their families in both the United States and in Canada (McKey, Condelli, Ganson, Barrett, McConkey & Plantz, 1985). The Perry Preschool Project was a study that examined the lives of 123 African Americans born in poverty and at high risk of failing school (Berrueta-Clement, et al., 1984). The research findings imply that children who have attended preschool repeat fewer grades and require special education classes less often than their peers. Education level, employment, involvement with the legal system, need for social assistance, as well as family and marital relationships have been positively influenced

up to twenty years later. However, as found in a study by West and Hausken (1996) investigating the benefits of early education programs, a higher number of risk factors such as low maternal education, poverty, mother's minority status language, and single parenthood reduces the number of preliteracy and numeracy skills gained by preschool children.

Unfortunately, even when a preschool program is available in a community, many of the children who could benefit from the experience are unable to attend. Possible barriers that prevent families from enrolling their preschoolers are insufficient financial resources, lack of transportation, and parents' inability to make a commitment to participate because childcare is not available for younger children. The same barriers often prevent parents from obtaining support as well as information and training which would help them provide a richer environment for their children. Preschool programs that combine parent participation and education components produce long-term results and, by affecting the parent's behavior as well, can influence the development of other children in the family. The premise is that families can and should function as behavioral change agents for their own children (Carney, 1983; Cartwright, 1981).

An important element for success with a program designed to teach parents how to help their children is the relationship established with parents (France and Hager, 1993). In a child/parent education program, special care must be taken to inform parents of the importance of their role in their children's educational progress. Responding to the families' needs as well as to the preschool agenda promotes a sense of shared responsibility with teachers and sets the stage for continued school success. A survey of early childhood programs (Campbell & Taylor, 1996) showed that by supporting

parents in their role, child/parent education programs can help parents make positive changes in their own educational and employment levels and reduce child abuse and neglect.

Education programs for young children that adopt a parent-participation component reinforce consistency of early growth and development between the child's family and the classroom environment. The program leaders of the Intergenerational Reading Project (France & Hager, 1993) adopted three general principles to promote better home-school rapport:

1. *Recruit* – “Difficulties in the recruitment of parent participants” and “erratic attendance of adult participants” are frequently noted as two of the major challenges confronted by educators in developing intergenerational or family literacy programs (Nickse, p. 635, 1989). Consideration should be given to the individual circumstances of each family and leaders should consistently reaffirm their confidence in the commitment of the parents to the educational welfare of their children.
2. *Respect* - A sense of shared responsibility for the education of children is a determining factor in making parents more comfortable in the school setting. Leaders should take special care to inform the parents of the importance of their role in their children's educational progress.
3. *Respond* - The format and content of the program should evolve in response to the needs of the participants.

Interactional Effects on Language Development and Use

One of the most useful strategies parents can contribute to their children's development of language is "scaffolding" (Bruner, 1985). This refers to the help provided by an adult while the child is working at a meaningful task. The child does everything he or she can, and the adult provides help so the child can complete the task successfully (Au, 1993). A type of scaffolding relating to child/parent education is the "two-tiered" scaffolding described by Gaffeny and Anderson (1991). The first level of scaffolding involves the support offered to the child by the parent, and the second level refers to the education that is provided to the parents so they can experience success while working with their children.

Parents are a child's most important teachers. Parents bring unique skills, knowledge, and individual differences to their parenting role. Children thrive on encouragement from their families and being involved together in a learning situation that is rich in oral language and hands-on experiences provides children with the opportunity to enjoy learning with the most influential people in their lives. Group activities that encourage participation and cooperation among family and friends, and free play opportunities that allow children to use their communication and social skills, can build and support a child's foundation in the learning process.

Teacher Efficacy

Although the family environment is the primary context for early communication, when children attend preschool the classroom teacher assumes the role of language facilitator. Kratcoski & Katz (1998) state "a teacher's ability to plan activities that provide varied linguistic experiences is critical throughout the preschool years" (p.30). In looking at elements

depicting the success of preschool programs, Wright (1983) found that teachers who were highly motivated promoted program quality. The morale of the staff was a significant factor, along with a curriculum that showed a clear focus and purpose for teaching. In discussing a balanced approach to early childhood education, Lodish (1996) upholds that young children need teachers who can integrate skills into their play activities and make them meaningful. In preparing language experiences for children, preschool teachers should keep in mind John Dewey's (1957) dictum from 60 years ago stating that the ultimate test in value of what is learned is its use and application.

In the Bristol Study (Wells, 1985) it was found that there was a clear relationship between the children's rate of progress in language learning and the amount of conversation they experienced. What seemed important in the child's conversational experience were the one-to-one situations in which the adult was talking about matters that were of interest and concern to the child. The most effective way for children to experience conversation is through joint construction. Teachers can adjust their speech to the child's level of development. The child's contribution to the conversation provides the scaffolding with which he or she constructs understanding of the language (Wells, 1985). The adult listens attentively in order to understand the child's meaning and then seeks to extend and develop it to help the child.

Fifty years ago Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the view of the teacher as essentially a facilitator of learning. Vygotsky labeled the zone between what children can accomplish on their own and what they can accomplish with the guidance of adults or older or more competent peers, 'the zone of proximal development'. The Vygotsky aphorism is "what the child can do

today with help, tomorrow he will be able to do alone". Children learn best when they collaborate with the teacher at the point where the child has a clear understanding.

Teacher as Language Motivator

Dumtchin (1988) suggests that teachers use child-centered speech when attending to a child's topic and incorporating it into the next comment or question. This provides respect for the child while at the same time making it easier for the child to remember what has been said. The information is easier for the child to remember and process because it is meaningful. There are several techniques available when talking to children. Dumtchin (1988) suggests that some are:

1. *Modeling*. Modeling refers to the adult's use of grammatically correct speech.
2. *Expatiation*. In using expatiation, the adult maintains the child's topic while adding other information.
3. *Open-ended questioning*. Open-ended questions are those which may elicit a variety of answers rather than "yes", "no", or another specific response.
4. *Expansion*. An adult using expansion restates the child's incomplete statement in order to make a logical, complete statement without responding negatively or insisting that the child repeat the statement the correct way.
5. *Recasting*. Recasting is a form of expansion but the grammatical structure is altered.

One of the most enriching experiences for children's language is the open-ended exploratory talk that comes from listening to stories. In *The*

Meaning Makers, Wells (1986) presents case studies of six children to identify the major linguistic influences on their later educational achievement. Wells found that stories are the way that children make sense of their lives. They give meaning to observable events by making connections between them and the real world, and the number of stories children heard in the preschool years had a lasting effect. Experiences with books at age five were directly related to reading comprehension at age seven and again at age eleven. Early exposure to books helps children come to know two essential things. They learn how print works and that reading is worth the effort it takes. Reading stories to children gives them the opportunity to prepare for the decontextualized learning situations at school. In order to meet the demands of formal education, a child needs to be able to disembed his or her thinking from an immediate activity and learn from the medium of words alone. Stories, and the discussion that arises from them, provide an important introduction to this intellectually powerful function of language (Wells & Nicholls, 1985).

Morrow (1997) suggests that teachers select and offer children's literature that represents varieties of language and experience. Some children's books feature the sounds of language and aid auditory discrimination or incorporate additional phonemes into a child's language repertoire. Others help develop the syntactic complexity of a child's language through embedding, transformations, and the use of numerous adjectives and adverbs. Craft books require children to follow directions. Wordless books encourage them to create their own stories from pictures. Concept books feature words such as 'up', 'down', 'out', 'near', and 'far', or involve children in mathematical reasoning. Realistic literature deals with

death, divorce, loneliness, fear, and daily problems. Books of riddles, puns, jokes, and tongue twisters show children how language plays on meaning in certain situations. Poetry introduces children to rhyme, metaphor and simile, and encourages them to recite and create poems. When children hear and discuss the language in books they internalize what they have heard and it becomes part of their own language. Research studies have found that children who have had stories read to them frequently develop more sophisticated language structures and increased vocabulary (Morrow, 1995).

The preschool teacher is able to provide different experiences for developing oral language in a variety of functions (Halliday, 1978). The following strategies are provided by Apps, McIntyre and Juliebo, (1996):

1. *Instrumental language (polite requests, persuasion)* - Children are encouraged to ask the teacher or their peers for help if they don't understand.
2. *Regulatory language (giving orders, commanding)* - The teacher creates situations in which each child (especially language delayed children) is in control of small and large groups.
3. *Interactional language (social language)* - The teacher encourages small group projects, especially in pairs or trios. The teacher engages in small group dialogue with the children.
4. *Personal language (express individuality)*- The teacher is willing to listen to the children and encourage them to relate their personal experiences in relation to the subject matter.
5. *Imagination language (drama, poetry, storytelling)* - Many opportunities are allowed for children to engage in role-playing, drama, story-telling and other activities which encourage imagination.

6. *Heuristic language (investigation, wondering, language of environment)* - Children are allowed to become actively involved in projects of their choice and in the modality they wish to investigate.

7. *Informative language (communicate information)* - Children present little reports in small groups in order to encourage discussion and feedback.

Children learn the value of differences in other cultures when the teacher encourages intercultural equality within the preschool classroom. Holidays and customs from the different cultures of the students in the classroom can be recognized and celebrated. Stories, poems, books, and materials should not stereotype a particular race. Displaying cultural materials in favorable and interesting ways helps others to regard the differences with respect and admiration. To advocate a multicultural society, all dialects and languages need to be respected, encouraged, and developed. Bredekamp (1997) states that, “teachers need to understand children’s cultural contexts and better use the full range of children’s abilities and interests to help them achieve the learning goals of the school”. (p. 38)

Teachers in preschools need to encourage the use of gender-inclusive language and be aware of the balance in conversations or discussions among boys and girls. Ward (1997) discusses the research in the differences between male and female talk. She states that although “girls are often identified as having language skills superior to boys and achieve well in language and reading tasks, they tend to be denied a place in instructional conversations” (p.67). If boys tend to dominate oral language, the teacher should pause the discussion and explain that everyone’s questions and

opinions are warranted and important. Teachers need to structure talk activities to make them equitable.

Summary

The literature presents the benefits of preschool education, especially when combined with parent involvement. Children's achievement in school is affected by their language experiences, and school success correlates with favorable lifestyles. The earlier a variety of language experiences are included into children's environments the better chance children have. As Schweinhart et al. (1985) confirm, "the quality of life of today's young children has profound consequences for tomorrow's adults" (p.553). Some families require additional support in order to provide the necessary experiences to stimulate language acquisition, and programs serving these families require the development of warm and trusting relationships.

Although awareness of the need for child/parent education programs is evident in the increased chances of high school completion, effects on family support and reduced incidence of delinquency, there still remains a problem in substantiating their value. Evaluation and measurement of success is difficult because of the expense and the distance in time and place of intervention and outcomes. As with most investments in growth, the effects of intervention in childhood years comes later on, and often does not show on the budget of the agency making the investment at the time (Schorr, 1989).

The child/parent education program that is the focus of this study blends the education of young children with the education of their families. The parent sessions regarding childcare, nutrition, cultural sensitivity, stress

and behavior management is relevant to the lives of the families both at home and at the preschool. Considering the combination of quality language experiences for young children and the powerful effect of parental encouragement, an understanding of the factors that influence the children's use of language will indeed be a reflection of the program's success.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

The Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was designed to help families with difficult life situations. The purpose of the program was to provide preschool education with an emphasis on parent involvement. My interest in the project was with the language use of the children. I wanted to know what aspects of the preschool program influenced the children's use of language. How did the preschool environment motivate the children to use and respond to language? How did the children use their language to interact with others at the preschool? By observing the children in the preschool setting I could determine and describe certain factors that seemed to inspire the children to use language within the context of the preschool.

Qualitative research is research intended to explore social phenomena by immersing the investigator in the situation for an extended period of time (Slavin, 1992). This type of research depends on doing fieldwork and going to the site in order to observe behavior in the natural setting. Process, meaning and understanding is what qualitative research is about.

Qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities – that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and

perception (Merriam, 1988). A qualitative study describes the real-life context in which an intervention has occurred. Considering the involvement of the children, parents, teachers and members of the Nipawin Early Childhood Team, a qualitative study with the above characteristics seemed to be the appropriate choice.

Designing a descriptive case study of four participants and their parents/caregivers who attended the second session of the preschool program provided the opportunity to investigate the language use of the children. Merriam (1988) defines a descriptive case study as one which “presents a detailed account of the phenomenon under study” (p.27). This type of case study is seen as particularly useful in innovative areas of education or in areas in which not much research has been done. Lancy (1993) states that a case study can explain unique links in real-life interventions that are too complex for a survey or experimental strategies. Case study research may focus on a situation in which the intervention has no clear single set of outcomes. By concentrating on a single phenomenon, such as the language use of four children, a case study is an approach that can uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1988).

In order to gather information about the language experiences of the children, I made several visits to the preschool classroom. Video recordings and audiotapes of the participants engaged in preschool activities, checklists, fieldnotes, and classroom observations as well as interviews with the parent/caregiver participants and the preschool teacher, served to make up the collection of data. A discussion of the procedures and related data sources follows.

Research Site

The Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was situated in Ecole Alex Wright School in Nipawin, Saskatchewan. At the time of the study, the town of Nipawin had a population of approximately 5000 people. Ecole Alex Wright School was a dual track school, offering programs in English and French Immersion. It had an enrollment of approximately 220 children in kindergarten to grade two, with approximately 25% of the children having Aboriginal heritage. The preschool and parent programs were housed in two kindergarten classrooms on Wednesdays and Fridays from 9:15 a.m. to 11:45 a.m., when these classrooms were not used for regular kindergarten programming.

Participant Selection

There were seven children enrolled in the second session of the preschool program, scheduled from January 13 to March 12, 1999. After consulting with the preschool teacher, I chose four children along with their parents/caregivers to be the participants for this study. I felt that keeping the number of participants low would allow for greater depth and richness of data to be collected and analyzed. The four child participants are referred to by pseudonyms: Billy, Debby, Lyle, and Walter. Their parents or caregivers are referred to as Billy's mom, or Debby's caregiver, etc. The preschool teacher is referred to as Mrs. G. and the teacher assistant as Mrs. R.

The participants were chosen to represent both genders and different cultural backgrounds. One child was three years old; the other three children were four years old. One child was of Aboriginal background. Three parents and one caregiver of these children attended the preschool education

program. The families accessed the education program for various reasons; however, the parents expressed particular interest in the socialization aspect of the program for both their children and themselves.

Timeline

The Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project scheduled three nine-week sessions for the 1998/1999-year as follows:

- First Session - October 13 to December 15, 1998
- Second Session - January 13 to March 12, 1999
- Third Session - April 7 to June 13, 1999

I collected data during the second preschool session. Throughout the first session, as a bystander, I was able to see how the program operated. This allowed time to consider the data collection methods that I would use. I planned to be a non-participant observer and try not to disrupt the program as it functioned. Because I was teaching full time during the research process I arranged with the administration to use planning days (Nipawin School Division policy) for the purposes of data collection. As well, my principal agreed to cover my teaching assignment for short periods as needed.

I met with the parent/caregiver participants of the second preschool session at the introductory class to inform them of my study and the data collection process during the preschool classes. After I described the project and read through the consent letter, they signed duplicate forms. (See Appendix A.) The parents and caregivers were very cooperative and quite enthusiastic that the study was involved in some way with the university. With an understanding of some family situations, I emphasized the

importance of regular attendance for the success of the preschool program and the study.

During the nine-week session I visited once per week for 1½ hours and alternated between Wednesdays and Fridays. I also alternated the block of time in which I visited, 9:15 to 10:45 one week, 10:45 to 12:00 the next. This was because during the first half of the morning the parents/caregivers attended the preschool with their child, while during the second half they went to another classroom for workshops about issues such as parenting skills, nutrition, and stress management.

Sources of Data

Upon arriving at the preschool classroom for visits to collect data I met briefly with the teacher and teacher assistant. They explained the activities that were planned for the block of time I would be there. I then knew where to set up the tape recorder or video camera. I also carried a clipboard for the purposes of anecdotal records and checklists. When the children and adults arrived we chatted about various topics. My feelings of being an intruder quickly dissipated when after a couple of visits the adults would help to set up my equipment, and the children would move the tape recorder if it happened to be in their way.

The following is an outline of the four sources of data included in this study.

1. Observation Checklist

Ward (1997) maintains the most authentic method of gathering information about children's language is to sit in on student discussions or conversations and record observations of their participation on a checklist.

A checklist was designed to help synthesize my observations about the children's ability to use and respond to language (Sullivan, 1994) and included oral language functions (Halliday, 1978). From the checklist I could gather information about the children's participation during a particular talk experience. I completed two observation checklists for each child during the nine-week program to record each child's involvement in language experiences in the preschool setting. (See Appendix B.)

2. Field notes and Videotapes/Audiotapes

Wells (1990) encourages the use of video recordings in classroom research. He suggests that the video recordings function as a text relating to classroom interaction. Videotapes and audiotapes were created of the children involved in various preschool activities. These allowed for examination of how and where the children were using language in the classroom. Transcripts were made of the video recordings and the audiotapes. Field notes were in the form of anecdotal records describing the children's activities and their interaction with the other children, the preschool teacher, and their parents/caregivers.

3. Interviews

At the end of the nine-week session I invited each parent and their child to the Dairy Queen for a treat at my expense. This provided an informal meeting place and they agreed to have the conversation audiotaped. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes. I used a set of guiding questions, but the interviews were kept semi-formal. (See Appendix C.) The parents were very willing to talk about their child's involvement and the effects of the preschool experience. I later created transcripts to look for themes or parallel ideas occurring in the participants' comments and responses.

4. Document Analysis

A questionnaire designed and administered by the Nipawin Early Childhood Team was used for data on parent satisfaction of the program. (See Appendix D.) One of the team members explained and/or assisted the parents/caregivers to complete the questionnaire. The team used the results of the questionnaire for the purpose of evaluating the program.

A written report from the preschool teacher following the session was available for data analysis. This report included an evaluation of the organization and implementation of the preschool program. It also included a progress report of the children.

Data Analysis

The major question for this research was: **What factors influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program?** In an attempt to answer this question, data reduction involved analysis of interview transcripts, field notes, observation checklists and transcripts of the videotaped and audeotaped sessions. Data analysis is the selecting, sorting, and categorizing of research data.

My past experiences as a primary teacher have led me to understand the significance of communication among children, parents and a teacher in the early childhood education process. I was aware of the importance of a nurturing learning environment, the need for a teacher who is capable of providing for the needs of young children, and the importance of a supportive home life. However, the preschool child/parent education program offered language situations that were different to those in a regular classroom and called for new understandings. I was especially interested in

how the involvement of the parents in the program would affect the children's use of language.

Recurring themes observed during the participants' activities and through the parents/caregivers' comments and in the related literature made it possible to devise a set of categories and a method of coding the data.

The following categories were used to code the data:

- Preschool environment
- Parent/caregiver involvement
- Teacher efficacy

Interpretation of Data

The data interpretation was open-ended and ongoing from the first visit. Throughout the course of the study, I attempted to keep in mind that the focus of this case study research was to describe, not to evaluate. There was no attempt to assess the effectiveness of the preschool education program. The children's language experiences were observed and described in the context of the preschool education program.

Ethics of the Study

The research was carried out under the guidelines set out by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioral Sciences Research. Participants were informed of the research project and specific permission was obtained through the use of a consent form. (See Appendix E.) Every effort was made throughout the study to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. The data transcripts were

shared with the parents/caregivers and Transcript/Data Release Forms were signed following the transcription of the audiotapes. (See Appendix F.)

The data will be safely and securely stored at the campus for five years according to the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee guidelines for behavioral research studies. Results of the research project will be made available to all participants upon request, and other interested parties following the completion of the study. In the event of publication, only aggregate data will be reported.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter includes a description of the participants and the preschool classroom where the children's use of language was researched. A review of the procedures for the research is provided along with a discussion of the sources of data included in the study. The factors used to analyze the data are discussed, and the data are presented and analyzed within each factor.

To ensure anonymity, the participants in this research will be referred to by pseudonyms, and their parents/caregivers will be referred to as Billy's mom, etc. The preschool teacher will be identified as Mrs. G. and the preschool teacher assistant will be referred to as Mrs. R.

The Preschool

The preschool, where the children's language use was researched, was situated in Ecole Alex Wright School in Nipawin, Saskatchewan. Ecole Alex Wright School has an enrollment of approximately 220 children in kindergarten to grade two, with approximately 25% of the children having Aboriginal heritage. The Nipawin Early Childhood Team decided to house

the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project in this particular elementary school for the following reasons:

- The Nipawin School Division was a partner of the Nipawin Early Childhood Team.
- Alex Wright School had two kindergarten classrooms available for sharing space, learning materials and equipment.
- Limited financial resources meant teaching materials would need to be provided in-kind through the school budget.
- The parents/caregivers of preschool children would have the opportunity to become comfortable with a primary school environment.
- Many of the workshop presenters for the parent education program were already associated with the school.

During the 1998/99 school year I taught a grade one class at Ecole Alex Wright School. The convenience of having the preschool program in the location where I worked allowed for easy access to the research site and close contact with the preschool participants. It also provided the opportunity to view the preschool project from more than one perspective. As a researcher, I was seeking the actual aspects of the preschool that influenced the children's use of language. As a teacher, I was interested in seeing how these preschool language experiences would affect the children's progress in future years. This study provided a means of connecting the two perspectives.

With its abundance of young students, the climate of Ecole Alex Wright School is one of jubilation. The hallways proudly display the beauty of young artists and beginning authors. Through the classroom doors children are seen participating in discussions, listening to stories or

involving themselves in learning activities at tables and desks. During recess, teachers help with jacket zippers and listen to excited children before setting up for the next lesson or stopping at the staff lounge. The schoolyard is greeting card perfect, with its colorful groups of children at play. This lively atmosphere suggests the appropriate setting for a preschool, an ideal place for preschool children and their parents to become acquainted with a new learning environment.

I met with Mrs. G., the preschool teacher, previous to the preschool session to be researched. In discussing the study, I explained that I would be observing the language use of the children in an attempt to determine factors within the preschool program that influenced their talking and listening skills. We also talked about the research process. I assured Mrs. G. that I was not evaluating the children's language ability, her teaching skills or the preschool program.

My first opportunity to meet the parents of the children was at the introductory class for the preschool session. Linda Spice, the principal at Ecole Alex Wright School and a member of the Nipawin Early Childhood Team, organized a meeting with the parents/caregivers to explain the preschool program and cooperatively plan the parent workshops for the upcoming session. I arranged with Mrs. Spice for time during this meeting to introduce myself and describe my research project. The parents and caregivers were interested and seemed very comfortable with the idea of the study. Of the seven children enrolled in this preschool session, three parents and two caregivers were in attendance. One of the caregivers would also be bringing a sister of the preschool child she was caring for. The older sister attended kindergarten on alternate days. A couple of days after the

introductory class the other caregiver in attendance informed me that the parent of the two children she would be bringing did not want to be involved in the study. This left four children to include in my case study, a number I had hoped to work with.

On my first morning of observing I arrived at the classroom thirty minutes early and was greeted by Mrs. G., the preschool teacher. She was setting up centers and organizing her teaching materials. Soon her teaching assistant, Mrs. R., arrived to help arrange the classroom. On various tables they set out wooden puzzles, an assortment of books, and containers of play dough. Understanding that an early childhood classroom is a busy place, I took note of where the various centers were situated and where I could observe and use my tape recorder or video camera.

The preschool shares a classroom with a kindergarten class and therefore Mrs. G. stored her learning materials on a large cart kept in the principal's office. Each preschool day she wheeled the cart into the room loaded with the required supplies. The physical appearance of the early childhood classroom was inviting. The furniture was arranged so that space was provided for whole class interaction, small group work and play centers. There were hexagon tables for group work, a painting center, a large carpeted area, a sand/water center, a housekeeping/drama area, and a book center. Display shelving holding manipulatives such as building blocks, lego, puzzles, small vehicles, and various plastic toys was accessible to the children. Bulletin boards displayed the alphabet, numbers, calendar, colors, weather chart, and artwork created by the kindergarten children. A bulletin board in the hallway was available for the preschool children to display their work.

Although I have taught children in the primary grades for twenty years, this new role of researcher was an uneasy feeling of intrusion. Suddenly I was struck with a flash of silly decisions. Should I hold my clipboard or leave it on a table? Should I sit down quietly or offer to help the teachers in setting up? I was concerned that my presence would cause others to be nervous. My uneasiness was soon alleviated as the children began to arrive and I fell into the comfortable routine of being with children.

I joined the teachers to greet the children arriving with their parents or caregivers. As I helped with winter clothing I introduced myself to the children. They looked at me curiously but readily accepted my explanation that I would be visiting them at the preschool a few times to watch them work and play. As the children and their parents/caregivers arrived Mrs. R. guided them to a table with play dough where she and I accompanied them. Mrs. G. continued to greet at the door until everyone had come and then announced it was time to go to the gym.

The Children

Seven children were enrolled in this preschool session. Of the four children attending on the first day, three were in my study: Walter, Lyle, and Billy. Debby was away visiting relatives. Although I did not have a choice in selecting the participants, my group worked out well demographically. There was a mix in gender - one girl, and three boys, and a difference of ages: Lyle, Debby and Walter were four years old and Billy was three years old. Of the four children, Lyle was of Aboriginal background, presenting a group cultural blend of twenty-five percent Aboriginal, the same percentage as the school population. On my initial visit to the preschool I could see my

small group of participants was a mix of personalities. In the following pages I introduce and describe each of the children involved in the study.

Walter

Walter was the first child to arrive with his mom on a cold January morning. At all times he kept physical contact with his mom, either holding her hand or clinging to her arm or leg. When they moved to the play dough table Walter sat on his mom's knee and did not attempt to pick up the play dough. Walter's mom made play dough shapes and placed his hand on the shapes while encouraging him verbally. He showed no interest in the activity and was content to watch others sitting at the table. Walter did not say a word. Later, in the gym, while playing a parachute game, Walter moved away from his mom to chase a ball that bounced off the parachute. He smiled brightly for the first time that morning. During story time Walter snuggled on his mom's lap while Mrs. G. read the story *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*. He did not join the choral reading parts with the other children, but watched and listened to the story. At snack time Walter ate his ice cream treat with one hand while he kept his other hand on his mom's arm.

Walter was four years old and the youngest of three children. The assistant director of Nipawin School Division had referred Walter to the preschool program. Walter was registered with the Northeast Early Childhood Intervention Project for speech and language intervention. His mom informed me that he had tubes implanted in his ears just before he turned three years old and had rarely talked before then. She said he still did not talk much, but that he talked more at home than at the preschool program. Walter had hearing loss and his hearing was described as similar to "listening under water". A concern about possible autistic characteristics

had prompted a referral for assessment. Walter attended sixteen out of seventeen preschool mornings.

Lyle

When Lyle and his mom arrived at preschool on the first morning he cheerfully led the way to join the play dough activity. He began making snakes with the play dough while telling about a boa constrictor he had seen on a recent television program. His mom sat beside him and commented on how much Lyle enjoyed animals like snakes. In the gym, Lyle played the parachute game with enthusiasm. At story time he sat close to Mrs. G. on the carpet and was very focused on the story. Lyle enjoyed participating in the choral reading parts, and he interjected with the comment, "*I'm tired.*" Mrs. G. acknowledged his feelings and Lyle continued to participate in the story. During play center time Lyle chose to play with building blocks along with Mrs. G. and another child. As Lyle ate his ice cream treat at snack time he commented, "*I like this*". When Mrs. W., the teacher assistant, asked Lyle to pass the salty snacks around, he happily offered them to everyone with a smile, and said, "*Would you like some?*" Lyle enjoyed the socializing at snack time.

Lyle was four years old and the youngest of three children. Lyle's family was referred to the preschool by Social Services. Their family was going through a separation. Lyle is of Aboriginal ancestry. He does not speak Cree but understands some of the Cree language. His mom described Lyle as a little "sponge" that loved everything about learning and school. Lyle's mom and dad took turns attending the preschool and sometimes he came with a caregiver. Lyle's mom was enrolled in a life skills program and

was not able to attend many of the preschool classes. Lyle attended eleven out of seventeen mornings.

Billy

Billy made a boisterous entry with his mom on the first morning.

In the gym Billy immediately started running around instead of sitting down in the circle with the other children and parents/caregivers. When the children started playing a parachute game with a ball he yelled, "*I want it, I want it*". Billy's mom kept calling his name to try to settle him down, but he was very excited. In the classroom, during story time, Billy was the loudest in the choral reading parts and sometimes interrupted with questions. He followed along and was very focused on the story. After the story, Mrs. G. asked the parents and caregivers to read a story to their children. Billy chose the book, *I Love Hockey*. He sat close to his mom and listened well, often asking questions. At play center time Billy chose the trucks and the road mat. He was very talkative while playing by himself. He made vehicle noises and conversation for the little toy people. Billy soon moved to play in the housekeeping center and did not want to leave the center when asked to line up to wash for snack time. After some encouragement from Mrs. G. he reluctantly lined up, wearing the high heels from the play center to the washroom. At the snack table Billy chatted about having salty snacks, like the ones they were eating, at his house, and informed the others that they could buy them at the store where his mom worked.

Billy was three years old and an only child. Billy's family was referred to the preschool by Public Health. His mother was a single parent and employed at a grocery store. She says Billy is very energetic and sometimes hard to handle. Billy's father was incarcerated during the

preschool session. Billy attended fourteen out of seventeen mornings. On the day his mom was unable to attend, Billy came with a caregiver.

Debby

On my second visit to the preschool I met Debby. I arrived at snack time and the conversation was about how to eat yogurt neatly so as not to get any on your clothes. Debby did not join in the conversation. She sat very quietly and ate carefully. After brushing her teeth in the washroom, Debby chose to play by herself with the play dough during play center time. During this time the parents and caregivers were at a workshop in the other kindergarten room. Mrs. R. had set up a face painting center and was painting Lyle's face. Debby moved to the table to watch. Soon Mrs. G. joined the center and offered to paint Debby's face with the face paint crayons. Debby was hesitant at first, but Mrs. G. encouraged her to choose the colors she would like to have her face painted with. Mrs. G. talked about the different colors and designs she liked to paint on faces. Mrs. G. also talked about putting on her makeup in the morning and described her favorite part of putting on lipstick because it is so colorful. Debby did not respond orally but listened with a contented little smile.

Debby was four years old and the youngest of three children. Her family was referred to the preschool by Public Health. Debby is of Philippine ancestry but she does not speak Filipino and does not understand it very well. Debby's family had recently been through a separation that involved domestic abuse. Debby's mom owns a business so she was not able to attend the parent workshops. Her caregiver said Debby was very quiet at preschool but talked just like a grownup at home. Debby and her caregiver attended eleven out of seventeen mornings.

Presentation of Data

Review of Procedures

The research process involved visiting the preschool once a week for nine weeks. I alternated the visits between the first and second hour of the preschool morning. This was so I could observe the children at times when they were with their parents/caregivers and at times when they were not. Each visit involved gathering field notes, keeping a checklist of the language use of one of the children, and either audiotaping or videotaping the preschool activities.

At the end of the preschool session I invited the four parents and one caregiver along with their children to the Dairy Queen for a treat. Each of the four separate occasions was an opportunity to interview the adults regarding the language use of their children at the preschool and a chance to thank them for allowing me to observe them at the preschool. (I was also able to sample four different flavored sundaes.) The families were very accommodating and allowed me to audiotape our conversations. After observing these families for three months and then having an informal outing with them I felt I had made several new friends.

At the end of the nine-week session I interviewed Mrs. G., the preschool teacher. Occasionally throughout the weeks involving the research we chatted about the children and their families, exchanging ideas and discussing teaching methods. The interview was an opportunity to talk specifically about the children's language use at the preschool. Mrs. G. also shared her evaluation of the preschool program and her assessment of the children's involvement.

The Nipawin Early Childhood Team required the parents/caregivers to answer a questionnaire regarding their satisfaction with the preschool education program. This was available for document analysis.

Factors

The major question for this research was: **What factors influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program?** The guiding questions that were attached to the major research question were:

- What characteristics of a preschool curriculum encourage children's use of language?
- How does the interaction between young children and their parents/caregivers affect the children's language use in a preschool child/parent education program?
- How is the teacher most effective in motivating children to use their language in a preschool program?

The above questions guided my observations and along with the related literature helped me to recognize emerging factors regarding the children's use of language. Tough (1981) concluded that three factors help children reach their full language potential: dialogue with an empathetic adult, opportunities for imaginative play, and an enabling environment in which the child encounters a variety of language experiences. This study coincides with the above factors, but addresses the unique factors associated with preschool children participating in a child/parent education program. The factors I identified as being most influential in the children's language experiences are categorized as follows:

- Play center activities

- Direct instruction
- Authentic experiences
- Parent/caregiver involvement
- Teacher efficacy

The Checklists

I recorded the oral language of the four children at the preschool on an observation checklist. I observed each child in two different talk situations. The checklists showed the differences among the four children's language use.

Billy was very capable in contributing his ideas to discussions and conversations. He used conventional grammar and was easily understood although he would sometimes shout his ideas during an activity. At times Billy did not listen and interrupted when others were talking. Billy clearly enjoyed the attention he received when he expressed his thoughts.

Debby was very quiet and did not demonstrate a willingness to contribute to conversation. During group discussion she listened well and sometimes joined in with actions of songs or poems. She played quietly at play centers. During craft activities she worked quietly and if she needed help she waited for someone to come to her rather than asking. On the few occasions that I observed Debby speak, her language was clearly understandable.

Lyle was very talkative and not shy to add his thoughts while participating in an activity. He was very comfortable expressing himself or asking for help. He spoke clearly and could be understood. He enjoyed the rhythmic sound of poems and songs and readily participated.

I did not observe Walter using language at the preschool. He communicated with his mom using gestures and facial expressions. During discussions he sat quietly and listened. His mom generally played with him during play center time. Walter did not feel comfortable staying in the classroom without his mom and accompanied her to the parent workshops.

The Observations

Field notes, audiotapes and videotapes were used to observe the children's language experiences at the preschool. Each of the categories identified is discussed in terms of the children's use of language. I have used transcripts of the children's talk experiences in the preschool followed by a transcription of the parents' interviews. These discussions are used to illustrate how the children's use of language was influenced by the preschool environment, the parents/caregivers involvement, and by the teacher's efficacy.

Play Center Activities

Play center time was scheduled for two periods each morning. This was time for the children to freely choose the area in which they wished to play. Because of the low enrollment there were generally only one or two children in a center at a time. When there was more than one child in the center he or she often played side by side or in what is referred to as *parallel play*. Parallel play is how young children learn to play cooperatively with others in early childhood situations (Beatty, 1990). During this time the children would often be observed talking about what they were playing with, rather than *to* the other child. Piaget (1926) labeled this language *egocentric speech*, speech that does not take the listener's perspective into account. Young children use this type of language to accompany action but with no

effort to communicate (Elkind & Weiner, 1978). When the parents/caregivers were in the preschool during play center time they would play with their own children or with other children. The children would sometimes talk with their parents/caregivers while playing or sometimes just enjoy the closeness of the adults. Play center time was when the children used their imaginations and learned how things work.

During one of my visits Lyle was playing with small plastic “little people” and a little toy house by himself. His mom was sitting in a chair nearby. He was using egocentric speech while he played.

These guys and ladies are going in the house. This is a firehouse dog. He eats a bone. Cows say “moo.” The cow likes the dog.
(Lyle)

Later, in the housekeeping/drama centre, Lyle and Billy sometimes played and talked with each other and sometimes played in the form of parallel play:

I’m making coffee. Do you want coffee? (Lyle)

We need some cups. The cups go here. The plates go here. (Billy)

I’m making cookies. These are good cookies. (Lyle)

I’m a fireman. Here is my hat. (Billy)

In the second half of the morning, play center time was usually planned to follow a craft or experiment. Because the craft or experiment often required careful explanation or demonstration by the teachers, it was sometimes planned as one of the play centers. The teachers called the children by turns to the craft or experiment area so they could work with one or two children at a time. The children worked closely with the teachers and were encouraged through the activity. This guided learning experience

provided a *constructivist* framework for learning. The concept of constructivism is an approach to learning that gives value to the knowledge and background that the children bring to each new experience (Piaget, 1977; Bruner, 1972)

Billy and Debby worked together with the preschool teacher to make a small valentine craft using a can, play dough, paper and straws. The children's conversation was an example of how they used language in making something artistic.

We want to make a ball with our play dough. Do you have a ball?

What color is your ball? (Mrs. G.)

Mine is green. We both have green potatoes. (Billy called the play dough balls potatoes.)

Yes, yours is green, Billy. Now take your piece of play dough and drop it in your can. Plop! Good for you, you're doing a great job. Now, pick up your piece of paper like this. Take your paper and your can and come over here where the glue gun is. Now are you watching? We will glue the paper on the can. Can you push the play dough down? Now we just put a little bit of glue on here. (Mrs. G.)

Can I take my potato out? (Billy)

No, you leave your play dough in the can. That's the base to hold the sticks with the paper hearts. See, what we are going to do next is tape your sticks to a heart, one stick to each heart. (Mrs. G.)

Gonna do it like this? Gonna do it like this? (Billy)

Now, I'm going to give you a piece of paper and you just push the paper down in the can like this. Then, I'm going to give you a piece of tape so you can stick a heart to the straw. (Mrs. G.)

We made some of these at my house. (Debby)

Did you? At your house? Who helped you do that? (Mrs. G.)

Auntie. (Debby)

Oh, I need a brand new tape. (Billy)

Now stick the straws into the play dough in your can. That looks nice, Debby. How did yours turn out, Billy? (Mrs. G.)

I like it. (Billy)

Nice. (Debby)

As part of a farm theme, Mrs. G. read *Jack in the Beanstalk*. Following the story the children went to a center where they planted a bean in a paper cup. Mrs. G. and Billy and Lyle talked together to solve the problem of planting the bean.

Our story this morning was just pretend. But this isn't pretend, we are going to plant a real bean. This book shows how a bean grows. (Mrs. G.)

It's real right, Mrs. G.? (Lyle)

It grows like that? (Billy)

You are each going to get a bean. When you put the bean in water and dirt it opens up and then it grows, and grows and grows. So come along and get a bean from Mrs. R. (Mrs. G.)

I want to go first. (Lyle)

Billy can come first, then you Lyle. (Mrs. R.)

Ooh, smell my hands. (Billy)

They smell like dirt. (Mrs. R.)

Do I put the dirt in here? (Billy)

Yes, Billy that's right. (Mrs. R.)

Then I put the stone (bean) in here. (Billy)

Can you pat some dirt on top of your bean? Very good. Now, let's put some water on it. (Mrs. R.)

It's not going to grow. (Billy)

Not yet, it takes a long time to grow. Now it's your turn, Lyle.

(Mrs. R.)

When you come back to school next day you can see how much your bean has grown. (Mrs. G.)

What the parents said:

...In the morning when Mrs. G. has show and tell, Billy likes to speak out. When there is play center time he talks a lot, like when he is playing with the cars. He plays better at home now. He's learning cooperation. (Billy's mom)

...I think the sand center was a place for a lot of talking. And also the toys where he and Billy could get along better when they were playing and not competing with each other. He seems to know how to behave better when we are at the restaurant because he has been interacting with other people at preschool. (Lyle's mom)

...I think he likes the puzzles and the cars at play center time. He has always been around older children at home. At the preschool he has learned to share. (Walter's mom)

...Debby started to open up as the preschool went on. Debby talks more with others in the housekeeping center. At home she talks a lot, but at preschool she is very quiet. (Debby's mom and caregiver)

Direct Instruction

The preschool teacher used a thematic approach for instruction. Each preschool morning Mrs. G. planned two opportunities for direct teaching regarding the ongoing theme. She used direct instruction methods that encouraged interactive communication. During the first part of the preschool morning Mrs. G. scheduled a short lesson in which she introduced new concepts and vocabulary. This lesson was accompanied with hands-on materials to help contextualize the new ideas. The children listened and asked questions that led to discussion. Contextualized language consists of talk based on things in the immediate environment or about topics of common interest and mutual familiarity (Salinger, 1996).

When the preschool children were learning about farm animals, Mrs. G. had a lesson in which she used narrative language to talk about a new baby calf. A teacher can use narrative language to illustrate particular points and to entertain (Ward, 1997). To help contextualize the discussion about cows, Mrs. G. used a small plastic cow and a green fruit basket as a fence to demonstrate while she was talking.

Yesterday I went to a farm. (Mrs. G.)

You went to a farm? (Billy)

Yes, I went to a farm. I live on a farm but I went to my neighbor's farm. And on my neighbor's farm there are lots of cows. Just like this cow I am holding. What does a cow say again? (Mrs. G.)

Moo. Did you pet one? (Billy)

No, I didn't touch it. Well, this cow had just had a baby and I watched the little baby calf try to get up. Because after the little baby was born he was trying to stand up. And his mother was trying to clean him with her tongue. The baby would keep trying to stand up on his four legs and he kept falling down. Finally he got all his legs going at once. Do you remember the story about Bambi and how Bambi was trying to stand up? (Mrs. G.)

(Walter nods his head.)

I can stand up. (Billy)

Yes you can. (Mrs. G.)

Next week when you come to preschool we will go visit a farm and see cows and maybe a baby calf like the one I saw at my neighbor's farm.

(Mrs. G.)

Later, during the second part of the preschool morning, Mrs. G. scheduled another time for direct instruction using a puppet called King David. She continued the farm theme using the puppet in a conversational manner. King David told about his personal experiences and encouraged the children to talk about their experiences. The children felt comfortable talking to the puppet. Debby smiled brightly when Mrs. G. took King David out of his bag for the following conversation:

King David, where do you live? King David lives on a farm with his mom and dad. And his parents raise horses and cattle. (Mrs. G.)

Cows? (Billy)

Right, cows and bulls are kinds of cattle. King David's mom and dad have big barns on their ranch that they keep the cattle in. And also, on their fields they have fences. What do fences do on a farm?

(Mrs. G.)

They fall down. (Lyle)

Well, when they are old they fall down. But what do you think a fence does on a farm? (Mrs. G.)

I don't know. (Billy)

A fence keeps the cattle safe. But in the olden days farmers didn't have fences. So they put something around the cow's neck so the farmer could hear the cow. The cow would have a cowbell on her neck. And every time the cow walked, the farmer could hear where the cow was. King David brought a cowbell to pass around for you to look at and touch. You can ring it if you like. (Mrs. G.)

I like the cowbell. (Lyle)

Sometimes when King David goes to a hockey game he hears people ringing a cowbell. Do any of you hear a cowbell at a hockey game?

(Mrs. G.)

No. (Billy)

(Debby doesn't want to touch the cowbell)

Along with whatever theme Mrs. G. was teaching, the children were introduced to various songs, poems, chants, and finger plays. The playfulness of the words motivated the children to use their language. The following song was taught as part of the farm theme. Mrs. G. would sing the song with an error so the children had to listen carefully and correct her mistake.

On the Way to Grandpa's Farm

We're on the way, we're on the way,

We're on the way to grandpa's farm. (repeat)

A pig, it makes a sound like this, "Baa, baa".

A pig it makes a sound like this, "Baa, baa".

Is that the right sound for a pig? (Mrs. G.)

No, that is the sound a sheep makes! (Lyle)

The children laughed and sang along with five more verses.

What the parents said:

...At the beginning Billy had a hard time paying attention. But he's learning stuff and he's learning to listen. He's learning to use words for manners, like "please" and "thank you". The difference between daycare and the preschool is that Mrs. G takes the time to work one on one with Billy. He knows more songs now, too. (Billy's mom)

...Debby learns a lot at the preschool. At home she likes to tell her sisters about what she has learned at school, like when she had been to the farm. She likes to talk about what she learns at school. (Debby's mom)

...Lyle has learned how to ask questions and that has helped the family open up to him. (Lyle's mom)

...Walter listens but he doesn't answer the questions Mrs. G. asks. (Walter's mom)

Authentic Experiences

The preschool was located in a primary school where the children saw others like themselves in neighboring classrooms and on the playground.

Inside the preschool classroom the small furniture and colorful learning materials were inviting to the young children. The classroom was equipped with play centers that were visually enticing and offered hands-on experiences. The classroom materials were changed with the themes that were being experienced. Mrs. G. often brought items from her home or from the community to inspire talk in the play centers. Sometimes the children were asked to help arrange the various centers, which created a feeling of ownership among the children. Centers such as the housekeeping/drama center and sand/water table allowed the children to practice language they heard in the 'real world'. Mrs. G. often played music while the children were involved in various activities, adding to the happy atmosphere.

The preschool extended beyond the walls of the classroom to other parts of the school. In the gym the children used language to play games. As part of the farm theme the children played the game 'What time is it Mr. Wolf?', along with their parents and caregivers. The children took turns being Mr. Wolf while the others would sneak up behind counting, "One, two, three, etc.". When the wolf said "Time to eat you.", the children ran back to the other side of the gym.

The children visited a grade two classroom where chicken eggs were being hatched in an incubator. The teacher invited the preschool children to look at an embryo in an egg with a flashlight in a darkened room. The children were very excited with this experience:

Who's got nice warm hands? (Grade Two teacher)

Can I hold it? (Billy)

Now we are going to go into a dark room. I'm going to turn the light off in a second. Now I'm going to turn my flashlight on. Can you see the little space at the end where it is all white? That's an air sac where the chick gets his air to breathe. Now we will look for a little dark spot. Can you see it? That is the chick. See the red lines in the egg. That is blood for the chick to grow with. (Grade two teacher)

Where's the blood? (Billy)

See those lines in there? (Grade two teacher)

That's blood? (Billy)

(Walter and Debby look very closely.)

I can't see in the dark. (Billy)

Isn't it cute, it is so tiny? (Mrs. G.)

It is going to hatch in about a week and a half. You are welcome to come back and see the chicks then. (Grade two teacher)

The environment of the preschool also extended to the community. The children were taken on field trips to the fire hall, the police station, the bakery, and a farm. While the children were learning about the season of winter they went tobogganing on a nearby hill and skating at the rink with their parents. The excitement of travelling as a group on a school bus or walking to the skating rink motivated the children's language and connected the preschool experiences they were having in the classroom to the outside world. These were opportunities for talk about authentic adventures.

One morning when Mrs. G. was welcoming everybody and taking attendance, she asked about a recent trip to the R.C.M.P station:

Didn't we have a fun trip to the police station last day? I enjoyed watching you in the police car. (Mrs. G.)

We were in the policeman's car. (Billy)

What was the policeman saying to you when you were inside the car?

It sounded very loud. (Mrs. G.)

He said good morning to us. (Billy)

Saying good morning is a nice way to greet people. (Mrs. G.)

Community people were invited to be guests at the school and provided the children with information, demonstrations, and conversations. A veterinarian was invited to speak about pet care during the farm theme. The children listened and asked questions following her presentation.

What the parents said:

...I see him more disciplined in public now. I think the field trips were good. With the preschool going out and doing these different kinds of things he could remember what he did and tell me about what he had seen. (Lyle's mom)

...Billy is transferring some of the things he learns at the preschool to home, like using words for manners, such as "please" and "thank you". Sometimes in the morning at home he talks about what he might do at school. (Billy's mom)

...Debby always wants to tell her sisters what she has done at school, like when she had been to the farm. (Debby's mom)

*...Walter liked going on the school bus, but he never talked.
(Walter's mom)*

Parent/Caregiver Involvement

The parents and caregivers were in the preschool with their children during the first half of the morning. They participated in craft activities, read stories, and played with their children during play center time. They also accompanied their children on field trips. During this time the parents would often enjoy new experiences and learn alongside their children. This time for the children and parents together at school helped bridge home and school experiences and connected the culture of the school with the culture of the family.

A time for the parents to read to their children was scheduled following the group story time with the preschool teacher or the teacher assistant. The children enjoyed being able to choose their own books and leading their parents to a quiet spot in the classroom away from others. The time spent reading to their children and sharing quality literature served as a natural springboard from listening to talking.

During story time with the parents, each child chose a book to read with his or her parent. On one occasion Billy chose a book called *Snow*. As they read together Billy sat very close to his mom and listened to the story. He made his hands move like snow coming down and started to sing a song about snow. Lyle chose a book about colors and while his dad sat on a chair he sat on the floor with his arm around his dad's leg. He listened and made comments about the story. Walter's mom chose a book to read to Walter. Walter sat on his mom's lap and put his head on his mom's shoulder. Walter listened and turned the pages of the book.

Craft activities were a chance for the parents and caregivers to interact with their children while creating something together. However, sometimes

the adults had to be encouraged by Mrs. G. to let the children do most of the activity. This activity enabled the parents to participate in the 'zone of proximal development', a term coined by Vygotsky (1978). This concept of child development describes how children do things first in a supportive context and then later independently and in a variety of contexts. The support of adults provides the necessary assistance or "scaffold" that enables the child to move to the next level of independent functioning (Au, 1993; Bruner, 1985; Gaffeny & Anderson, 1991; Wells, 1985;). Although Debby is a very quiet worker she and her caregiver demonstrate this notion while making a small St. Patrick's hat together:

Here's a shamrock for your little hat. (Mrs. G.)

Put the sparkles on it. (Debby's caregiver)

Okay. (Debby)

There, it should be dry now. Come on, stick a flower on it. Now, put the glue on the feather. Stick it on top. (Debby's caregiver)

I'm done. (Debby)

That's good. (Debby's caregiver)

What the parents said:

...I liked doing the songs with Walter. The songs are good. I also liked doing the crafts, although he doesn't participate much. Walter loved the gym. He smiles the whole time we were in the gym. (Walter's mom)

...I like doing the crafts and reading books to Debby. The last class we had at preschool was the first time Debby ran in the gym. She

usually is too shy to participate, but we did it together. (Debby's caregiver)

...I like going to the gym. And I like doing the crafts with Billy.

(Billy's mom)

...He seems to know how to behave better when we are at a restaurant or someplace because he has been interacting with other people and at other places. (Lyle's mom)

Teacher Efficacy

The preschool teacher influenced the children's language use through her careful planning of active learning experiences. (See Appendix G.) She recognized the importance of building the children's language and attempted to take every opportunity she could to incorporate language into the various preschool activities.

Mrs. G. used songs so the children could experience language in a pleasant way to carry out daily routines. The children loved to watch her sing and soon joined in with the rhythmic pattern of the words. The parents would often join in as well. When tidying up the room they sang:

Clean up, clean up,

Now it's time to clean up. (Repeat)

(Tune: It's Raining)

Or when brushing their teeth after snack:

This is the way we brush our teeth,

Brush our teeth, brush our teeth.

This is the way we brush our teeth

So early in the morning.

(Tune: Round the Mulberry Bush)

Mrs. G. accepted whatever the children offered at sharing time, either objects or stories, and used these spontaneous moments to build a sense of trust. The children were encouraged to listen and learn from each other even if the experiences were unpleasant. From this the children became comfortable expressing their feelings. An example of Mrs. G.'s understanding and empathy was when Billy had some news about his dad:

Does anyone have news today? (Mrs. G.)

My dad is in jail. (Billy)

That's news, jail. Is dad in jail because he made a bad choice? Do you think that is what happened, Billy? I know you won't do that because you are learning to make good choices at preschool. (Mrs. G.)

(Billy nods his head.)

Mrs. G. used language in a very clear manner when children's behavior needed checking. She used a discipline method called *1,2,3 Magic*. When Billy went to the housekeeping center instead of choosing a book at story time Mrs. G. was able to redirect his actions very effectively.

One, you're not listening. Two, its story time. Three, come choose a book. (Mrs. G.) Billy went to choose a book.

Mrs. G. connected the children's family experiences with the preschool program at sharing time when she mentioned that she knew they were involved in an activity such as story time at the public library or if she met them in some other place in the community. The children enjoyed hearing her talk about their outside experiences:

When I went to the post office the other day, do you know who I saw?

I saw Debby and her sister. And I stopped to say hi. We talked about what we would be doing in preschool today. (Mrs. G.)

Mrs. G. and Mrs. R. modeled good listening behaviors whenever they could. If one of the teachers was reading to a group of children, the other sat and listened attentively. Snack time provided an excellent opportunity for the teachers to model appropriate behavior and conversation. The following conversation took place at one snack time:

Can you find a place at the snack table? (Mrs. G.)

Where's all the snack? (Lyle)

We are getting it for you. We are going to decorate the cookies that we made last day. What shape of cookie would you like? A bunny, a carrot, a heart? (Mrs. R.)

I want a bunny. (Billy)

Can you say thank you? (Mrs. G.)

Thank you. (Billy)

Mmm, this tastes good. (Lyle)

Yes, these cookies are good. Do you make cookies at home? (Mrs. G.)

Sometimes, but we don't make shapes. (Lyle)

Do you remember how we made the shapes? (Mrs. G.)

We flattened the dough and then used the cookie cutters. (Lyle)

Yes, that was fun, wasn't it? (Mrs. G.)

I like the red icing. (Billy)

What Mrs. G. said:

At the end of the preschool session I arranged to meet with Mrs. G. to ask her questions regarding the children and the preschool program. After

the last preschool class Mrs. G. and I ate our sandwiches and apples while exchanging questions and answers.

What do you think about in regard to the children's use of language when planning for the preschool?

...I think about the children's interests. I try to plan opportunities for them to share their personal experiences through language at the preschool. I use King David, a puppet, to tell about his experiences. With the use of a puppet I can model how to express ideas, while at the same time introduce new concepts. The children are given the opportunity to express themselves orally during circle time. The children also express themselves individually through crafts and artwork, painting, etc.

What part of the preschool program seems to motivate the children's use of language?

...I think the sharing time motivates the children to use their language. King David brings things to show the children and they seem to open up and see that it is okay to talk about their experiences. I also try to find time each day to be with each individual child. When I am playing or working on an activity with each child they seem to feel comfortable enough to talk about what they are doing. The children also enjoy story time with the teacher assistant and they ask her questions or comment about the story.

What changes do you see in the use of the children's language over the nine-week preschool session?

...I see the children "break out of their shell". They become comfortable and contribute their ideas or experiences. They soon feel they can say what they want to say. When they open up and use their language it gives me opportunities to approve or correct their language. If I have an opportunity, I model a correct structure and have them repeat it after me.

What do you notice about the parents/caregivers' language interaction with the children?

...At the beginning of the session they were a bit unsure, but they soon warmed up and became more comfortable. I notice that the parents sometimes do the craft for the children when it would be better if they would let their child try to do it along with their help. They don't do a lot of talking to their children about the crafts. They seem hesitant to push their child or allow the child to be challenged by the task. Sometimes I think they feel it is more important to complete the craft than realizing the importance of the process.

What can you tell me about the individual children's use of language at the preschool?

... I think the best thing for Walter at the preschool is the company of the other children. I think it is good for him to hear other children's language.

... Lyle is very mature and loves the activities at the preschool. He enjoys the interaction with the others.

... Debby has learned to interact with the other children with much more ease. She has learned to stand up for herself.

... Billy has learned to use appropriate and acceptable talk. He has learned to share and how to follow directions.

What can you tell me about the parents'/caregivers' participation?

...The preschool is a good place for them to be. They have stuck it out. They all want to help their children.

What the parents said:

...The exposure with the other children has been the best thing for Walter. At the preschool he has learned to share. (Walter's mom)

...Lyle has learned to take his turn; he used to always interrupt. I found Mrs. G. taught him that. Mrs. G. really has the "knack". Communication has been a big hurdle for my family. Now with Lyle opening up his brother and sister have no choice but to talk to him. They are both so quiet but now Lyle asks them questions and they have to answer him. (Lyle's mom)

... Now Billy understands words more and I can ask him if he is sad or angry. Now he can tell me how he is feeling. He has learned to

listen to the teacher and not to just take things without asking. He's learned that he has to ask the teacher before he leaves the room. Billy has learned to calm down and to interact with the kids in a better way.
(Billy's mom)

...It is good for Debby to be at the preschool with the other children. There is a teacher at the preschool who talks to her and teaches her manners and attitudes. (Debby's mom)

Document Analysis

A questionnaire was given to the parents asking for their evaluation of the program. The parents indicated that they enjoyed the participation with their children. They appreciated how their children had learned to share and listen. They especially enjoyed going on the field trips with their children. An interesting statement made by one parent on the questionnaire was, "if you are interested, your child will be interested also". This shows how the preschool experience has helped the parents realize the importance of being involved in their children's learning.

After each nine-week session Mrs. G. submitted an evaluation of the preschool program to the Nipawin Early Childhood Team. In her evaluation she discussed promoting the children's use of language in various activities. She was particularly pleased with the results of the planned story time for the parents/caregivers to share reading time with their children. Mrs. G. noted how the parents had taken an interest in this opportunity to become directly involved with their children's learning.

Summary

The children who were invited to participate in the preschool child/parent education program were provided with opportunities to hear and use language in a variety of contexts. The preschool was an environment that stimulated their senses and connected their language at school to their language at home. The children were with teachers who cared about their feelings and encouraged them to express themselves. The preschool program involved the children in experiences that allowed them to be active participants and to use their language to learn and socialize in interesting ways.

Most importantly, the children were learning together with their families. The parents were learning from the parent workshops how pivotal their presence was in their children's lives. The preschool gave the families an opportunity to use their language together during their children's most critical learning stage. As Morrow (1989) states, the process of acquiring language is continuous and interactive and takes place in the social setting of the child interacting with others. Children learn the language they are surrounded with. The preschool provided a safe and supportive environment for language learning to take place.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence the language use of a small group of children in a preschool child/parent education program. The previous chapter was a presentation of the data and preliminary analysis – more specifically, the situations in which the children used their language. This chapter contains an interpretation of the data presented in the previous chapter and discusses the factors that motivated the children to use their language in the preschool environment. The analysis of this study will be presented in terms of the guiding research questions and will refer to the literature presented in Chapter Two.

Revisiting the Guiding Questions

The major question for this research is: **What factors influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program?** Three guiding questions are attached to the major question. These guiding questions were introduced in Chapter One. Stated again, they are:

- What characteristics of a preschool environment encourage children's use of language?

- How does the interaction between young children and their parents/caregivers affect the children's language in a preschool child/parent education program?
- How is a teacher most effective in motivating children to use their language in a preschool program?

The Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was implemented with the understanding that children need to interact with others in a supportive environment that facilitates their language and socialization skills. My observations of the children, and the interviews I had with the parents and the preschool teacher derived data that pointed to particular features within the preschool program that had an influence on the children's use of language. The factors that influenced the children's language are:

- Play center activities
- Direct instruction
- Authentic experiences
- Parent/caregiver involvement
- Teacher efficacy

The following discussion will illustrate how these five factors contributed to the language development of the children involved in this study. The factors are discussed in light of the three guiding questions attached to the major research question.

What characteristics of a preschool environment encourage children's use of language?

Three characteristics emerged from the preschool environment as having an influence on the children's language use. These characteristics

are **play center activities, authentic experiences, and direct instruction.** Booth (1994) states that a rich and varied program with ample opportunity for exploratory talk allows children to encounter new ideas, have greater experimentation with language and become confident and effective language users. The children were able to use their language to establish relationships, tell stories, ask questions, and give information. The preschool provided opportunities for the children to become familiar with classroom discourse, such as turn-taking and teacher-child exchanges.

Play center activities, authentic experiences, and direct instruction were particular characteristics of the preschool environment that provided social situations for the children to use the various **functions of language** identified by Halliday (1973). The following are examples of these functions:

- The children used **heuristic** language to express their thoughts while they learned about their environment. Billy was able to put his knowledge of the senses into words while participating in the experience of planting a bean when he said, "*The dirt is smelly.*" The children shared and expanded their vocabularies while they explored their environment during their preschool experiences.
- Lyle demonstrated **interactional** language as he excitedly caught the teacher's attention with, "*Mrs. G., look what I made.*" after painting a valentine. Mrs. G. responded to his sense of pride: "*Lyle that's a beautiful valentine, would you like to put a stamp on it?*" The preschool was a place for the children to participate in meaningful activities along with others who cared about their learning and accomplishments.

- Opportunities for the children to learn cooperation were inherent in the experiences of the preschool. Mrs. G. scheduled play center time so the children were in control of non-structured experiences. Billy demonstrated the use of **regulatory** language when he asked Mrs. G. to play with him. *“Can you play with me?”* asked Billy. Mrs. G. replied, *“Sure I can, what would you like me to do?”* Billy said, *“Make a road.”*
- Debby used **informative** and **personal** language while decorating cookies when she expressed, *“We made some of these at my house.”* The preschool was a place for the children to feel secure about sharing personal experiences as well as having their ideas accepted without fear of criticism.
- Lyle demonstrated **instrumental** language when he asked Mrs. R. to help him take the masking tape off his art project. *“How do I get it off?”* Mrs. R. replied, *“Watch while I show you.”* The children soon learned they could get help by asking others in the preschool.
- Many opportunities were provided in the preschool for **imaginative** language. The children used imaginative language in the housekeeping/drama center for role playing as demonstrated by Billy when he said to Lyle, *“I am a fireman. Here, you put on a hat, too.”* The center with manipulative toys also provided opportunities to use imaginative talk as demonstrated by Billy when he was playing with the small vehicles: *“My motorbike is stuck. I need a tow truck.”*

Teaching through themes was the method used by the preschool teacher to present activities and experiences about a particular topic within a given period of time. A theme-teaching approach is a type of conceptual organizer and helps the children make connections and see relationships not only among the events in the classroom but also to the experiences in their lives (Booth, 1994). The teacher attempted to incorporate the children's particular interests and enthusiasms into each theme through the play center activities, the authentic experiences and direct instruction.

Play Center Activities

The preschool environment involved the children in active learning experiences that encouraged the children to talk. The classroom had areas for the children to converse one-to-one with their teacher, their parents, or teacher assistant. There were places for pairs of children to collaborate on puzzles or games, centers for small groups to play and work on activities, and a carpeted area for large groups to come together for discussion, stories and sharing time. The physical arrangement of the room along with a variety of play activities created a "talk friendly" environment.

The preschool children were provided with learning experiences in the play centers that were developmentally appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987). By providing a choice of play activities, the preschool teacher was able to capitalize on the children's interests and encourage talk among the children as they exchanged information and shared feelings. While participating in the activities in the various play centers in the classroom, the children used their language with other children and adults in the program. The opportunity for dramatic play was a way for the children to explore the meaning of the activities they saw in the grown-up world (Cohen et al.,

1983). Here they could learn to interact with others, to resolve conflicts, and to gain a sense of competence while still enjoying the magic of “make believe”. The children were immersed in social talk that included greetings, good-byes, chatter, gossip, and jokes. Daily activities such as tidying up play centers, welcoming visitors, sharing story time and telling teachers, parents and caregivers about their personal experiences were opportunities for the children to use their language in meaningful ways.

The preschool classroom displayed books of all types – picture books, easy-to-read stories, folk tales, pop-up books, and poetry collections. Books with multicultural settings were shared to demonstrate that children come from different backgrounds. The teacher used stories to enrich the themes she was teaching while at the same time exposing the children to the sounds of language and the patterns of stories. Big books and small books were shared by the children and the adults and served as a natural springboard from listening to talking. As Clements and Warncke (1994) affirm, a print-rich environment is key to assisting children as they learn about literacy.

Direct Instruction

Children construct their own knowledge through repeated experiences involving interaction with people (Piaget, 1926). The preschool teacher provided language situations through whole class, small group, and individual activities. In each of these different groupings the teacher was able to encourage and guide the children’s use of language through direct instruction. Direct instruction was the method used by the teacher to focus the children’s learnings on concepts and vocabulary within a particular theme. Direct instruction and teacher-led activities enabled the teacher to build on the children’s background knowledge while introducing them to

new ideas and the language that accompanied these topics. The teacher was able to use these instructional opportunities to pass on accurate knowledge in a meaningful context.

The whole class activities involved gathering all the children together to share and discuss various experiences. This was a time for organizing, establishing the focus for the day, and for direct teaching. The large group setting was also used for reading aloud or choral reading. The teacher's use of a puppet attracted the children's interest and seemed to ease the children's inhibitions of talking out loud. Small group activities such as crafts and experiments allowed the teacher to conduct teacher-led lessons. This time contributed to building the children's listening skills and their ability to follow directions. Individual tasks allowed the children to work at learning centers or work stations independently and enabled the teacher to address the needs, interests, and learning styles of individual children.

Authentic Experiences

The preschool environment extended beyond the walls of the classroom to other areas of the school, the neighborhood and the community. Litman (1999) states that children learn about life through experiences that are sensory and concrete and gradually their world expands beyond themselves. Field trips and learning experiences outside the preschool setting provided the children, and the parents/caregivers who accompanied the children, with awareness of the resources of the community and a reason to use language to share and discuss the shared adventures.

As the children participated on the playground and in other classrooms, they had the opportunity to interact with older children in the

school on an informal basis. Lessons planned for the preschool children took them to other places in the school such as the library and the gym, introducing them to different experiences and terminology. The themes taught in the preschool often included going to places in the community such as a farm, the police station and the bakery. As well, visits from guests such as a veterinarian, a dental nurse and an Aboriginal storyteller were enjoyed. These authentic experiences broadened the children's knowledge and promoted their natural curiosity. The anticipation and preparation before these events and the discussion following them were opportunities for the children to hear and use new vocabulary. The parents commented on how these experiences impressed their children and inspired conversations in their homes.

How does the interaction between young children and their parents/caregivers affect the children's language use in a preschool child/parent education program?

Parent/Caregiver Involvement

The child/parent education program in this study was based on the assumption that parents are powerful and that their attitudes convey a critical message about schooling, the work and joy of learning and quality of life (Morrow, 1995). Because home is a child's first school and parents or caregivers are the child's first and most important teachers, it is critical to have a program that encourages the participation of the family. The involvement of the parents and/ or caregivers in this preschool program was a factor that influenced the children's use of language. Children talk not only to express their ideas, but also to reflect and refine their thoughts

(Booth, 1994). The preschool provided a place and a time for the children to experience the responses of their parents/caregivers.

Young children often have feelings of anxiety when faced with unfamiliar surroundings and expectations. The comfort of having a significant person in their life to share the new learning experiences helped lessen their uneasiness at the beginning of the preschool program. The children soon settled into participating and expressing themselves in the context of the preschool environment. As the preschool proceeded, the parents/caregivers became more comfortable in the classroom environment and conversed with their children about the activities in the play centers. The notion of “talking to learn” (Booth, 1994) became a common understanding as the parents/caregivers prompted their children to tell about personal experiences and helped extend their children’s stories at sharing time. The parents/caregivers sometimes helped the teacher with explanations about new concepts by using language more familiar to the children during various learning situations.

During the first part of the preschool morning the parents/caregivers participated in the preschool activities with their children. Working together on activities designed specifically for the children provided opportunities for the adults to support their children in an environment uninterrupted with the daily pressures of adult life. The attentive presence of the parents/caregivers communicated to the children their love and care. As the parents/caregivers became more familiar with the preschool environment and routine they were able to understand the importance of their interaction with their children through direct experience. The parents/caregivers practiced the skills and

understandings they were learning from the ~~parent~~ workshops during the other part of the child/parent education program.

The participation of the parents/caregivers created a bridge between the home environment and the school environment through language. This was evident at the play centers as well as during group discussions. On one occasion when Debby had been to visit relatives, her caregiver encouraged her to share the candies she had been given on the plane ride. Although Debby offered very little explanation, she was able to hear the language interaction between the teacher and her caregiver that connected her home life to her school life. Through the involvement of the parents/caregivers, an interchange of experiences between home and school provided the children with the understanding that these were two very important places in their lives.

The beliefs, attitudes, and expectations parents and caregivers hold with respect to literacy has a strong effect on children's motivation to read (Morrow, 1995). Snow & Goldfield (1983) suggest that parents who have been read to as children know how to read to their children, while parents who have not been read to may experience difficulty in constructing or re-creating the literacy and social routine. Opportunities were provided for the parents/caregivers to use a variety of reading material at the preschool. The parents used the time to snuggle closely and enjoy the time together as they experienced the process of joint storybook reading and book sharing. This method of scaffolding (Bruner, 1983; Smith 1985) allowed the children to learn how print works from the most important people in their lives, the parents and caregivers.

How is a teacher most effective in motivating children to use their language in a preschool program?

Teacher Efficacy

A unique element of a preschool child/parent education program is the need for the preschool teacher to be adept in both early childhood education and adult education. A preschool program with parental involvement requires a teacher with experience and training in dealing with situations that are particular to adults as well as young children. It became apparent that the teacher's efficacy was a factor influencing the children's use of language in the preschool program. The preschool teacher possessed the ability to create a comfortable relationship among the children and their parents/caregivers while at the same time communicate her expectations of both the children and the adults within the context of the program.

The preschool teacher's efficacy stemmed from her understanding of two basic beliefs of early childhood philosophy. The first of these is to regard each child as unique and the second is to acknowledge the importance of providing children with opportunities to interact, and to cooperate in groups (Day and Drake, 1986). These principles of early childhood education, combined with the involvement of the parents/caregivers, provided an effective situation for the families to realize the value of communication in the future of their children. The preschool teacher implemented a program that was developmentally appropriate (Bredecamp, 1987) and balanced with specific learning skills and creativity (Lodish, 1996). This was evident in her ability to plan time for the children to experience spontaneous interactive play, receive direct instruction and participate in authentic experiences within a thematic approach.

The preschool teacher demonstrated several techniques to help the children build their language skills. As she moved among the groups and individuals she was able to observe and contribute to their language learning. When talking with the children in any language situation she modeled speech that was clear and expressive. As she joined them in activities she attempted to expand their statements in a friendly manner that showed interest and concern for their thoughts and ideas.

"I made a triangle." (Lyle)

"A triangle, mmm, a triangle has three sides. Can you count with me? (Mrs. G.)

"One, two, three lines." (Lyle)

She asked open-ended questions to encourage the children to use their language to explain and elaborate on their experiences. This was demonstrated at circle time:

"Does anyone have any news this morning? Anything they would like to talk about?" (Mrs. G.)

"I saw Billy yesterday." (Lyle)

"Where did you see him?" (Mrs. G.)

"Uptown." (Lyle)

During direct instruction or teacher-led activities she emphasized and repeated new vocabulary.

"Do you know what color King David's suit is?"

"Red." (Billy)

"Yes, it is red. It reminds him of Valentine's Day. On Valentine's Day King David's mother makes cookies. And he can smell them cooking – like we did last day. (Mrs. G.)

Wells (1986) suggests that children will learn most effectively when they have frequent opportunities to talk, both with teachers and with fellow students. Children develop language skills by listening and using language. They must be talked with, listened to, and surrounded by words and books. The preschool teacher created a language environment that invited the children to use their language to explore and to express themselves to other children, to their parents/caregivers and to the teachers.

The preschool teacher also had the task of creating an environment that was inviting to the adult participants. Her friendly manner settled any uneasiness of the parents/caregivers and they soon realized she was there to support their relationship with their children. With patience and respect she encouraged the parents/caregivers to become involved in the preschool activities and work closely with their children.

Summary

Children's competency in communication requires a supportive environment that encourages a variety of language experiences. Language experiences lead to opportunities for children to understand the purposes of literacy and that literacy is directly related to school success. A preschool program designed for families at risk can have immediate and long-term success in helping children experience positive school experiences, build stronger self-esteem, and reduce school drop-out (Manning & Baruth, 1993). Researchers confirm that the quality of preschool education depends on early childhood instruction that is developmentally appropriate, and includes parental participation and competent leadership (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; McKey et al., 1985). The children in the Preschool for Child/Parent

Education Project experienced a program that provided opportunities for them to hear and use language in an environment that fostered and valued communication.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The focus of this study was to determine the factors that influenced the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program. This study attempts to generate an awareness of the language needs of young children and an appreciation for the effects of an early childhood program designed to address families with preschool children who may be at risk for school success. This chapter will include reflections on the methodology employed in this research, a discussion regarding the implications of this study, and future research directions.

Reflections on the Methodology

The following discussion includes a reflection of the research processes: Observations, interviews, research site, and time frame.

Observations

As a teacher, much of my time is spent observing children as they participate and learn in the school environment. These observations range from a quick note on behavior to more involved records of achievement and are used for making decisions about effective instruction. In this study, the observation process not only involved watching the children interact with

each other, but also their interaction with the preschool teacher, the teacher assistant and the parents/caregivers. The purpose of these observations was to gain insight into the language component of early childhood education programs designed for at risk families. However, because of the irregular attendance of the participants, richness of data was compromised and possibilities for extensive analysis were limited.

In the process of gathering information about the language use of the four children in my study, I became acquainted with their personalities and behaviors as well as those of their parents/caregivers. Observing the participants' interactions with their families and listening to their conversations left me with the feeling that I had looked through a window into the lives of the families in this preschool program. This experience has now affected the way I observe the children in my primary classroom as I consider how their use of language may have been influenced by the interactions with their families.

Interviews

The interviews with the parents and caregivers of the children were poignant experiences. The parents/caregivers were very willing to participate in the interviews and to contribute to my study. Although the intention of the interviews was to gain a better understanding of the language use of the children, the conversations with the parents/caregivers often led to talk about the family's life circumstances. With the understanding that the interviews were confidential and anonymous, the parents/caregivers felt comfortable explaining some of the situations in their lives that contributed to their need to participate in the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project. The parents seemed to appreciate my interest in their lives on a personal level.

They conveyed to me a willingness to make lifestyle changes and I sensed they trusted this program to help their families. These were proud, intelligent parents who recognized their own needs and wanted their young children to have a good start in life. They were willing to learn new skills along with their children so their families would have a better chance at succeeding in school.

Research Site

This study focussed on the factors that influence the language use of children in the context of the preschool experience. The research process did not include data taken of the children's use of language in their home environment. Observing the children using language in their homes would probably yield another set of factors. This information could assist child/parent education programs through an appreciation for the language that the families bring from the home environment. As the leaders of child/parent education programs become more aware of the life situations of children, the better they can facilitate the needs of families. In turn, the preschool programs can benefit as program leaders learn and build from the resources and expertise of the families with whom they are working.

Time Frame

This study took place over the course of three months during the second nine-week session of the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Program. Observations, field notes, videotapes and audiotapes were used to record data on the language use of the children while they attended the preschool. An opportunity to take data during the following third preschool session perhaps would have yielded an increased use of language among the children due to their comfort, familiarity and growth with the program.

With more talk to record, more information could be gathered with respect to the language component of the child/parent education program.

Implications of the Study

An examination of factors that influence the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program leads to discussion of implications for other programs designed to help families with young children at risk for school success. An awareness of the value of child/parent education programs also has implications for governments, educational administrations and the general public. These implications are not intended to be prescriptive in nature, but perhaps stir the conscience of decision-makers who address the challenges facing young children and their families.

Preschool Child/Parent Education Programs

A critical component for child/parent education programs to consider is the children's use of language in the preschool. Oral language is the most common mode of expression and the first form of language that a child usually learns (Jalongo, 1992). Children who are designated to participate in a child/parent education program need opportunities to hear and use language in a variety of situations. *How* these opportunities are provided is as important as *that* they are provided (Schorr, 1989). Following are some practical suggestions that may help to encourage the language use of preschool children in a child/parent education program:

- Provide a preschool environment that offers play center activities developmentally appropriate for the children.

- Provide a preschool environment that promotes authentic experiences for the families.
- Provide a preschool environment that offers teacher-directed instruction to the children.
- Provide a preschool program that encourages parent involvement during the children's preschool experience.
- Provide an enthusiastic preschool teacher that will promote language use among the children and their families, and has the ability to build a trusting relationship with the parents/caregivers.

An important component of the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project was the parent education provided at the same time as the preschool experiences. The parents were able to participate with their children in the preschool for the first half of the program and then move to another area of the school for workshops particular to their needs. Topics such as parenting skills, cultural sensitivity, budgeting, stress management, and nutrition were addressed. The information provided in these sessions empowered the parents, as they were able to immediately transfer their new knowledge to their relationship with their families in the context of the preschool as well as in their home environment. The parents also formed a support group among themselves as they became acquainted with each other and discussed the various issues.

A preschool teacher in a child/parent education program requires a support system. In this study the preschool program was housed in a primary school, offering collegiality with other teachers in the school. However, because of the pioneering nature of this project and the uniqueness of having both children and adults in the program, some situations in the

preschool were unfamiliar to other teaching staff. Professional development and training in working with families would benefit the preschool teacher. As well, visits to other child/parent preschool programs in similar settings and the creation of a support group among preschool teachers would be helpful.

Educational Administrations

Providing a two-generational program can assist educational administrators in addressing two common concerns: students at risk for school success, and a strong school-home linkage. The combined effect of providing an environment that reaches children through a window of opportunity that may never again be available on the learning continuum, along with the cooperation and support of families, can help administrators meet the challenges of schools today (McCain & Mustard, 1999). Consider the profound effect on schools if students having behavioral and/or learning difficulties had been given the chance to develop social and language competence, along with their families, before potential problems began to manifest and compound.

Directors and principals need to take a serious look at the impact of carefully defined early childhood education programs on teachers as well as students. More and more teachers are becoming disillusioned with their profession because of the societal pressures affecting their students and displayed in schools, ranging from lack of nutrition to substance abuse. With an understanding of the needs of young children in changing family structures and lifestyles, administrators can ease educational tensions of teachers at all levels of instruction. Providing child/parent preschool education programs for families at risk for school success is a proactive

approach to the learning progress of students. Educational administrators with an unbalanced focus in favor of older students are likened to a farmer who neglects to care for his crop until it is almost fully-grown, then becomes frustrated with the unproductive yield.

School Trustee Associations

The investment in preschool child/parent education programs can mean reduced costs for school boards in the future. The expenses related to a preschool program are negligible when compared to the cost of intervention in later years by way of special education, resource room support, grade retention, counseling, tutoring, and teacher assistants. The preschool child/parent education program in this study was funded through a grant and supported in-kind by the Nipawin School Division. As school boards become aware of the benefits of preschool programming on future spending, they will want to find ways of integrating this component of education into their operating budgets. A funding partnership with other agencies such as public health and social services could be created in a collaborative approach to early childhood intervention.

Universities and Paraprofessional Training Institutions

In this study, the efficacy of the teacher was found to be a factor influencing the language use of the children in the preschool program. The experience and training of a teacher working with young children during this crucial period of life is a critical element in the success of a preschool program. Universities and paraprofessional training institutions can contribute to the preparation of early childhood educators by offering programs of study that provide theory and practice unique to the early growth and development needs of very young children. For teachers in

child/parent education programs, dealing with families who may be at risk requires consultation skills. Inservice training should be provided so teachers can respond effectively to the circumstances of these families. The preschool teacher's integral role and responsibility for the success of the preschool program needs to be recognized and reflected in the salary offered. The quality of personnel required to conduct an effective child/parent education program can be supported by universities and training institutions through the emphasis placed on this level of instruction.

Government Departments

Government departments such as health, education, social services and justice can work together to adapt to the diverse family lifestyles and their effect on young children and their families. The success of preschool child/parent education programs has the potential to dramatically reduce costs to society in the long term. Early intervention with families at risk can reduce the costs of later education, social services and remediation. Society could then benefit from increased economic productivity and decreased social and economic assistance. Even more important than monetary savings is the possible elimination of the detrimental, psychological impact of reading failure (France, 1991). A preschool program that promotes an understanding of the language needs of young children is the beginning of life-long literacy skills.

Future Research Directions

The four children in my study who participated in the Preschool for Child/Parent Education Project had the opportunity to use language in a variety of experiences that may not otherwise have been available to them.

An interesting study would be to follow the children's progress through subsequent school years to ascertain the effects of the preschool experience on their literacy development. A look at how the language opportunities in the preschool have contributed to the later formal process of learning to read would be helpful in confirming and advocating the significance of children's use of language in the preschool years.

Another element of the preschool child/parent education program to consider following up would be the continued interest and participation of the families in school activities. It would be interesting to know if the efforts of the preschool child/parent program made a difference in the parent's attitude toward their child's learning progress in subsequent school years, both at home and in the school environment. As well, an investigation of how the school, along with the other agencies that were involved in the parent education sessions of the program, extends support to these families beyond the preschool years.

A longitudinal study that follows the participants of the preschool child/parent program throughout their school years, and perhaps beyond, could provide evidence relating to the long-term effects of the intervention. Through this type of extensive investigation, data pertaining to various instructional approaches, parent involvement and staff training and experience could be examined and used to ascertain the most desirable formula for successful early childhood programs.

Summary

As society continues to transform with the impact of knowledge, technology and communication, family structures are evolving. Dual career

families, blended families (stepfamilies), families distanced from grandparents, single parent families and families with economic pressures require early childhood education programs with new understandings of the needs of children experiencing these lifestyles. The focus of this research was to determine factors that influence the language use of children in a preschool child/parent education program. A study of the language use of children in a program designed to support families with children at risk for school success serves to provide more information for those who would advocate the need to help young children have a good start in life.

In discussing emotional intelligence, Goleman (1995) believes in “prevention for the range of pitfalls threatening children” (p.268). He maintains that children need to be taught to recognize feelings and build a vocabulary for them, see the links between thoughts, feelings, and reactions, and learn to be good listeners and question askers. Although family lifestyles are becoming increasingly diverse, children will thrive with the love, support and involvement of their parents or caregivers. The ability to speak and listen effectively often makes the critical difference between success and failure in life (Pinnell & Jaggar, 1991). A preschool for child/parent education program can provide assistance to families experiencing difficult life circumstances. With an understanding of the language needs of young children and the positive effect of a caring social environment during the preschool years, we can better prepare children for school success. Families are changing -- our children need to hear and use language, and they need someone to listen.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Sample Script to Parents

As part of my work in graduate studies, I want to look at the language use of preschool children. Children's language skills are related to their success in school. The language experiences children have in the very early years are especially important. I would like to learn more about the kinds of activities and experiences that encourage talking and listening in a preschool setting. I would also like to learn a few things about the language experiences you have with your child.

A central part of my research will be observing your children eight or nine times in the classroom. I will be using an audiotape while I am observing, so I can record their talk. I plan to video tape your children twice as they are involved in classroom activities. I would also like to interview you as well, to see what you think about the talking and listening your child does at preschool. If you agree, these interviews will be tape recorded so I don't have to write so much while we are talking. You and your child may withdraw from the study at any time. The tapes and video recordings will be erased when my project is completed. I will use different names for you and your child in my report.

APPENDIX B

Observation Checklist

Date: Jan. 20/99

Participant: Billy
(pseudonym)

Talk Experience: Valentine's craft activity
Children are working at tables,
painting heart shapes, cutting
them out and pasting the
hearts on another sheet of
paper.

	In this area the child is		
	Strong	Adequate	Weak
Contributes information and ideas to discussion.	—	✓	—
Listens when other speak.	—	✓	—
Speaks clearly and uses expression when speaking.	✓	—	—
Uses conventional grammar and forms.	—	✓	—
Indicates enjoyment of language sounds and rhythms.	—	✓	—
Makes eye contact and uses gestures when speaking.	—	✓	—
Makes requests.	—	✓	—
Asks for direction.	—	—	✓
Asks for information.	—	—	✓

Uses oral language for a variety of functions.

Instrumental ("I want...")	✓	—	—
Interactional ("me and you...")	—	✓	—
Personal ("here I come...")	—	✓	—
Heuristic ("tell me why...")	—	—	✓
Imaginative ("let's pretend...")	—	✓	—
Informational ("I've got something to tell you...")	—	✓	—

Teacher comments:

- when asked to cut out Valentine said "I can't."
- + - "I know you can do it."
- works along with teacher
- stays focussed and interested
- said "I paint it first" to confirm directions
- words are very clear and loud.
- enjoying the craft
- works independently.
- does not talk to other children while working
- follows + directions - to put painting on shelf to dry

Observation Checklist

Date: Feb. 19/99

Participant: Lyle
(pseudonym)

Talk Experience: Shape art activity
Put masking tape on paper
and paint over top of tape,
then take tape off to see
shape. - working with dad,
another child and teacher

	In this area the child is		
	Strong	Adequate	Weak
Contributes information and ideas to discussion.	✓	—	—
Listens when other speak.	✓	—	—
Speaks clearly and uses expression when speaking.	✓	—	—
Uses conventional grammar and forms.	✓	—	—
Indicates enjoyment of language sounds and rhythms.	✓	—	—
Makes eye contact and uses gestures when speaking.	✓	—	—
Makes requests.	✓	—	—
Asks for direction.	✓	—	—
Asks for information.	✓	—	—

Uses oral language for a variety of functions.

Instrumental ("I want...")	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interactional ("me and you...")	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal ("here I come...")	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Heuristic ("tell me why...")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Imaginative ("let's pretend...")	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Informational ("I've got something to tell you...")	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Teacher comments:

- very anxious to do activity
- talks about going skating while trying to cut tape and put on paper
- words are very clear and expressive
- says "I want mine just like Walter's."
- very interested in activity
- + asks dad to help take tape off paper - dad talks very quietly
- walks over to show finished picture to t.a., "See my picture?"

Observation Checklist

Date: Fri. Mar 12/99

Participant: Debbie
(pseudonym)

Talk Experience: Housekeeping / drama center
Debbie and another girl are
playing with dishes and
pretending to set table for
a meal.

	In this area the child is		
	Strong	Adequate	Weak
Contributes information and ideas to discussion.	—	✓	—
Listens when other speak.	—	✓	—
Speaks clearly and uses expression when speaking.	—	—	✓
Uses conventional grammar and forms.	—	✓	—
Indicates enjoyment of language sounds and rhythms.	—	✓	—
Makes eye contact and uses gestures when speaking.	—	✓	—
Makes requests.	—	—	✓
Asks for direction.	—	—	✓
Asks for information.	—	—	✓

Uses oral language for a variety of functions.

Instrumental ("I want...")	—	✓	—
Interactional ("me and you...")	—	✓	—
Personal ("here I come...")	—	✓	—
Heuristic ("tell me why...")	—	—	✓
Imaginative ("let's pretend...")	✓	—	—
Informational ("I've got something to tell you...")	—	—	✓

Teacher comments:

- play cooperatively with other girl in center, put on shoes, etc.
- speaks very quietly, but words are clear and articulated well
- setting table with dishes
- say "The cups go here."
- "The coffee is ready."
- another boy comes to play, she ignores him and continues pretending to set the table
- the little boy leaves shortly
- say "You sit here." to other girl
- I say "Clean up time." + calls everybody to carpet
- girls tidy up, take off dress up clothes

Observation Checklist

Date: Mar. 12/99

Participant: Walter
(pseudonym)

Talk Experience: Circle time - teacher
is talking about trip to
R.C.M.P. last day.

	In this area the child is		
	Strong	Adequate	Weak
Contributes information and ideas to discussion.	—	—	✓
Listens when other speak.	—	—	✓
Speaks clearly and uses expression when speaking.	—	—	✓
Uses conventional grammar and forms.	—	—	✓
Indicates enjoyment of language sounds and rhythms.	—	—	✓
Makes eye contact and uses gestures when speaking.	—	—	✓
Makes requests.	—	—	✓
Asks for direction.	—	—	✓
Asks for information.	—	—	✓

Uses oral language for a variety of functions.

Instrumental ("I want...")	—	—	—
Interactional ("me and you...")	—	—	—
Personal ("here I come...")	—	—	—
Heuristic ("tell me why...")	—	—	—
Imaginative ("let's pretend...")	—	—	—
Informational ("I've got something to tell you...")	—	—	—

Teacher comments:

- Walter sits on mom's lap during circle time
- When + says "good morning" to him, he turns his head into his mom
- Walter watches + talking and using King David (puppet) to describe farms
- When cow bell is passed around he takes it for a brief moment but does not ring it
- he uses no words, but is very expressive with body movements & facial expressions

APPENDIX C

Sample Interview Questions

- What activities do you like doing with your child at the preschool?
- Does your child talk more or less at the preschool than at home?
- Do you see any changes in the way your child talks at the preschool compared to home?
- What activities or play centers at the preschool do you think encourage your child to talk?
- Do you think talking is important for your child? Why?
- Is your child's language at home the same as the language he /she speaks at the preschool?
- Is your own language at home the same or different from the language you use at the preschool? What is similar? What is different? Why?

APPENDIX D

**Nipawin Early Childhood Team Preschool Program
Parent Questionnaire**

1. What did you like best about the parent program?
2. What did you like least about the parent program?
3. What did you like most about the children's program?
4. What did you like least about the children's program?
5. Please list any other parent/caregiver topics that you would like addressed.
6. What could be
 - a) added to the program?
 - b) deleted from the program?
 - c) changed in the program?
7. As caregiver and participant in the program, what was one important thing you learned?
8. Was the location for the program suitable?
9. Is there another location you think would be better?
10. As a result of being in the program, can you name one thing you have changed when working with your child?
11. Was the preschool program worthwhile? Comment.
12. Was the parent/caregiver program worthwhile?
13. Would you recommend this program to another parent? Comment.
14. Would you like to be involved in the program again in another session?
Comment.

APPENDIX E

Specific Parent Permission

Dear _____

I request permission to have you and your child _____, participate in a study I am conducting entitled "Factors Influencing the Language of Preschool Children in a Child/Parent Education Program". This research is for a M.Ed. (thesis) in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.

The primary aim of the study is to determine factors influencing the language use of children in a preschool child/parent education program. The objective of the research is to provide a broader perspective of the language experiences of preschool children who may be at risk for school success and point to more effective ways to assist and teach during their optimal stage of learning.

If you agree to participate, your child will be observed in the preschool and videotaped during one or two classroom sessions. I will also ask you to participate in an interview for about 20 minutes. The interview will be tape recorded. At any time you or your child may withdraw from the study.

You and your child's name will be changed for the study. The data collected will be stored safely and securely for five years after the final thesis is approved by the University of Saskatchewan. The study adheres to all requirements of the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Committee guidelines for behavioral research studies. The results of the study will be made available at the completion of the research.

Sincerely,

Patricia B. Byers
Graduate Student Researcher

.....
Please sign the appropriate space below which indicates that you have read the above information and agree to participate along with your child in the study.

Parent's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX F

Transcript/Data Release Form

I _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Patricia B. Byers. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Mrs. Byers to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Transcript/Data Release Form for my own records.

Participant

Date

Researcher

Date

APPENDIX G

Sample Preschool Dayplan

February 19, 1999

9:15 - 9:30 Opening Exercises

Welcome children and parents

Children arriving early will put masking tape on paper and paint over top of the tape. When finished painting they will take the tape off and see what shapes they have made.

Welcome song

Good morning, good morning how are you?

Good morning, good morning, Mrs. G..

Circle time, bring children to circle

Attendance

News Today is the day we go skating! We will have a great time together. Does anyone have any questions they would like to ask about our trip today?

Direct Teaching

Good Shapes for a Hungry Bear

9:30 – 9:45 Story Time

Jack and the Beanstalk

Story time with parent/caregiver

9:45 Craft

We will plant a bean today, just like our story. Children will be responsible for the watering and the care of their plant. We will watch and experience the growth of their beanstalk.

10:00 Snack

We will begin with hand and face washing.

Snack

Dental care, brushing teeth

10:15 Play centers

Time for fitting skates for children who did not bring their own skates.

10:30 – 11:30 Skating at the Rink

