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Kindergarteners' use of oral language when interacting with texts

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KINDERGARTENERS' USE OF ORAL LANGAUGE
WHEN INTERACTING WITH TEXTS

by

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Dedications

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my husband, Rob, and my sons Robert and Kevin. I would have not been able to complete this research study without your constant support, encouragement, and humor. Thanks for always "supporting the cause." Love you with all my heart!

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I would like to thank all the students I teach, and my principal, Danielle Sochor, at my school. You inpsire me each day to do better than the day before, and to greet each day as a new beginning. I am especially thankful to my students in this study for reminding me why I became a teacher, and how enjoyable and rewarding it is to teach "little people." I am so thankful.

Abstract

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TEXTS
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The purpose of this research inquiry is to study how kindergartners use oral language when interacting with texts during guided reading, read aloud books, and literacy discussions. Six students were selected from a Basic Skills Instruction (BSI) intervention program to participate in this study. As the academic demands have increased in the kindergarten classroom, it appears that there is a decline in the oral language skills that are the foundation for success as an emergent reader. This study examines the effects of engaging students in talk about books to promote their oral language and reading skills. Characteristics of literacy talk from both the students and the teacher during literacy events are analyzed. Findings from this study suggest that talk that supported students' interests, the use of open-ended questions, collaborative talk with peers, and selecting authentic literature with moral and justice themes are key components to encourage literacy talk in the kindergarten classroom. Implications for educators are also discussed in this study.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I have been teaching kindergarten for the past seventeen years and enjoy the social interactions with my students. I appreciate their sense of humor, honesty, and eagerness to learn. One of my favorite subjects to teach is language arts. I enjoy teaching young learners how to read and write, with a focus on expressing their ideas.

Traditionally, kindergarteners have had lots to say about their family, friends, favorite toys, pets, and other things and events pertinent to their lives. However, in the past decade, I have seen a decline in the expressive language of kindergarteners, which seems to be adversely affecting their literacy achievement. It has become more of a struggle for most kindergarteners to retell a story, or share their thoughts about a story, or ask questions. "Show and Tell" has become more of a chore for young learners, rather than a fun activity. Students bring in their favorite toys or books, security items such as blankets or stuffed animals, and other important items in their lives. However, when it is time to "tell" about their item, students have great difficulty moving beyond factual statements that merely name the object. This trend of less and less talking among five and six year olds seems to be a growing phenomenon in my classroom, as well as in my colleagues' classrooms. Often, we discuss how so many kindergarteners talk less and less during their time in school. What was once filled with meaningful chatter in our classrooms has been replaced with one and two word answers, shoulder shrugging, and numerous "I don't knows".

As I reflect on this trend, I note how the curriculum for kindergarten has changed over the past fifteen years. I wonder if I have changed my literacy practices over the

years that has resulted in this decline in student talk. I wonder if I have moved away from more student-centered discussions to a high prevalence of teacher-directed talk in the era of high-stakes testing and the pressure to meet state standards. As a result, I am curious to find out how students' oral language skills impact their learning in reading and writing. In addition, I want to note my own teaching practices and how they influence students' abilities to actively engage in literacy activities.

Statement of the Question

This inquiry is concerned with the nature of oral language during literacy events by both students and teachers. As I began to wonder what has caused students to talk less, I think back to eighteen years ago when I first started teaching kindergarten. Back then, the day was filled with songs, poems, and play time. There was, what I call, a beautiful buzz in the classroom throughout the day. Kindergarteners were engaging in meaningful conversations with their friends and the teacher. Language was everywhere. As Gee notes, acquiring language is best learned by becoming immersed in the language, and having constant interaction with that language (1987). I can definitely hear my students and myself being immersed in language and interacting with each other throughout the day.

Once the National Reading Panel (2001) issued their report on reading in the United States, and suggestions for future educational policy, early childhood practices began to shift.

A change in curriculum and expectations nudged the beautiful buzz out of the classroom, only to be replaced with isolated content area instruction, that may or may not

be related to each other. Gone are the thematic units in which we studied penguins, pumpkins, transportation, and the like, in which we learned math, science, social studies, reading, and writing.

As a result, I need to find ways to promote the return of authentic oral language interactions. As I think about my own practices, the opportunities for open discussion among students has given way to more teacher talk, and less student talk. All learning takes place in the context of social interaction and children develop as a result of their interactions with their culture's oral and printed language (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, language development is fostered when teachers engage students in conversations that support children's interests and use open-ended questions (Whorall & Cabel, 2015). As a result, I need to engage my students more actively in talk about books they like and about general knowledge to enhance their oral language and reading skills. The following question guided this research:

How do kindergarteners use oral language when interacting with texts?

To fully analyze this question, the following subquestions were also investigated:

1. What types of classroom discussion promote oral language?

2. How does the teacher promote and sustain student talk?

3. What types of literacy discussion do kindergarteners apply to their own reading?

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine language and its impact on literacy in the kindergarten classroom. This inquiry will note the characteristics of talk from both the teacher and the students during the literacy events of read aloud, guided reading, and

literature discussions. Through observation of these three literacy events, I will able

explore language patterns and note changes in student talk with each event. In addition,

the roles students assume and the meanings they create will also be noted. Finally, I

explore my role as the teacher and how I can promote and sustain classroom talk during

these events. As I listen to students' talk and their conversations when engaged with

texts, I will discover what they need and instruct them in those areas. I hope to model

how reading is a social event that flourishes when discussed with others.

Story of the Question

It is time for morning meeting. My kindergarteners have cleaned up from

breakfast and are making their way onto the carpet. They are accustomed to the routines

of morning meeting so they each stand in a colored box, waiting for me to select the

Child of the Day. I reach in a bin with students' names who are awaiting to be the next

Child of the Day. I reach in, read the name, and cover it so no one can see who it is. I

begin giving clues . . . the child of the day is a boy; the child of the day is wearing

sneakers; and so on. If students match the clues, they remain standing. If they don't

match, the sit down. I continue giving clues until all but one student is eliminated.

Today, one of the clues is the child of the day is wearing a plaid shirt. Four boys

are left standing. The students keep looking at each other and their shirts. It is obvious

they do not know what is meant by the word plaid. I explain it a pattern with strips of

colors that go up and down and across to form squares. One boy yells out, "I have

plaid!" Unfortunately, he does not. He is wearing stripes. I explain the difference and

he quietly sits down. The three boys remaining are still unsure of what constitutes plaid.

I bring up a picture on my Smart phone, since no one else was wearing plaid. After seeing the photo, "Johnny" realizes he is wearing plaid.

Elated, Johnny comes up, puts on his child of the day necklace, and listens as we sing the child of the day song to him. Once finished singing, I ask Johnny what he wants to share with the class. No response. I prompt him with asking about what he did over the weekend. No response. I give examples such as play outside, play a game, visit family, or go to a friend's house. Johnny finally says, "I played." I continue to prompt, "What did you play and with whom?" Johnny continues, "We just played."

This scenario has become all too common in my kindergarten classroom. More often than not, children are coming to school with inadequate language skills to participate in common every day conversations. Most students respond with one or two-word answers that evoke very little thought. The responses are simple recall of people and events without any type of elaboration or feelings.

Coincidentally, I have noticed these types of responses during various literacy activities. The decline in students expressive language seems to be adversely affecting their literacy achievement. It has become more of a struggle for kindergarteners to retell a story, share their thoughts about a story, or attempt to ask questions about a story.

My goal as a result of this inquiry is to improve individual achievement, not test scores. Cochran-Smith & Lytle note that teacher research is guided by a need to "generate deep understandings about how students learn - from the perspective of those who do the work" (2009, p. 58). Although I began this inquiry without any social or political agendas, the authors further argue that although teacher research may not be overtly linked to social and political action, this type of research "rests on deep and

profound sense of accountability for students' learning and life changes" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 58). Shagoury & Power contend that teacher research serves as a "grow light" so that students may flourish (2012, p. 33). As a result, I am eager to shine the light on how students' oral language skills are impacting their learning in reading and writing, what can be done to help these skills grow, with the hope of improving their lives.

Thesis Organization

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature surrounding oral language and its impact on reading achievement. Chapter Three describes the context of the study, including the research design, a description of the participants from the basic skills classes in which the study was conducted, and how the data was collected and analyzed. Chapter four provides the analysis of the collected data and a discussion of the findings of the study, including the setting, the students, and the curriculum utilized for this study. Chapter five presents the conclusions of the study and its implications for teaching literacy to young learners, as well as suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

"Talk is the sea upon which all else floats." (James Britton, 1970)

Introduction

Every teacher's goal is to see their students become proficient readers. Learning to read is no easy task, and there are many factors that influence how well a student learns to read. Before they enter kindergarten, children learn to listen and speak. Listening and speaking skills are paramount to students' future success in reading and writing. The connection between oral language and reading ability has been regarded as the foundation for early reading "as children draw on the meaning, syntax, and the phonology of spoken language as a bridge to emergent literacy" (Hill & Launder, 2010, p. 240).

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature in the areas of oral language and reading achievement, the impact of instructional talk during literacy activities, and the social environments that influence oral language. The first section discusses the bridge between oral language and early reading. The next section discusses various literacy skills such as decoding and its connection to oral language, and the benefits of exposure to academic language and instructional talk. The impact of social environments in school and non-school environments is discussed in the third section. Finally, the chapter ends with a summation of the research and how this study may contribute to current knowledge in the literacy field about oral language and reading.

Oral Language and Early Reading

While many studies have sought to determine what abilities predict reading achievement, there are mixed results about what skills are reliable indicators. Some studies give oral language abilities in preschool and kindergarten a high importance in determining reading achievement in later grades, while other studies give more predictive power to phonemic awareness skills. To clarify the relationship between oral language and early reading achievement, Roth, Speece and Cooper (2002) conducted a study with thirty-nine kindergarteners. The authors measured three domains of oral language: structural language, metalinguistic skills, and narrative discourse. Structural language encompasses semantics, morphology, and syntax. Metalinguistics includes phonological awareness and the ability to manipulate meanings of words, phrases and sentences, including moving beyond the literal level, such as understanding idioms, metaphors, and similes. Most students readily engage in conversational discourse because it is interactive. In contrast, the third domain, narrative discourse, is generated after or independent of an experience and contains unfamiliar and abstract vocabulary (Roth, Speece,& Cooper, 2002).

This study by Roth, Speece, & Cooper concluded that while phonological awareness skills in kindergarten predicted word and psuedo-word reading in first and second grades, it did not predict reading comprehension for these grades. Semantic knowledge, which was measured by word definitions and word retrieval, along with kindergarten print awareness, was a more potent predictor of reading comprehension than was phonological awareness (Roth, et al., 2002). However, these findings only relate to the structural language measurements in kindergarten. The authors note that further

investigation of these variables is needed in the primary grades to resolve the precise nature of the relationship between structural language and early reading acquisition.

Additional research was performed in Australia by Hill and Launder concluded that "learning to read written English is influenced by children's oral language development as well as their experience and understanding about written language structures" (Hill & Launder, 2010, p. 240). The authors of this study examined the ways young children in their first year of school used oral language, vocabulary, and phonology as they learned to read. The ability of young children to have control over "aspects of the reading process including phonology, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics" (Hill & Launder, 2010, p. 241) is essential to provide a foundation for emergent readers. In an effort to improve a child's oral language, an intervention program was developed at the University of South Australia to find the relationship between five-year-old children's oral language and reading emergent literacy texts and observe if improvement could be made. A play based program was implemented that utilized activities that "involved sustained thinking, use of narrative and the use of oral language to inform, hypothesize and imagine." A major tenant of the research was that oral language should be developed with context and not merely drills involving vocabulary words, grammar and phonemic awareness exercises. Fifteen different playboxes were created. Each play box also had an associated set of "leveled questions" that would stimulate children's oral language. Each box encompassed different books and materials that possessed a central theme. The leveled questions "encouraged the children to: describe things, describe thinking, brainstorm, and go beyond the here and now" (Hill & Launder, 2010, p. 244).

Nevertheless, a clear relationship between oral language and beginning reading was not found. However, a strong connection between phonemic awareness and reading was found to exist particularly in the first and second grade. Again, this does not translate to improved reading comprehension in later grades (Hill & Launder, 2010). It should be noted that "it is not phonology alone that influences beginning reading as oral language is multidimensional in it's contribution to early reading" (Hill & Launder, 2010). With oral language being "multidimensional," varied approaches need to be explored to identify the merits of each approach.

Conversely, in a study by Snow, Burns & Griffin (1998), they found the connection between early language development and later reading achievement to be a greater indicator than the connection between phonological awareness and success in reading. However, as explained by Snow, Burns, & Griffin (1998), while early language development and phonological awareness are highly correlated, "it was measures of semantic and syntactic skills, rather than speech discrimination and articulation that predicted phonological awareness differences" (p. 53). This further confirms the importance of developing early language skills.

Findings from a recent study further support the connection between early language and reading achievement. In a longitudinal study spanning fifteen years, Suggate, Schaughency, McAnally, & Reese (2018) explain the predictive links between vocabulary, oral narrative skills, and reading comprehension. The authors followed forty-six children from age nineteen months to sixteen years old. Language measures were administered at the beginning of the study and then at 25, 32, 40, 51, and 65 months of age, as well as at ages twelve and sixteen years. Their study revealed vocabulary and

reading development at each age predicted subsequent development significantly. In addition, their research demonstrated that preschool oral narrative skills are linked to students' reading comprehension at age sixteen (Suggate, et al., 2018).

Researchers continue to investigate and evaluate the best practices and programs to promote literacy achievement in the early grades. Snow & Matthews (2016) reviewed various reading programs to discover best practices for teaching reading. They grouped foundational literacy skills into two groups: constrained and unconstrained skills. Constrained are finite skills in which a student can achieve perfect performance such as identifying the 26 letters of the alphabet, or a set of common spelling rules. However, these skills do not translate into proficient reading comprehension. Unconstrained skills, knowledge acquired through experience, such as vocabulary and background knowledge, are required as children progress through the older grades, and are much harder to test. A drop in US literacy scores on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that only 36 per cent of fourth-graders scored at or above proficient in literacy scores. Beyond third grade, Snow & Matthews (2016) contend that successful comprehension requires children to understand a broad range of topics that contain complex language. The decline in literacy scores leads the authors to suggest that schools are focusing too much on constrained skills, and not enough on language skills that include vocabulary and background knowledge in the early grades. "Knowing what the words mean and having some background knowledge relevant to the text become the strongest predictors of successful comprehension among students who have acquired basic decoding skills" (Snow & Matthews, 2016, p. 59). After review of numerous early childhood programs, the authors contend that student achievement may not be a result of

the curriculum itself, but by the teacher talk that results." Storytelling and StoryActing were identified as the two techniques that promoted oral language skills in pre-school children. In this technique, children dictated stories to the teacher, and then act out the story with classmates as the teacher reads the story aloud. After adopting this technique in six Head Start classrooms, Snow & Matthews (2016) noted that the children who participated in Storytelling and Story Acting "showed greater gains in storytelling and story comprehension, vocabulary, early literacy skills, and ability to pretend."

After review of various programs and practices, the authors note that differences in scope and sequence, costs, and ways to implement any change make comparing them a challenge. However, considerable evidence leads the authors to suggests that:

"the quality of teacher's talk influences students' opportunities to learn- in particular, to learn the unconstrained language and content skills relevant to literacy. Children whose preschool teachers use more sophisticated vocabulary, engage them more actively in talk about books, and use more complex syntax themselves show larger vocabularies, more complex grammar, and better reading skills even as late as fourth grade" (p. 69).

With the connection between the quality of teacher talk and the improvements in students's skills established, an effort to incorporate sophisticated oral language by the teacher is essential. Various techniques used to elicit student talk and high-quality teacher talk in combination provide an opportunity for enhanced student oral discourse.

Oral Language and Literacy Skills

The debate over the impact of oral language regarding literacy achievement is not easily reconciled. Language is complex and there are numerous stances as to its effects on reading in the early grades. Kendeou, White, Van Den Brock & Lynch (2009)

examined the relationship between oral language and decoding skills from preschool to early elementary school. They posit that oral language skills and decoding skills have a reciprocal relationship. Comprehending text involves both breaking the code by translating symbols into written words, and the ability to gain meaning from the text and identify semantic relationships between the facts and events. Both skills begin developing in preschool and are predictive of reading comprehension in second grade. However, oral language skills accounted for more variance in reading comprehension than did decoding skills (Kendeou, et al., 2009).

Instructional practices have a positive effect on reading achievement. Reading research as begun to investigate how students' linguistic environments may impact their literacy development. In a case study by Ankrum, Genest, & Belcastro (2006), differentiated verbal scaffolding through questioning and prompting provided the "developmentally appropriate support that young learners need to think on a higher level. Instruction focused on open-ended, scaffolded conversation before, during and after reading. The verbal scaffolding in a kindergarten classroom was found to have positive implications to promote independent use of reading strategies. Showing beginning readers how to use strategies included direct instruction, explicit modeling, invitations to participate, clarification, verification, and telling. Meaningful conversations helped to guide the problem solving and critical thinking young learners needed to carry out a task or reach a goal beyond his/her unassisted efforts (Ankrum et. al., 2006). Teachers scaffold reading behaviors by using language effectively and responding with talk that bring the student "a little further along." Coaching talk such as prompting and

questioning had positive effects on student achievement over instruction that focuses on telling. Classroom discourse effects student thinking and ultimately student achievement.

To further highlight the importance of teacher talk in the classroom, Michener, Proctor, Silverman (2017) investigated how instructional talk predicted reading comprehension. Transcripts from third, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms were coded for features of instruction that predicted reading achievement. The authors found that two talk moves were found to predict reading comprehension: teacher explanations that included explicit instruction and exposure to academic language and follow-up moves that used positive reinforcement to keep students' attention on the learning task, and therefore, potentially more language exposure (Michener, et al., 2017).   While these findings are predictive of reading outcomes, the authors note these moves may not be helpful in the long term because the dominance of teacher talk would seem to constrain the opportunities for engaging in "higher-level thinking and robust linguistic comprehension on which reading comprehension relies" (Michener, et al., 2017, p. 750).

Social Role of Language

Halliday (1978) contends that all learning takes place through the "ongoing medium of language." Language is a product of our experiences and the interpretation of those experiences.   It is not just a series of sentences, but, rather a discourse about the exchange of meanings that is ongoing with significant others (Halliday, 1978). From Halliday's perspective, everything human revolves around language, including our social actions and the ways in which we learn. This social constructivist lens echoes the major idea of learning by Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. According to Vygotsky, all

learning takes place in the context of social interaction with others. Additionally, children develop as a result of their interactions with "sign systems" that include a culture's oral and printed language (Tracey & Morrow, 2017).

Reading any text requires the physical procession of the material and the act of listening to any conversation requires the listener to be present. However, the comprehension of the meaning of either is influenced by numerous outside forces. No matter the method of conveyance, human language conveys information and meaning that has been shaped by "social activities and interactions; to scaffold human affiliation in cultures and social groups and institutions through creating and enticing others to take certain perspectives on experience" (Gee, 2001, p. 715).

The meaning that is extracted from language is not just some internal representation of written or verbal language. Gee (2001) contends that "meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social worlds" (p. 715). People's experiences are gathered from their lifetime and stored to be referenced like a huge database of possible interpretations of language. An individual's own experiences shapes their comprehension. We "videotape our experiences as we are having them" and store them to our personal library. An individual accesses their experience's to evaluate language and interpret its meaning based on the set of experiences that are available. The experiences are layered with other associated "feeling, attitudes, embodied position, and various sorts of foregrounds and background of attention." It is these associations that give language a depth that would otherwise be just a relaying of information. The resulting depth of meaning brings the giver and

receiver of language a common experience that still is influence by each's personal experience.

It appears that "the meaning of words, phrases and sentences are always situated, that is customized to our actual contexts" (Gee, 2001, p. 716). Each expression of a thought through language comes with a pretext of experiences of the individual expressing themselves when conveying thought. The recipient of the thought processes the language contextually and then filters and shapes the language through their own library of experiences. It is important to note that language is not just about transferring information but rather about "communicating perspectives on experience and action in the world" (Gee, 2001, p. 716). This is why the experiences of the individual expressing presents the language is an effort to mold or introduce a new perspective. A new mother talking to a toddler about a boiling pot of water is a conversation most can relate. A mother doesn't just instruct her child on the dangers of hot water, but rather is relaying her own experiences to her child. Not only is the mother using her words, but she typically acts them out frantically, pulling her hand away as she grimaces, creating an opportunity for her child to "videotape" the mom's experience into the child's own experience library, reinforcing the message she wanted to send.

The gathering of experiences and the free and frequent exposure to the verbal communication of those experiences plays an important role in the development of early language abilities. Many studies have shown that "the correlation between early language abilities and later success in reading is just as large as, if not larger than the correlation between early phonological awareness and success in reading" (Gee, 2001. p. 723). To increase school-based verbal abilities, "exposure to family, community, and

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school language environments in which children interact intensively with adults and more advanced peers" (Gee, 2001, p. 724) is recommended. Providing children with a rich environment of written and verbal language that covers a wide breath of topics will greatly enhance their ability to express their thoughts and experiences, both verbally and textually.

Home and School Environments

Environment cannot be denied as an influence on a child's oral language and vocabulary skills. A child's early exposure to oral language from birth to age three is primarily the result of interactions with their parents and close social group (Fiano, 2013). This early exposure creates the foundation for their initial vocabularies and oral language. There is mounting proof that the amount of parental speech a child is engaged with is related to a child's vocabulary development and growth (Fiano, 2013). The early years of a child oral language development are referred to as their primary discourse (Gee, 1989). It is important to recognized that there are many components that influence a child's primary discourse. Cultural, socio-economic, geographical and home environments all create a collage of experiences that shape an individual's primary discourse. With so many possible combinations it should be recognized that primary discourses are not "right or wrong, better or worse – rather, just different" (Fiano, 2013, p. 63).

A child's introduction into public environments such as community, businesses, and school provides a new source of discourse. Gee (1989) refers to this as secondary discourse. The most striking difference between the primary and secondary discourses is

the set of expectations that are associated with secondary discourse. "Secondary Discourses present specific structures of being and protocol that require compliance to gain access to them, commanding particular ways of speaking, acting and doing" (Fiano, 2013).

Fiano's research focused on one kindergarten student who was observed at home and school. There were 20 home/school sessions, where observations lasted approximately 60 minutes in each setting on the same day for over a total of 40 hours of study (Fiano 2013). All sessions were recorded and reviewed to establish individual dictionaries that were collected for both the home and school environments. Results of the research showed a significant difference in oral expression at home and school. In the Primary discourse environment, the number or words uttered was 4 times as great as the number of words used in the classroom. It should be noted that the number of different words used in the home environment was 5.5 percent, while in school the variety of words was 11 percent. (Fiano, 2013). The transfer of discourse from the home to school environments was significant, however the transfer from school to home was not as prevalent. The study shows the importance of incorporating primary discourse into the classroom environment to establish connections between the two and subsequently build oral language that scaffolds from the foundations of both.

This has great implications for teaching English learners and the results were mirrored in a longitudinal study by Uchikoshi, Yang, Lohr & Leung (2016). The authors followed 102 English learners over a year to examine how their oral proficiency in their native language impacted their reading comprehension in English, as measured by elicited narratives using a wordless picture book. Narrative samples were collected in

first grade, and reading skills were assessed one year later. The results demonstrated that reading comprehension was positively affected by the ability to produce a coherent oral narrative in either the home language or English. Uchikoshi, et al., (2016) noted that "the more developed the children's stories were in either their home language or English, the higher their English reading comprehension scores were one year later" (p. 248). The authors note that a limitation to this study was that English reading comprehension was measured with only one assessment, and results may differ with other reading comprehension assessments. This study suggests that literacy education should focus not only on vocabulary, but also include opportunities to include vocabulary development as part of producing coherent narratives in a communicative context (Uchikoshi, et al., 2016).

This includes literacy instruction during the preschool years. There are strategies that support children's oral language development in the preschool classroom even during non-teacher directed settings, such as at meal time and during centers. Whorall & Cabell (2015) recommend providing children with purposeful conversations that include sophisticated vocabulary. Preschool oral language skills have shown to predict reading comprehension in the second grade (Kendou et al. (2009). Language development is also fostered when teachers engage students in conversations that support children's interests and use open-ended questions. When children talk about their interests, the talk becomes decontextualized and they are able to move beyond the "here and now" and include talk about the past and the future (Whorall & Cabell, 2015, p. 337). Teachers have the opportunities to engage students numerous conversations throughout the day that will enhance their literacy achievement.

Conclusion

While the importance of language as a precursor to literacy development is touted, the debate continues over whether language or phonological awareness skills truly predict reading achievement. Semantic knowledge (Roth et al. 2002), vocabulary, preschool oral narrative skills (Suggate, Schaughency, McAlly, & Reese, 2018), and syntactic skills (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) were shown to predict reading achievement in later grades. I agree with Hill and Launder (2010) that language is multidimensional and should be explored more to evaluate the tenets of various approaches to teaching reading. As a kindergarten teacher recognizing the decline in oral language skills, it is my intent to provide my students with explicit instruction and engage them more actively in talk about books and general knowledge to promote their reading skills. I feel that emergent readers need language, or talk, to provide the foundation for their literacy achievement. It is my hope that my questions for this study, along with the literature review, will promote early language development in school, as well as preschool environments, so children will be equipped with the necessary tools to become successful readers.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Research Design

This inquiry used the qualitative research design. The purpose of this research is to question and evaluate educational practices within my classroom to improve student achievement in literacy. As such, I need to consider the learning environment, my educational practices, and the needs of individual students, according to Smith & Lytle, (2009). The data collected occurred in the natural setting within my classroom. My students' literacy abilities guided my instruction and interventions throughout the inquiry. Shagoury & Power (2012) contend that teacher research is an extension of good teaching, not something added to teaching. It is an opportunity to learn from the perspective of the students as the teacher researcher evaluates their own teaching practices, with the goal of improving students' learning (Shagoury & Power, 2012). The various data collected included spoken, written, and observed forms. Narratives from the classroom were used to highlight key findings. Use of multiple data forms provided multiple lens to provide a clearer understanding of literacy talk for kindergarteners.

Triangulation of the data was used to establish trustworthiness. Triangulation is comparing data from different sources. Data was collected from student surveys, audio recordings of student talk during literacy activities, field notes, and entries from a teacher's journal that noted observations and any emerging patterns. Triangulating the date increases the validity and generalizability of the inquiry. In addition to transcriptions of student talk, examples of students' drawings were used to gain further insight into oral language skills and their thinking. Periodically, students were asked to

draw a picture about a story they read and then "tell the story of their picture." This was done to ensure the data was valid. "Validity rests on concrete examples (or "exemplars") of actual practices presented in enough detail that the relevant community can judge trustworthiness and usefulness" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 43). In addition, systematicity is preserved when "multiple data sources illuminate and confirm, but also disconfirm one another (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 44). Triangulating data from more than once source increases the credibility of the findings.

Context of the Study

  Community. The research site is a small early childhood school in a suburb of Philadelphia, located approximately twenty miles east of the city. The population is divided between middle class families and lower-socio-economic class (SEC) families. Most of the lower SEC families consist of a mother and her children, and sometimes nieces and nephews. Lower SEC families reside in rental properties such as apartment complexes, townhomes, and other ranch-style homes through government subsidies. The town is home to a state university. During the school year, the population increases by 10,000 to 12,000 college students. Students reside in homes throughout the community in addition to on-campus housing. Most of the off-campus housing is located in an area of the town known as Chestnut Ridge, which is near the university. As residents move from these homes, investors have bought them and turned them into multiplex units to rent to college students. The research site is located in Chestnut Ridge.

School. The study site is a small Title I school that houses early elementary grades pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. Approximately three-hundred students attend this school. This enrollment represents a decrease in the student population because of more student housing replacing single-family homes. Two-thirds of the students attend full day kindergarten for six hours. The rest of the students attend pre-kindergarten programs for two and a half hours a day. There are two pre-kindergarten classrooms for three-year-olds, three pre-kindergarten classrooms for four-year-olds, and one pre-kindergarten classroom for special needs students for ages three to four. Five regular education classrooms for kindergarten share a wing with two inclusion kindergarten classrooms. In addition, there is an Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) kindergarten classroom for students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

Sixty percent of the student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch. The school receives federal funding to provide breakfast to all students. Due to the young age of the students, busing is available to all students.

The racial make-up of the school is 58% white, 36% African-American, and 6% who are English Language Learners (ELLs) that are mostly Hispanic, with some Asian-American and Turkish. The homeless population is 1 – 2%. Special education is 7% of the population.

Participants. Approximately 25 students were identified as needing Basic Skills Instruction (BSI) based upon the results from the first trimester of the DIBELS assessment. This part of the DIBELS assesses letter recognition and identifying the beginning sounds in words (first sound fluency- FSF). Students whose scores indicated intensive interventions were needed in both letter recognition and FSF were targeted for BSI. Students were accepted into the Basic Skills program once parental consent was given. The students were divided into five small instructional groups with four to six students in the group, depending on scheduling and class assignments. Initially, I wanted to include all basic skills students in the study. However, scheduling and lack of parental consent prevented full inclusion into the study. As a result, I chose the group of students who were permitted to participate in the study. The group consists of three boys and three girls. They represent a range of personalities and cultural backgrounds. Following is a description of each participant. Student names have been changed to preserve the confidentiality of the participants in this study.

Grace is a five-year old Caucasian girl. Her grandmother has custody of her and her three year-old brother. Grace sees her parents on weekends and one night during the week. Grace receives free lunch. She loves to play dress-up and play with her LOL dolls. Grace is shy and hesitates to answer questions if she is unsure she will be correct.

Nadia is a five-year old bi-racial girl. She lives with her mother and sees her father on weekends. Nadia has two older sisters; one is in high school and the other sister is in college. Nadia loves dogs and wishes she had ten of them. Nadia is quiet, but becomes very excited when she realizes she has completed a task or answered a question correctly.

Jada is a five-year old African American girl. She has a twin sister in the classroom adjacent to her classroom. Jada also has an eight-year-old brother and lives with both of her parents. Jada receives free lunch. Jada and her twin sister dress alike every day. Jada walks her twin sister to her class every day and gives her a hug before proceeding to her own classroom. Both sisters love My Pony and Elsa. Jada's sister is more vocal, and will answer questions and do work for Jada.

Tommy is a Caucasian boy who is the youngest in his family. He is five years old and has an older brother who is seven. Tommy lives with both of his parents. His mother is a special education teacher in a nearby district and his dad works with computers. Tommy loves to play on his iPad. Tommy is reluctant to participate in literacy activities. If he does not know the answer immediately, he will refuse to continue with the lesson.

Joey is a five-year-old African American boy. He lives with his mother and father and seven-year old sister. Joey is petite for his age and suffers from eczema on his arm and hands. He does not respond to many questions and hesitates to try things on his own. Joey waits to see what his friends do, and then copies them.

George is a bi-racial, five-year-old boy and he lives with his mother, who is from the Philippines, and his Caucasian father. George has a younger brother and sister, who are two-year-old twins. He talks about them often, and recounts how he helps his mom and dad take care of them. George puts forth great effort every day. He is willing to take risks in his learning, and embraces new skills and ideas.

Procedure of the Study

Over the course of five weeks, I taught a group of six BSI students for thirty-five minutes each day. Most of the instruction focused on curriculum mandated by school administration. Primarily we read books in guided reading groups to improve emergent literacy skills such as concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, rhyming, and sight words. Guided reading books used were level A from the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) program by Fountas & Pinnell. The books used were both fiction and non-fiction, with highly predictable patterns and limited to one sentence per page. Only one word changed on each page, and the pictures on each page supported the new word. Discussions followed each guided reading text included recall, predictions, making connections, and sharing opinions. I recorded students' discussions for six guided reading books; three fiction and three non-fiction that all had repetitive text.

The titles of the fiction books were *Funny Things, Tom,* and *Rex*. *Funny Things* portrayed funny pieces of clothing that ended with the last page putting all the pieces together to show a clown. The text is, "Look at the funny ___." *Tom* listed all the things a cat can do, such as run, jump, eat, drink and purr. The text is, "Tom can ___." *Rex* shows a dinosaur doing playful activities outdoors such as jumping, running, climbing, hanging, and swimming. The text is, "I like to ___."

The titles of the non-fiction books were T*he Park, At the Zoo, I Can,* and *My Dad.* *The Park* names various items that can be seen at the park such as trees, flowers, birds, slides, swings, and children. The text is, "I can see the ___." *At the Zoo* lists animals that can be found at a zoo, such as tiger, bird, snake, and elephant. *I Can* shows a young girl and various things she can do such as run, jump, ride, and climb. The text is, "I can

___." My Dad shows different things a dad was doing such as shopping, cooking, riding (a bike), swimming, and sleeping. The text is, "Dad is ____."

Although guided reading is the primary mode of literacy instruction for BSI students, I included five read aloud books from the kindergarten curriculum to support oral language. three read aloud books were fiction and two read aloud books were non-fiction. These book titles were *Corduroy Writes a Letter* by Alison Inches, *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts, *The Recess Queen* by Alexis O'Neill, *Sun Up, Sun Down* by Gail Gibbons, and *Motion: Push and Pull, Fast and Slow* by Darlene R. Stille.

I read aloud each book to the students, stopping at various points in the text to discuss the story or information. We discussed each book over two days. I recorded their conversations and took notes about their behaviors. I looked for broad themes in students' conversations and their level of initiation and engagement. In addition, I noted the level of scaffolding and wait time from myself, and how it impacted student responses. Student drawings were used as another form of assessment. "Examples of student work can be one of the richest sources of data for teacher-researchers. It is tangible evidence of what kids are able to do and of the range of ways in which kids respond to different learning tasks" (Shagoury & Miller-Power, 2012). Each student was then asked to "tell the story of their picture" to further illuminate their thinking.

Data Collection

   The methods for data collection included multiple and different qualitative research techniques to increase the credibility of the findings. I used a student survey at the beginning and the end of the research study to ask my participating students their views about reading and talking, and to document any changes in their feelings or attitudes about "literacy talk." In addition, I noted any changes in body language and facial expressions. Audio recordings of student talk during our literacy lessons documented student conversations as I coded the types of responses and conversations they used.   The codes for discussions about texts included labeling/commenting, describing, storytelling, making connections, asking questions, inferring, and synthesizing. I kept a teacher journal to record my thoughts, feelings, and questions about the data collected each day. I observed behaviors that supported "literacy talk", and looked for themes of talk that emerged from different literacy events. I looked for features of talk that included turn-taking, initiation of talk, and length of response. In addition, student artifacts, such as drawings and writings, were used to gain insight into student thinking and to further document their discussions.

Data Analysis

   This inquiry analyzed student talk during literacy events and the effects of teacher talk on the development of kindergarten students' oral language development. I compared the results from the student surveys before and after the research study to see if a focus on oral language had altered their views about reading books and discussions about books. I noted if their motivation to read and their opinions about themselves as readers had changed.

I listened to audio recordings and read notes from my teacher journal to note patterns and reveal the interactions between students and teachers. The choice of text used, the level of questioning, and the length of wait time were analyzed for each literacy event to uncover the content of the talk and the meanings created. During guided reading, the teacher dominated the talk to teach numerous reading skills and strategies. In read aloud and literature discussions, the students had more control over the direction of the conversation, and more freedom to share their thoughts and interpretations of the text. The length of student responses was used to uncover the variation in content and sophistication of student talk among the various literacy events.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four discusses the findings of this research study to answer the question, "How do kindergarteners use oral language when interacting with texts?" As I analyzed my data, I noticed several themes that occurred throughout the research study. These included: open-ended questions produced longer responses; students preferred stories that evoked emotions; science readings resulted in higher levels of critical thinking and increased use of science vocabulary; and verbal interactions increased among students over time. Also, surveys given to the students before and after the research study revealed a positive increase in their feelings about reading.

Student Response Length

Research suggests that when conversing with young children, their responses tend to be very short one word responses. A one word response gives very little insight as to how much the student is invested in their response. No real depth of understanding is conveyed. This can be overcome by the teacher asking open-ended questions that push the students to elaborate on their responses. Interestingly enough the most basic one word question to ask a student is "Why?." It not only acknowledges their initial response, but then lets them know you are interested in hearing more about their thoughts on the topic. During the guided reading of "At the Zoo", the following exchange took place.

Teacher: Can you think of some other animals you may see at the zoo?

George: Flamingos

Nadia: Lions

Grace: Polar bears and penguins

Joey: Zebras

Jada: I don't know.

The teacher acknowledged it was okay to not know and that the students would read to learn more about animals at the zoo. While the responses only required a one word answer, with a bit more encouragement by asking additional questions, the students' answers begin to become more informative and they began to express their opinions after the reading.

George: I think the giraffe is cool. He has a really long neck.

Teacher: Why is his neck so long?

George: So he can reach the leaves in trees.

Nadia: I like him and I like the elephant. Elephants are my favorite.

Teacher: Why do you like them the best?

Nadia: They are cute and nice. They don't eat animals.

Joey: I like the zebra.

Teacher: Why?

Joey: "Cause he has cool stripes. And he can hide.

Teacher: How does he hide? He is a big animal.

Joey: He hide in the grass. His stripes help him hide.

Teacher: What is the word that describes when animals' skin or fur helps them hide from predators?

Timothy: Camouflage

Grace: Like them tigers. They have stripes and they can camouflage, too.

Nadia: Elephants can't hide. They are too big. (She giggles.)

Teacher: Jada, what animal did you like?

Jada: I like the bird. He's pretty. (Referencing the colorful toucan.)

Data analysis also found that when students respond with longer answers, their answers tend to include personal details. Their personal details frequently reflect on the primary sources of discourse which occur in the home environment. The following exchange during the reading of the *Recess Queen* clearly illustrates the discussions held at home, as well as the sociological mindset of the discussions.

Teacher: Today, I am going to read a book to you about a bully. Does anyone know what's a bully?

Nadia: It's someone who's mean.

Jada: Yeah, and they hit you.

George: Kids can't hit in school. That's not being a good bulldog buddy. (The school mascot is a bulldog.)

Teacher: That is true. You should not hit in school. How about at home or at the park? Do you think it is ok to hit when you are somewhere else other than school?

Timothy: No, you can get hurt. My mom said you should get a grown-up if someone is bullying you.

Jada: But my mom tell me that if someone hit me, I can hit them back.

Students look surprised and shake their heads no, except Joey.

Grace: It's bad to hit people. You have to tell them to stop. If them don't stop,

you run and get a grown-up.

Joey: My dad told me to hit back if someone hit me.

George: But then you are fighting and you can get hurt.

Data analysis also revealed that value judgements were expressed by the student's

verbal and non-verbal responses. Many of the students were surprised by Jada's response

and shook their heads no, except Joey. This exchange suggested that the primary source

of discourse shapes the way in which the reading is being received. The differing points

of view from home made the students interaction with each other and the text uniquely

personal. Here we see that our personal experiences influence the way we receive and

interpret text. Additionally, when the students expressed their opinion/experience, they

again were shaped by the responses they receive, which added to the base of their

experience. They added to the "video tape library in their mind" (Gee, 2001, p. 715), and

this connection to their personal experiences prompted longer responses.

Emotions and Oral Expression

A second finding suggested that students appeared to be much more attuned to

stories that evoke emotion. They showed more eagerness to express themselves, either

through empathy with the characters or their own feelings about the topic. A strong tie to

reading text and comprehending its meaning is dependent on the reader's ability to relate

to the story or characters. This relationship relies on a common set of experiences that

bind the reader to the story. Stories that tugged at the students' hearts tended to open

them up to more expressive conversation. The story "Those Shoes" deals with a young

boy who wants a new pair of shoes and the emotional highs and lows he experiences as

the story progresses. I started the lesson by having a discussion on the difference between having a want and a need. Lessons about needs and wants were previously conducted in their kindergarten classrooms. This established a foundation that the students knew the difference between needs and wants. The students were eager to say what things they wanted or needed. What was interesting was that one student, Nadia, already understood the more acceptable expectation behind needing something over wanting something. The following exchange highlights the conversation before reading the story.

George: A want is something you want like a toy.

Timothy: Or a video game.

Jada: You can want a new doll, like a LOL doll.

Nadia: I want a new coat.

Teacher: Do you need a new coat? (Nadia doesn't answer, seeming afraid she will say the wrong thing.)

Teacher: Does your coat you wear now have something wrong with it? Is the zipper broke or is it too small?

Nadia: It is too tight.

Teacher: Then you do need a new coat. If the coat fit and was not broken, would you need a new coat?

Nadia: No. (She seemed relieved to think that it was OK for her to get a new coat. Nadia is a pleaser and a rule-follower and does not like to disappoint anyone.)

Students showed engagement and were focused on the emotional feelings of the characters. Bullying has become an issue in the educational environment that has received a strong response from both the academic and parental realm. The influence from both sides can be seen in the student's responses. This is showing that both the primary and secondary sources of discourse are having an effect on shaping the interaction with the text.

The students' responses also appear to exhibit deeper connections to the story by the type of responses they give. While most of the readings conducted during the research have responses that weigh heavily on the labeling and commenting type of responses, the stories with a more emotional slant elicit high level responses. Responses to these heart-felt types of stories show inferring and synthesizing appear more often than in stories without a focus on emotional themes. Two of the stories used during the research dealt with emotional themes, *Those Shoes*, and *Recess Queen.* In both of these stories, the student responses show a strong increase in responses that exhibit inferring and/or synthesizing. The charts below show that the percentage of responses that are either considered to be inferring or synthesizing make up approximately 20 percent of the responses for both "Recess Queen" and "Those Shoes." The other stories used during the research typically have less than a 10 percent response rate in the inferring and synthesizing categories.
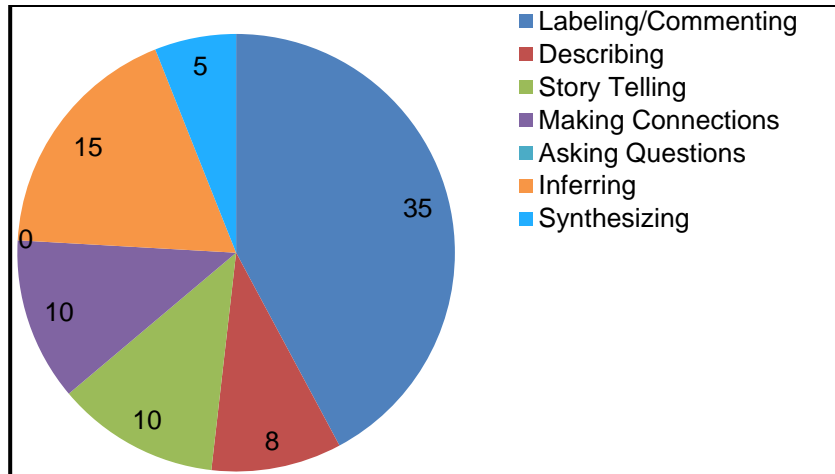
Figure 4-1. Recess Queen Response Counts
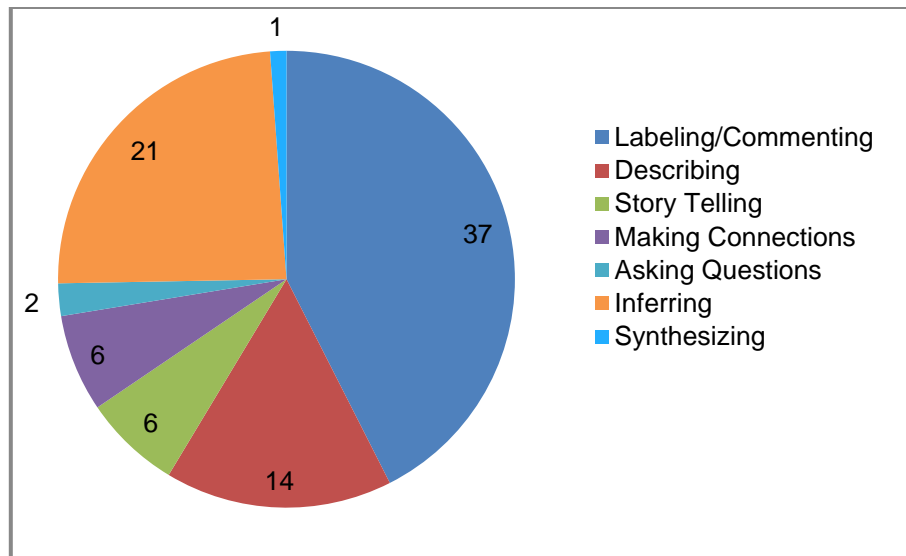
Figure 4-2. Those Shoes Response Counts

Perhaps the most striking observation make during the reading of *Those Shoes* was the empathy and emotional transference made by one student, Nadia. She projected the feelings that one character, Antonio, was having based on the perceived empathy he

had for another character's emotions, Jeremy. The following oral exchange showcases this multilayered projection of emotions.

> Teacher: I agree. Let's look at Antonio's face. What do you think?
>
> George: He looks upset. Maybe he is afraid the kids will be mean to him too.
>
> Nadia: I think he is sad cause they are making Jeremy sad.

Students were asked to draw a part of the story that really shows the character's feelings and be able to tell me what you are thinking. I instructed them to think about how they cared for each other and what they said or didn't say to each other. All of the students drew various parts of the story. All but one student focused on the happy outcome of the story. Nadia, the student who exhibited the multilayered projection of emotions instead portrayed a more somber moment depicting two sides of sadness from the perspective of the Grandmother and from Jeremy, the main character. It appears that the negative emotions caused a greater impact and deeper insight to the feelings of the character for Nadia. She has taken an aesthetic stance with this story as she appears to be "living through the event" and self-actualizing the character's emotions (Rosenblatt, 1978). The drawing below depicts Nadia's visualization of the story. She took great care to draw the picture with details, which demonstrates the impact this part of the story had on her. When I asked her to tell me about her picture, she said, "Grandma is sad because she cannot get the shoes for Jeremy. And Jeremy was sad because he couldn't get them." Nadia is again very aware of the characters' feelings. She is connecting with the characters on an emotional level. Below is Nadia's picture and explanation of her drawing recorded by me.
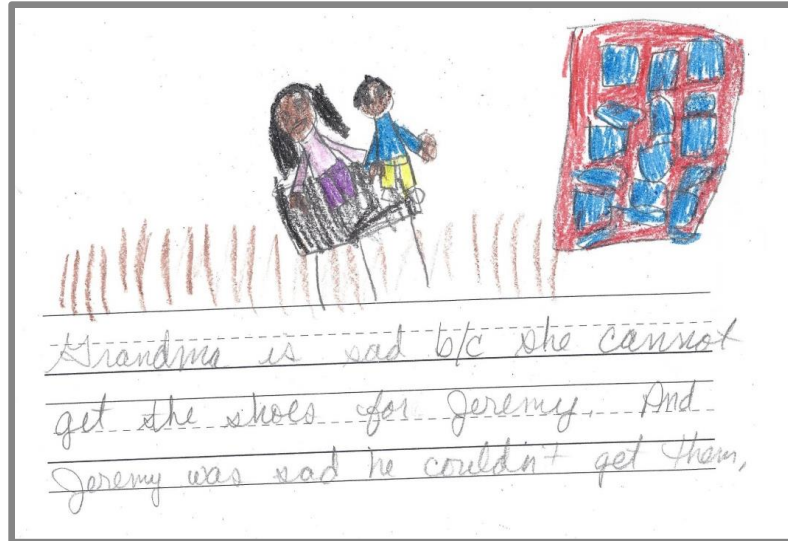
Figure 4-3. Those Shoes Drawing by Nadia

Although Grace drew a happy event from the story, she, too, noted how the one

character's feelings, Jeremy, were influenced by the other character's feelings, Antonio.

Grace drew Jeremy and Antonio standing in line to go outside to play in the snow. She

drew a speech bubble above Antonio's head and wrote 'thank you' in it. Although her

picture had minimal details, when I asked her to tell me about her picture, she said, "It

him whispering in Jeremy's ear. Him said thank you because he shared his shoes with

him. Jeremy is happy because Antonio is happy." Like Nadia, Grace connected with the

characters' emotions.

Joey had another insight to the story. He drew Jeremy and Antonio racing in the

snow. When I asked him to explain his picture, he said, "Jeremy and Antonio are racing.

They are happy because Jeremy like his new boots and Antonio likes his new friend."

Joey recognized that more than the material things, it was a new friendship that Antonio

appreciated the most.

Those Shoes evoked real feelings and authentic responses from the students. Each student seemed to be "engulfed in the story" as they remained focused and engaged with the text throughout the entire reading (teacher's journal, Feb. 8, 2019). More than learning about needs and wants, the students were moved by the emotional ups and downs of the characters.

This emotional connection to characters was evident in the discussion following *Corduroy Writes a Letter*. In the story, several things are wrong and Corduroy writes letters to fix the problems because Lisa feels that if she writes a letter, no one will listen to her. In the end, Lisa finally writes a letter to get her favorite song on the radio. Student responses were minimal until they realized that Lisa, the girl in the story was mad.

Joey: She don't want to write a letter. She is mad.

Teacher: Why do you think Lisa is mad?

Joey: Her face look mad. (He points to the picture.)

Teacher: She does look upset in the picture. Why is she mad? Is she too little to write a letter? What is the real reason Lisa does not write the letter? Think about what the author said on this page. (I reread the page.)

George: Oh, she thinks the baker will not listen to her so that's why she doesn't write the letter.

The students were surprised when the baker listened to Corduroy's letter and put more sprinkles on the donuts. As a result, the students champion for Lisa to write a letter to the movie theater owner to let him know that two of the lights in his sign are out. They want her to solve the problem. Grace pleads, "But maybe him will listen." Then

Timothy offers, "Maybe he will listen. She should try." When the students think she
cannot write it by herself, Nadia offers a solution.

Teacher: Why should Lisa write the letter?

Joey: So the people know where to go.

Nadia: Lisa could ask her mom to help her write the letter.

Teacher: Do you think Lisa needs help?

Nadia: Yeah, she can't do it by herself.

Teacher: What makes you think that?

Nadia: Because if she could, she would write it.

Students were eager to have the problems in the story resolved. They were
excited when Lisa finally decided to write a letter requesting to hear her favorite song on
the radio.

Teacher: Why do you think Lisa will finally write a letter?

Grace: Because now her knows that people listen to letters.

Timothy: Maybe she can ask Corduroy to help her. He already wrote letters.

Jada: Or maybe the bear can write the letter again.

Joey: No, Lisa will write the letter. I think she feel like she can do it now.

Teacher: I agree, but what makes you say that? Why do you think she can do it
now?

Joey: Because it her favorite song.

The other students agreed in unison. They identified with Lisa finally writing
about something that was important to her personally. The emotional connection to Lisa
allowed the students to empathize with her and rally for her success in the story.

Additionally, it is interesting that students feel that adults don't listen to children. However, it does not stop them or the characters in the story from writing letter to relay their concerns to those with the authority to make change. There seems to be an implied importance to written communication being more effective or official then oral communication when attempting to communicate a concern or desire.

Science Texts and Critical Thinking

Texts about science exhibited the highest level of critical thinking and an increased use of vocabulary from the text. It is interesting that the students used their personal experience to tie themselves to the scientific principles being discussed. It allowed them to become part of the science. It appeared that this sense of being part of the story triggers an increased amount of conversation about the various aspects of the scientific principle being discussed. While reading the story *Sun Up, Sun Down*, it was observed that student responses began to be composed of compound sentences and multi-sentence responses.

George: Yeah and the sun helps you see things. You can't see things in the dark.

Grace: And it helps plants grow. If there was no sun, then plants would die.

Nadia: Not if you wear sunscreen. My mom always puts sunscreen on me. Then I don't get burned.

While discussing the story "Motion," the use of multi-sentence responses occurred more often. In addition, the students laced their responses with personal information that tied them more closely to the text. In the following excerpt, each of the students relayed personal information. It appeared that once the first student shares

personal experience, the rest were eager to join in and tell their story. The following is an excerpt of the conversation referring to riding on a seesaw:

Joey: They have one at the park. But I don't go on it. It's too big for me.

Timothy: I know what they are but I don't go on them either. I don't like to go up high.

Nadia: I love to go high! I go on it with my big sister.

George: I never went on a seesaw but my dad can take me.

In this short exchange between four students, we see them expressing their likes and dislikes. What is even better is that the students are not making judgements on each other's likes or dislikes. The conversion builds with each participant adding to the last student's response. Joey states that "They have one at the park. But I don't go on it. It's too big for me." Timothy is agreeing with Joey and adding that "I don't go on them either. I don't like to go high." Timothy is acknowledging Joey's statement and confirming with his experiences. This building continues with Nadia saying that "I love to go high." Here Nadia is indicating that she understands that while Timothy does not like to go high, she does. Not only that, she enjoys going on the seesaw with her big sister. Also, it appears that George is inspired to try a seesaw based on the others' experiences. And like Nadia, Timothy wants to share this experience with his someone, his dad.

The text fostered a sharing of experiences that tangentially relate to the topic. Each statement builds on the statement preceding it. The statements are not disassociated from each other as just four independent statements. They each provided greater meaning in the context of the conversation. Each statement is linked to the statements

surrounding it. As in text, the connections that flowed from sentence to sentence are mirrored in conversation. The ability to link thoughts in a conversation exhibits an understanding of the discourse and a contribution to further the discourse. With strong verbal discourse, the ability to express oneself has shown a relatable increased ability to understand textual discourse.

The use of new vocabulary and the concepts were introduced not just by the teacher, but also by the students. While discussing "Motion," two of the students, Timothy and Grace introduced the word "gravity" This immediately set into motion a series of responses that allowed Timothy and Grace to begin "teaching" the other students about gravity. The exchange below shows the students independently explaining gravity.

Joey: What's gravity?

George: It keeps us from floating away.

Jada: We can't float away.

Nadia: That's silly. We don't float.

Timothy: Because Earth has gravity so we don't float away.

Grace: Them can't float away. You can't see gravity but it's here.

This exchange involved every student and more importantly was not moderated by me. When the student's conversation stopped, I posed a question, a catalyst so to speak, "What do you think would happen if we did not have gravity?" This again elicited a response from each student. Each one saying what would "float away" if there was no gravity. A sense of silliness was present in their responses. Then, the conversation changed to a more serious tone as to what problems would occur if there was no gravity.

Grace: You can't walk outside or you can float away up in space.

Nadia: Then you can never go outside!

Joey: How do you get food if you can't go outside?

Timothy: That's why we need gravity.

With the introduction of the word gravity, new thoughts were introduced to some of the students. The students were encouraged to explore what would happen if we didn't have gravity. The students began to expound on the obvious implications of no gravity and then the secondary impacts it would have on our lives. The introduction of one solitary word was the impetus for understanding a new scientific concept. This, in turn, required deeper thought and prediction as to the effects of having gravity or no gravity present. Also, it inspired some humor amongst the students. And finally, a cause and effect correlation that brought to light a more pressing problem by Joey when he asked, "How do you get food if you can't go outside?"

An important aspect of this exchange is that teacher participation was minimal. The students were maintaining the discourse with only occasional help from myself. The students were learning just by talking with their friends. Interestingly enough, learning from your peers is perhaps the lessons most retained and also those least likely to be identified as taught.

During the reading of *Sun Up, Sun Down*, students used the new word vapor to expand on their knowledge. When finished reading the book, I asked the students to share their thoughts about the book.

George: I thought it was interesting how the sun makes rain.

Timothy: Yeah, the sun turns the water into a vapor.

Teacher: What is vapor?

Grace: You know, it's like it floats in the air. I watch-did Brain Child. If the water gets too hot, it vaporizes. Them form clouds and it rains.

Jada: I didn't know that!

Joey: Me either!

Nadia: I like how the shadows go where you are going.

Teacher: How did the shadows form?

No one responds. I can see they are trying to come up with the words to explain how shadows form. I reread the page that show the shadow in relation to the sun and ask students to examine the picture carefully.

Teacher: Where is the sun?

George: Behind the girl!

Teacher: Where is her shadow?

Timothy: In front of her! And in front of her cat!

Teacher: How is the girl and her cat making the shadow?

Grace: Her is blocking the sun!

Teacher: Yes, the girl is blocking the sun, which creates a shadow. Now the shadow is in   front of the girl. What will happen is she stays in the same spot, but turns her body around? Where will her shadow be?

Joey: In front of her?

Grace: No, it will be behind her.

Jada: It will?

Grace: Yes, look at the picture. If her turns around in the same spot, the shadow will be behind her a 'cause the sun will be behind her.

Jada and Joey: Oh!

The teacher questioning promoted a guided discovery of the scientific concepts from the text. In addition, the students were able to share their interpretations of the text with each other to synthesize the new information. Furthermore, the students were able to take concepts from the book and apply them to why the sun is so important. They predicted what would happen to the Earth without the sun.

George: We need it to get food for us to eat or we would die.

Nadia: And the animals would die if they didn't have any food.

Timothy: We would be too cold without the sun. And everything would die.

Grace: And the sun helps make rain so them can get water.

Joey: The sun makes us see better. We can't see in the dark.

Here again the students are teaching each other, with minimal discussion from the teacher. The effects of reading a non-fiction book did not end with the text. The content can be directly experienced by the students, giving them the opportunity to discuss their own experiences, as well as theorizing about events that they have yet to witness.

Student Discussion

Over time, student discussion moved beyond short exchanges with the teacher. Their responses became more expressive, and they began to engage in conversation between each other more than with the teacher. These observations may be attributed to the students' familiarity with each other and the differences in content between patterned texts and authentic text.

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As children enter kindergarten the most prevalent source of conversation takes place with their family, the primary source of discourse. Over time, their peers and teacher become part of their "learning family," the secondary discourse. With increased exposure to peers and the teaching staff, children become more comfortable holding conversations with members of the educational environment. Over the course of the research, student conversation was observed to be more substantive. Discussions in the beginning tended to exhibit a question-response pattern between the students and the teacher. This type of response is highlighted during the discussion of the guided reading book, *I Can,* which happened early in the research study.

Teacher: What are some things the boy can do?

Jada: I can run. (She rereads the text.)

Teacher: What else can the boy do?

Grace: I can hop. (She rereads the text.)

Teacher: What else is the boy doing?

Joey: I can climb a tree. (He rereads the text, but adds the words 'a tree.')

The students' responses mirrored the text. They thought their responses should be a rereading of the text (Journal entry, Dec. 18, 2018.) Since the purpose of reading the text was to decode, their responses were more like making the correct sounds in words, as opposed to making meaning. As the research progressed, the question-response pattern faded, giving way to a more in-depth interplay between the students and teacher, and more importantly between the students themselves. Further into the research study, during a discussion of the guided reading book, My Dad, students talked more with each

other as opposed to simply answering teacher questions. The last page shows Dad sleeping in a hammock.

Teacher: What is dad doing?

Jada: He sleeping.

Joey: He tired.

Grace: Him did a lot of work!

George: And he is smiling.

Joey: 'Cause he likes his, um, kids and his mom. (Referring to the mom in the pictures.)

Teacher: How do you know that?

Joey: 'Cause he does lots of stuff for them.

Jada: He shops for his family. My dad go to the store, too.

Nadia: And he cooks for them. My dad cooks for me.

Timothy: And he cleans the house for them all the time. But my dad doesn't clean the house. But he does go shopping sometimes.

By the end of the research, the students seemed more comfortable expressing their ideas. In part, this may be due to them understanding their ideas would be accepted, and therefore, they became more forthcoming. Their responses contained personal details about family and their experiences. Also, they genuinely seemed eager to be heard and share their thoughts. "Familiarity with the other students and the teacher appears to have encouraged students to be more free with their responses" (Journal entry, Jan. 15, 2019).

Using various types of text in the research yielded several interesting observations. The type of reading influenced the purpose of the reading. When using

patterned text that focus on learning to read, or break the code, versus making meaning,

pattered text yielded simple conversations. Student talk tends to pattern what they just

read. Simple text lacks informational exchange that can cause deeper conversation on the

concepts presented. There is a lack of content to spur any deeper discourse. However,

authentic text provided a much wider breath of information. The additional

content/information allowed the reader to relate with personal experiences, feelings, and

opinions with the text. More complex text increased exposure to new vocabulary and

increased concept-rich textual discourse. In addition, the students returned with an

elevated level of oral discourse in both verbal complexity and expression. Student

enthusiasm when reading authentic text was noticeably heightened. The volume level of

the conversation and body language accompanying the discourse were both "turned up"

to illuminate their active engagement with the text (Journal entry, Jan. 15, 2019).

Students' Attitudes Towards Reading

Surveys administered prior to beginning the research study revealed some

uncertainty with discussing reading. The survey questions can be categorized into two

groups: those which require the student to be the giver of oral discourse with the

expectation of personal reflection and those which the student is the receiver of the

discourse without the expectation of reflection. At the start of the research, all students

indicated a positive feeling when they looked at pictures in books; when someone read to

them; when someone talked to them or when they watched a movie. Each of these

activities did not require the student to be the initiator of any oral discourse. The students

were the recipients and were happy to passively participate. However, when questioned

about how they feel when someone asks them a question, or how they feel when they talk about a book they are reading, or how they feel when they talk about a book that someone else is reading, the responses were more negatively skewed. Here the students were required to be the initiator of the oral discourse and express their personal feelings. The comfort levels expressed by the students, both positively and negatively between the two groups of questions were very similar. The positive responses of the students preferring to be the receivers of oral discourse, reinforces the notion that oral discourse is the foundation for learning. Perhaps the comfort level of the students when passively being the recipients of oral discourse creates a personal environment where the platform for learning can be built and then expanded upon to include greater participation of the students.

Surveys were again administered approximately eight weeks later. As would be expected, the students' responses to those questions where the student is the receiver of the discourse without expectation of reflection remained positive. However, a dramatic shift was observed in the student responses where the student is the initiator of the oral discourse with the expectation of personal reflection. Improvements in the students' positive feelings came from increased positive levels in this category of questions. The students were decidedly more comfortable being the initiator of oral discourse as well as discussing their personal feelings during the oral exchange. This improvement may be caused by a familiarity with the other students and the teacher, resulting in an environment where they feel secure to express their views. It also may be due to the exposure of participating in discussions over the eight week period that modeled what productive oral discourse can achieve. All students improved with a minimum of a

seventeen percent increase in positive feelings about reading. The survey was comprised of eight questions each worth one to three points, for a possible total of twenty-four points. The students were asked how positively they felt about the question by picking a smiley face, neutral expression face or sad face. A smiley face was worth three points, a neutral face was worth two points and sad face was worth one point. The percentage increase was calculated by taking the total score for each student before the research and subtracting the students' total scores after the research and dividing the difference by twenty-four, resulting in the increased percentage. The charts below show the scores at the start and end of the research period for each student as well as the percentage increase in positive responses.
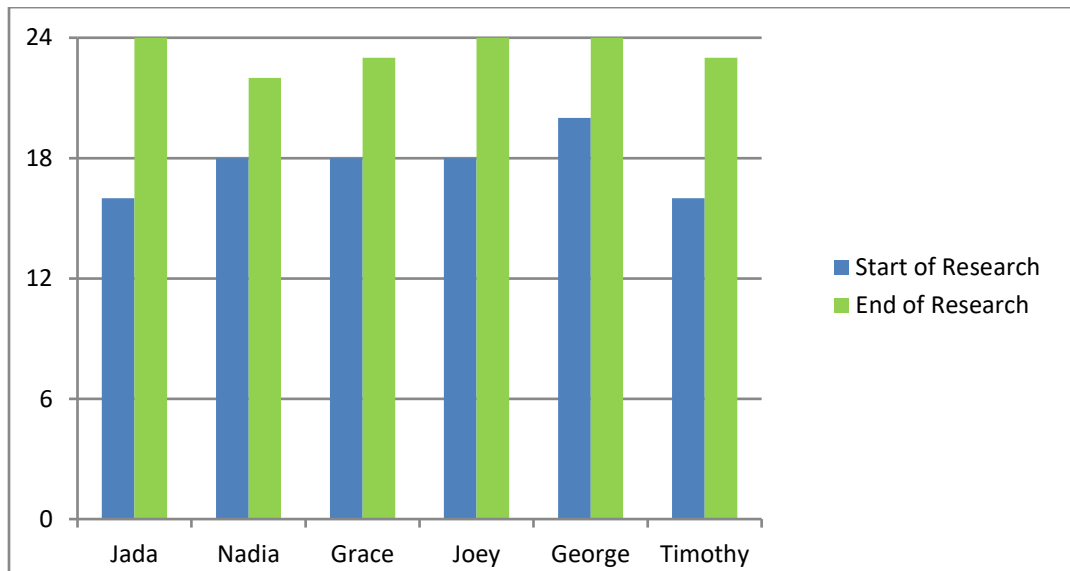
Figure 4-4. Before and After Research Positive Attitude Scores
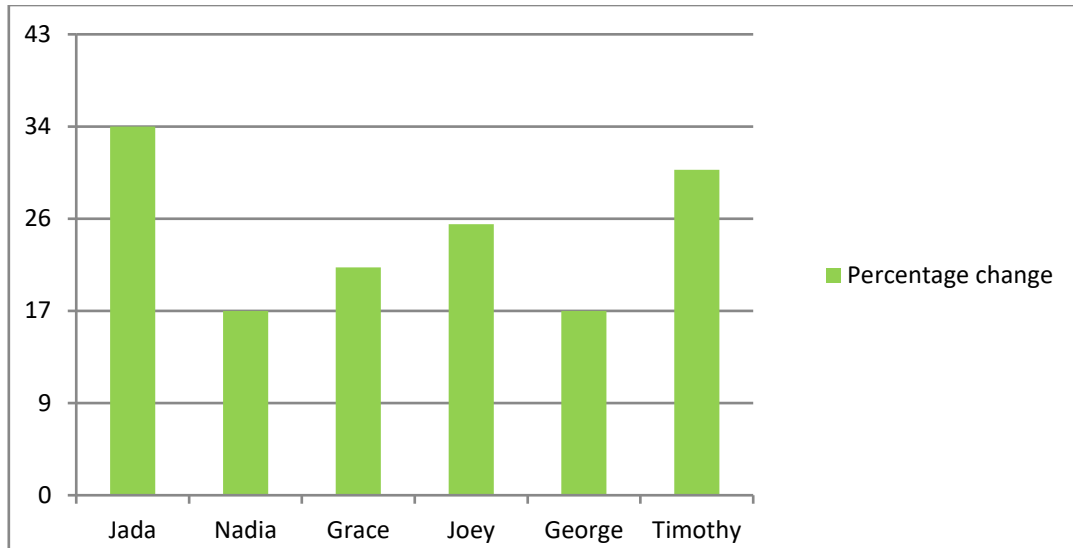
Figure 4-5. Percentage Increase in Positive Attitude Scores

At the beginning of the research period students were asked what were their favorite part of reading, two students said, "I don't know," and one student said, "Looking at the pictures." All the responses were fairly short and did not delve into any personal expression of why the students felt the way they did. At the end of the research when asked about their favorite part of reading, this time students were more verbose with their responses. Students commented on their ability to read and shared some of their favorite books. Their responses are noted below.

George: I get to read the books. I like information books because they help you learn.

Timothy: I like non-fiction books, like space books. It has the sun, and it is a type of star. Remember when we read the sun book. I liked that.

Joey: I like books with pictures. And I like characters, like when they is a Mom.

Jada: I liked the Bella book because she is so cute. And her friend Dot. I like storybooks because they are happy.

Grace: When I know how to read a book and then I can read it tomorrow. I like to read real books about dogs.

Nadia: My favorite part is the pictures and the pretty colors. And now I like the words. (Teacher: Why?) Because I get to sound it out. And I like story books because I like when they solve a problem. Something for Bella was my favorite. (Teacher: Why?) Because she just wanted a friend.

The book about Bella was another book we read that was not included in the study. Yet it seemed to leave a positive impression on Jada. and Nadia

This is an example where we see the student's responses were decidedly positive. In addition, each student elaborated on why they chose their favorite part of reading with personal expressions of their likes and thoughts about some of the books they have read.

Summary of Data Analysis

During the course of the research, the premise that oral language is a key component in providing a foundation for learning proved to be essential. At the beginning of the research, student expressions of oral discourse were rudimentary and without much descriptive content. Conversations were limited to a question/response exchange. As the study progressed student responses became longer and more complex, filled with personal details to reinforce their answers. The subject matter of the reading material appeared to be an important part in the students' desire to participate in oral exchanges of their ideas. Non-fiction text appeared to elicit discussion that exhibited a

deeper understanding of the text and an enthusiasm to share with the other students. Text

that also dealt with emotional topics inspired students and showed an eagerness to discuss

and share how the character in the stories felt, as well as how the stories made the them

feel. In the beginning of the research, the teacher directed the discourse, providing

prompts to encourage deeper discussions. However, as the research progressed the

students began to take charge of moving the discourse forward and allowing participation

of all the students with a reduced amount of direction by the teacher. Overall, the

improvement in establishing connections with the text and the ability to express those

connection became more sophisticated as the study progressed. The use of oral language

became the glue that bound the students to the text and, ultimately, to each other. As a

result, the student attitudes about reading improved, which was reflected in their ability to

express themselves to others about the content of text being discussed and their personal

opinions and feelings on the topics presented. Having an engaged student group in which

all students participated in lively and meaningful, oral discourse improved the reading

experience for all involved.

Chapter Five presents the conclusions and implications of this research, as well as

recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions and Implications

The following chapter provides an overview of this research study, including the purpose of the study, the methodology of the study, and a summary of the findings, the limitations of the study, and the implications of these findings for the classroom, the home environment, and future research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the nature of talk from kindergarten students and the teacher during the literacy events of guided reading, read aloud, and literature discussions. Data were collected and analyzed to reveal the characteristics of student talk, the role of the teacher, and the meanings the students created as evidenced by their talk. This inquiry was guided by the following question:

How do kindergarteners use oral language when interacting with texts?

To fully uncover the nuances of this question, the following sub-questions were also investigated:

1.   What types of classroom discussion promote oral language?

2. How does the teacher promote and sustain student talk?

3. What types of literacy discussion do kindergartners apply to their own reading?

Summary of the Methodology

This inquiry took place in a small early childhood school in a suburb of Philadelphia. The school is a Title I school that houses pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.   Students for the study were selected from the Basic Skills program.

Eligibility for Basic Skills Instruction (BSI) was determined by results from the first trimester DIBELS assessment. Students accepted into the BSI program are divided into small groups of four to six students. One group of six students from the BSI program were selected to participate in this study. The group consists of three boys and three girls. They represent diverse cultural backgrounds and personalities. BSI instruction occurred every day of the week for thirty-five minutes each day.

The study took place over a period of eight weeks. Most of the BSI instruction focused on curriculum mandated by school administration. Level A guided reading books from Fountas & Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) program were used primarily. Four non-fiction and three fiction books were used for the purposes of this study. Discussions followed each guided reading text and included literal recall of events or facts, predictions, making connections, and sharing opinions. In addition, I included five read aloud books from the kindergarten curriculum to further support students' oral language skills. The read aloud books included three fiction and two non-fiction books. All discussions were recorded for the guided reading and the read aloud book. I coded the types of student responses during these reading events. The codes for discussions about the texts included labeling/commenting, describing, storytelling/recalling information, making connections, asking questions, inferring, and synthesizing. Careful attention was given to look for broad themes in students' conversations and their level of initiation and engagement. Student drawings were used as another form of assessment. In addition, student surveys administered at the beginning and the end of the research were analyzed to note any changes in their feelings or attitudes about "literacy talk."

Summary of the Findings

Upon analysis of the data, I noticed students became more engaged and responsive during our literacy activities. Their talk became more verbose and personal, and allowed them to make meaning from the texts used during instruction. Teacher-directed talk gave way to student-centered talk that served as a bridge to comprehension. In addition, language development was fostered when the teacher engaged in conversations that supported students' interests and used open-ended questions. Although the BSI curriculum mandated the use of simple, repetitive text, asking open-ended questions prompted students to utilize longer sentences and share their feelings. The quality of the teacher talk and questioning influenced the students to move beyond literal responses (Snow & Matthews, 2016) and make connections to personal experiences, which were shaped by their primary discourse (Gee, 1989).

Stories that evoked emotions inspired students to be more expressive in the discussions about the reading. Responses were more detailed and structurally more complex. Compound and multi-sentence responses became more prevalent. The students also began to share their personal thoughts on the stories' main themes. They revealed their personal feelings and experiences on the topics, as well as empathizing with the characters in the stories. Several students' responses suggested that they read with an aesthetic stance, in which they were drawn into the story. Louise Rosenblatt argues that because every reader's schema is unique, then "every reading experience is, therefore, unique to each individual as well," (Tracey & Morrow, 2012, p. 65). Children

who read authentic literature with an aesthetic stance expressed the desire for justice and fairness, and the need for a problem to be solved.

When the students were presented with science readings, their level of interest increased as evidence through their animated and enthusiastic responses. Student's thought processes showed a higher level of critical thinking. Abstract thinking was expressed by predicting events based on information presented in the literature. An experimental environment was temporarily created as students began acting out the scientific principles and discovering for themselves the ideas discussed in the literature. Students introduced new words into the discussions from the texts when they could apply the concepts to their own life. This connection brought about a sense of ownership and pride. As a result, they began to teach each other. Research finds that when children talk about their interests, they are able to move beyond the present and include talk about the past and the future (Whorall & Cabell, 2015) and engage in higher level thinking such as creating and analyzing.

Over the course of the research, the students' discussions relied less on teacher prompting. Their level of engagement with each other increased. Discussions more frequently became intertwined with each student adding to the others comments and expressing their own feelings on a topic. While occasional teacher involvement was used to continue conversation, the students quickly took over the discussions. Participation amongst the students was fairly equal in group discussions, and demonstrated that they were eager to be heard. More importantly, their voices were being taking in by each other and expounded upon. This collaboration showed a definite give and take of thoughts and opinions being expressed between the students.

The students' personal feelings towards reading and oral expression improved by the end of the research. The familiarity with others within the group was an influencing factor. The students become part of each other's "learning family." Learning took place though the "ongoing medium of language." This language was an exchange in meanings that was ongoing with their significant others (Halliday, 1978). With an increased sense of belonging and comfort, positive feelings towards reading emerged as students were able to express their feelings and preferences.

Conclusions

Emergent readers need language, or talk, to provide the foundation for their literacy achievement. Promoting early language development is linked to future success in reading comprehension (Suggate, Schaughency, McAlly, & Reese, 2018). To have strong language development, teachers need to create activities that afford students opportunities to explore language. Language is affected by social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and discourse (Gee, 1989), and it is fostered when the teacher creates a safe environment for students to engage in meaningful exchanges of discourse with their peers, as well as the teacher. Asking open-ended questions, choosing topics that support students' interests, and selecting authentic literature to promote justice and morality are key to developing confident, literate, and socially conscious citizens. "Talk is the sea upon which all else floats" (James Britton, 1970).

Limitations

The major limitation of this study was the available time to conduct the research. This study took place within a thirty-five minute session each day. Many times

conversations had to be shortened due to time constraints. Limited time prevented students the opportunity to expand their thinking and oral expression during the literacy activity.

In addition to the limited time to conduct research, the overall time frame of the study was only eight weeks. Although the students made good progress, it would be interesting to see how much more their language skills would have improved over a longer span of time, and with more varied types of texts.

Also, it was not possible to observe the students outside of the BSI setting to determine if, in fact, familiarity influenced their talk during other literacy events. Their engagement in oral discourse was not observed in other settings, and therefore, it cannot be determined if their increased use of language transferred to other subject areas.

Another limitation of this research study was the small sample size. Only six students were included in this research. Scheduling and lack of parental consent restricted the number of students in the research group. While there was some diversity among the students, no English Language Learners or Special Needs students were part of this research study.

Implications for Educators

The findings of this research study have strong implications for the role of talk when teaching literacy to young learners. In an era of high-stakes testing and common core standards, many teachers have focused their instruction on more teacher directed statements and questions. This study highlighted the importance of allowing students time to discuss and explore texts to deepen their thinking about the text and how the text may impact their own lives. The meanings and understandings from each text were

expanded upon when students engaged in talk with each other. These opportunities of authentic discussion about a text should be encouraged to promote the use of more language and personal expression from the students.

Teachers play a fundamental role in creating literacy experiences and teacher talk influences student talk. When teachers dominate literacy discussions, student talk is limited. It is important to ask open-ended questions so that students can elaborate on their initial responses. A simple question such as "Why?" sends the message that the teacher in interested in hearing more about their thoughts. Talk is a powerful tool that allows students to make meaning and promote thinking. When students are encouraged to talk, teachers gain insight to their understanding of the text. Teacher talk sets the tone, length, and depth of students' responses by virtue of the language he/she uses.

Text selection is an important consideration in the kindergarten classroom. While a school curriculum can mandate many of the texts read, teachers should look to supplement their curriculum with authentic texts that address students' interests and inspire a sense of morality and justice. Allowing time for students to discuss and explore literature with their peers will deepen their thinking about the text and foster the social construction of knowledge about their world.

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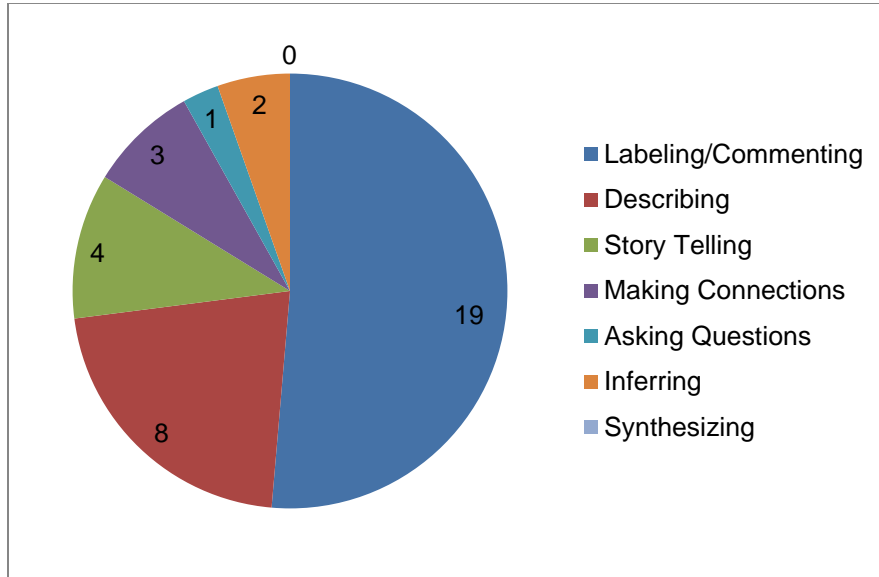
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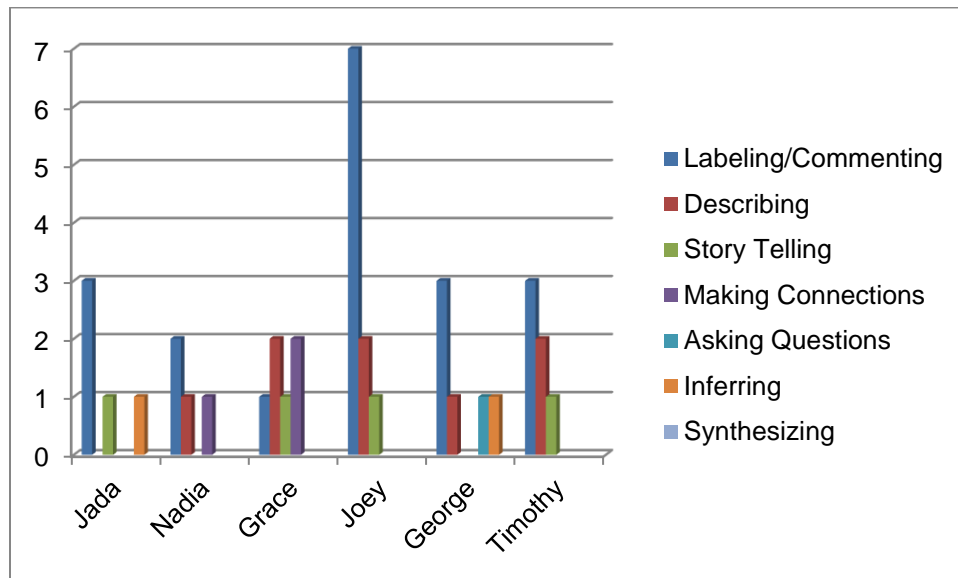
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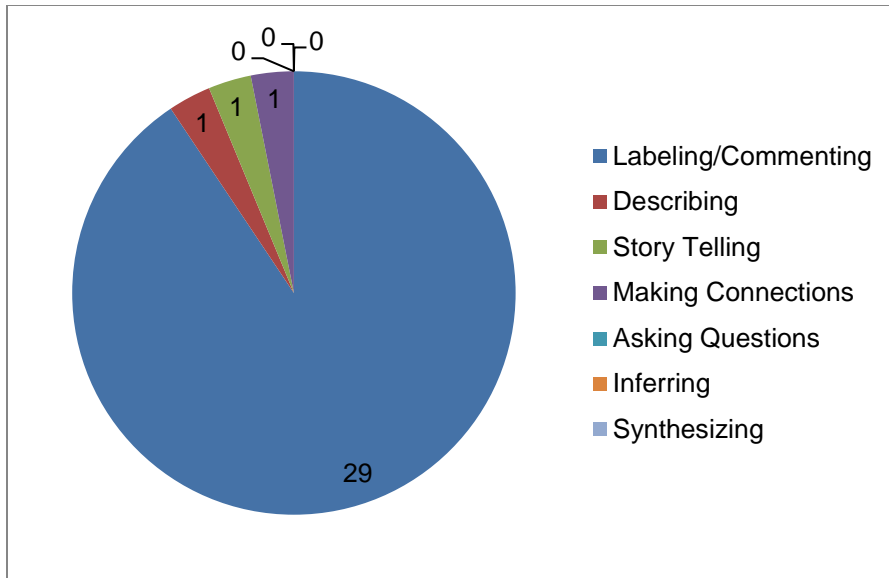
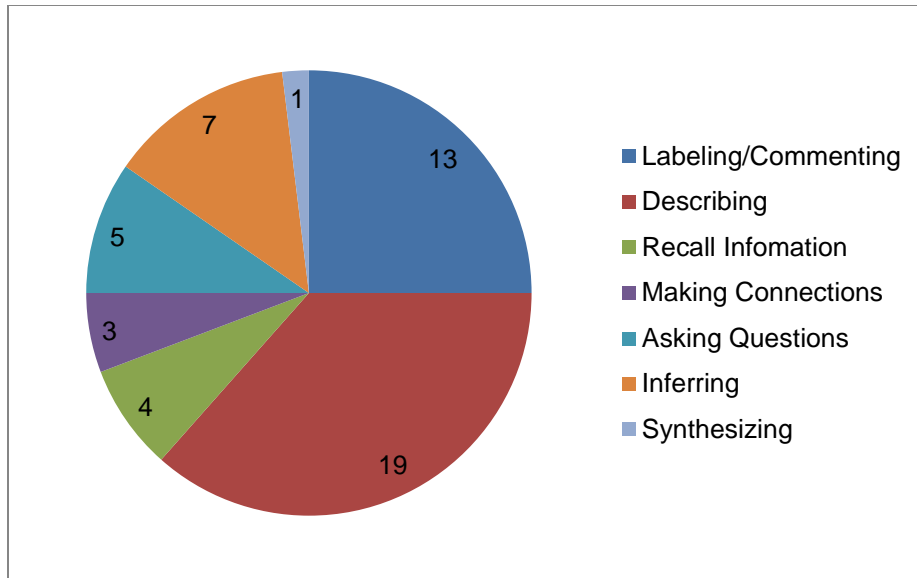*Figure A-3*. I Can - Group Responses
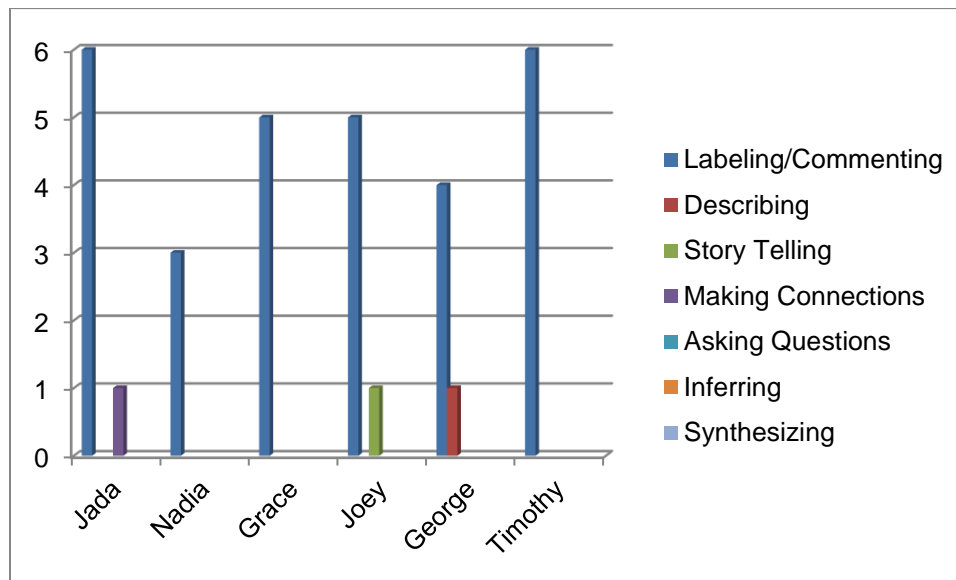
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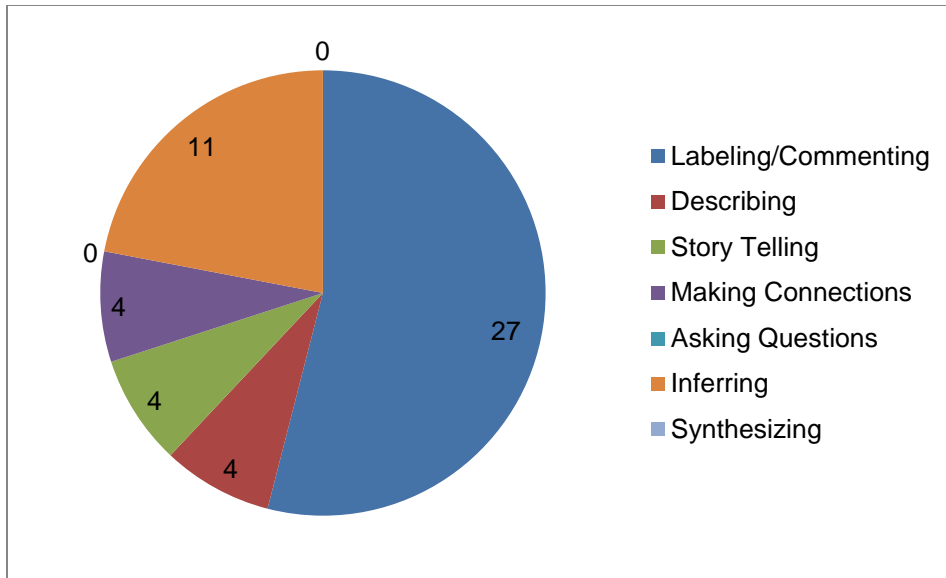
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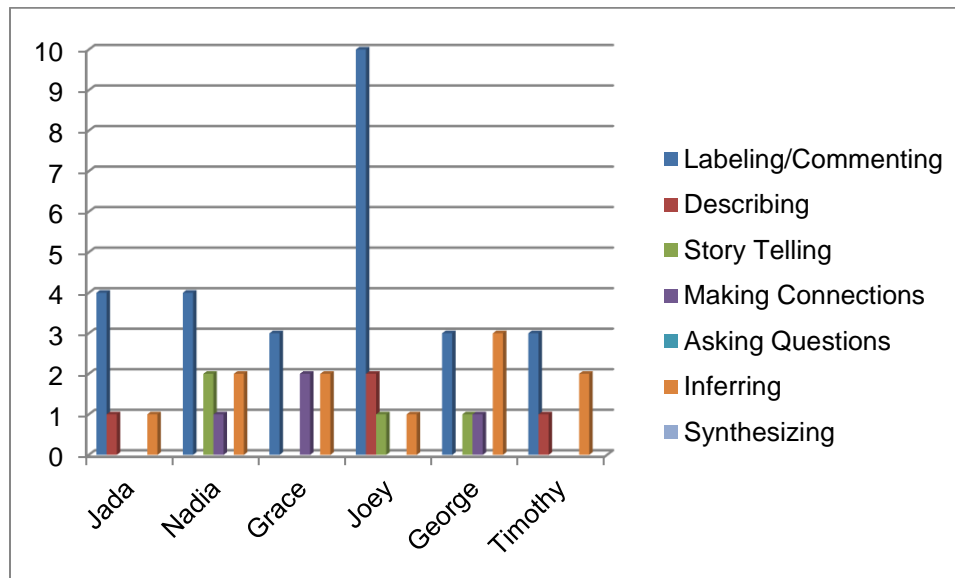
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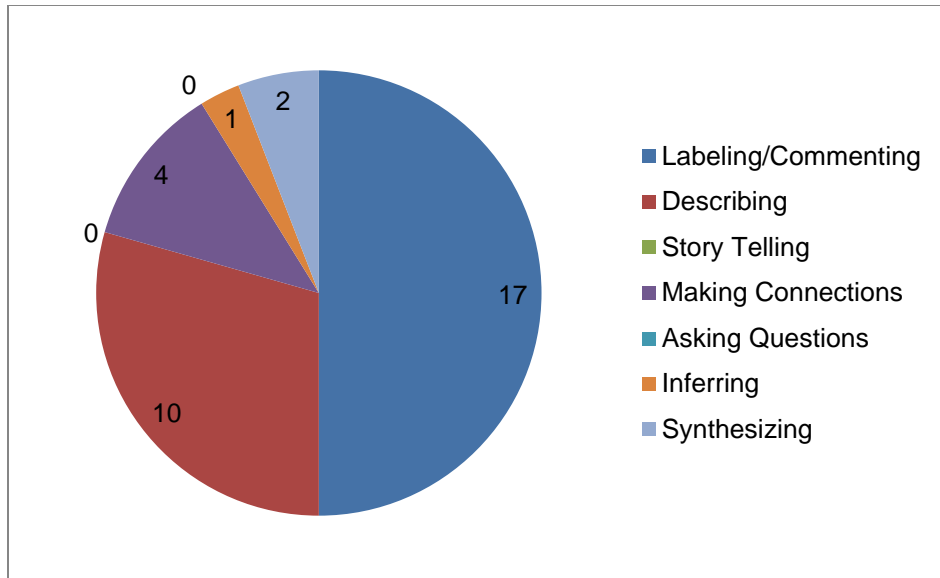
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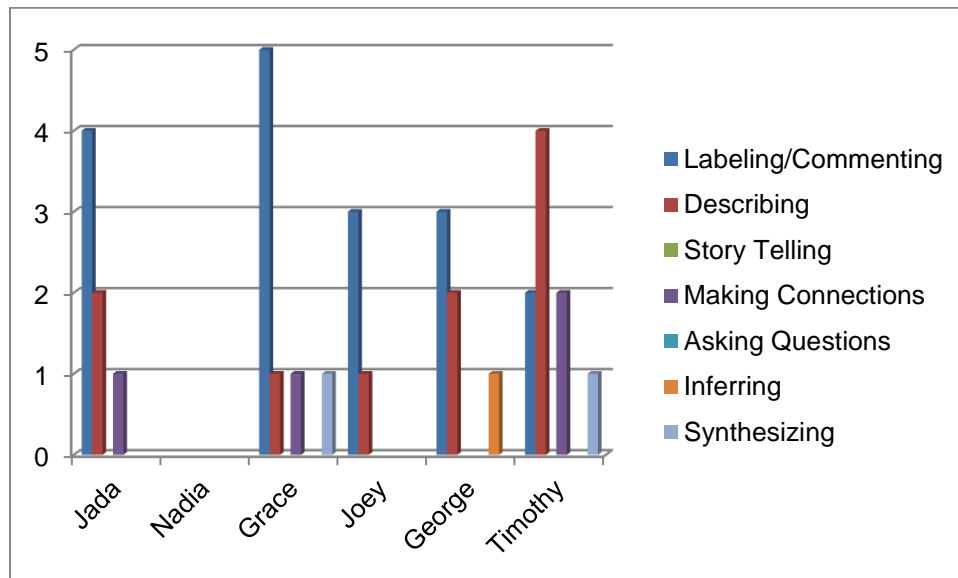
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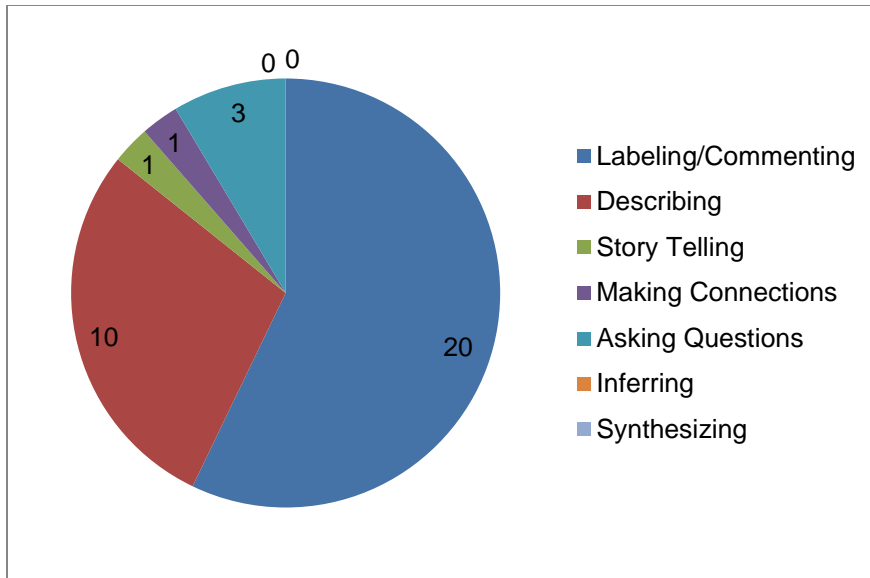
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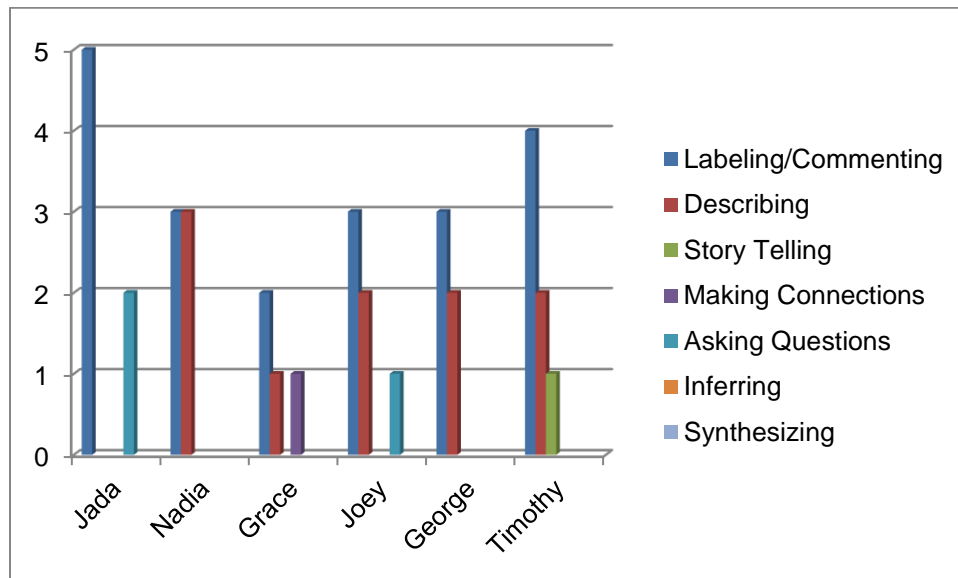
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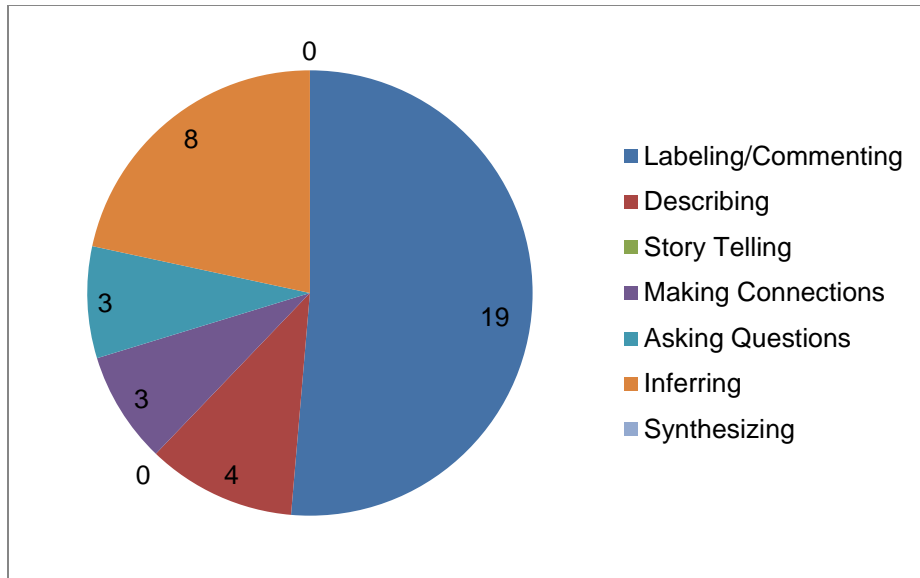
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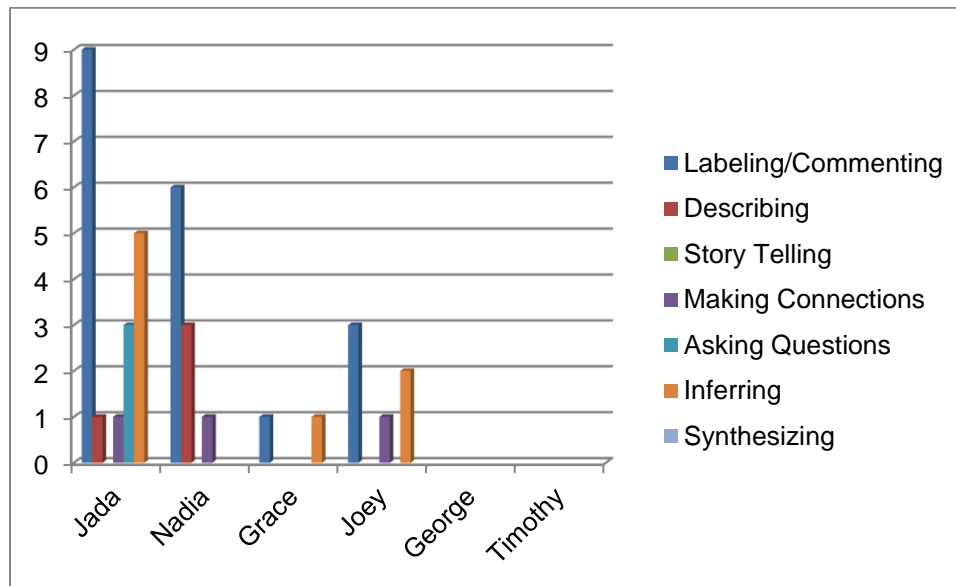
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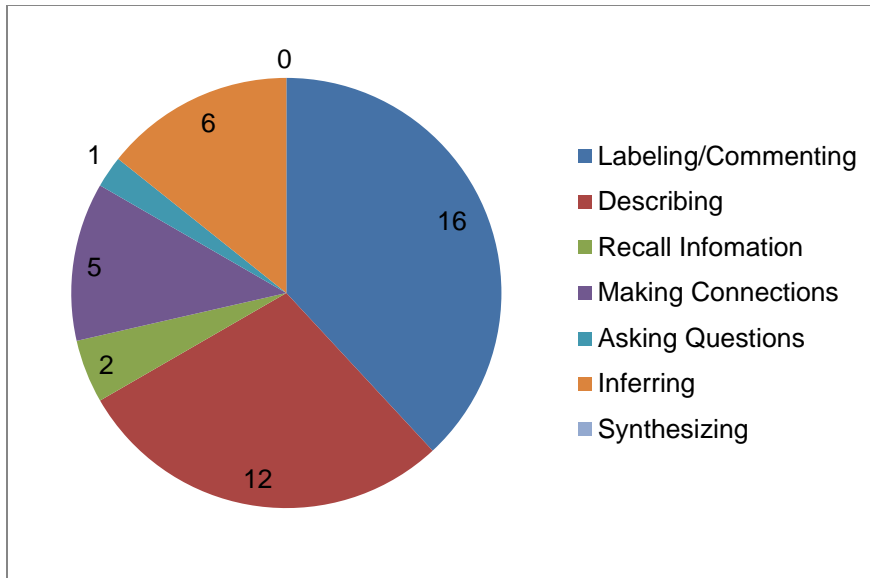
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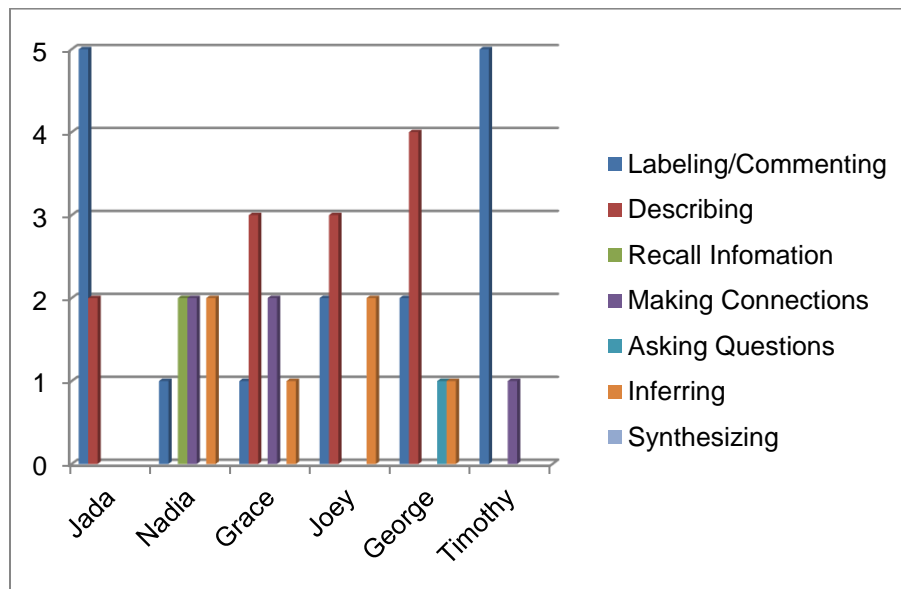
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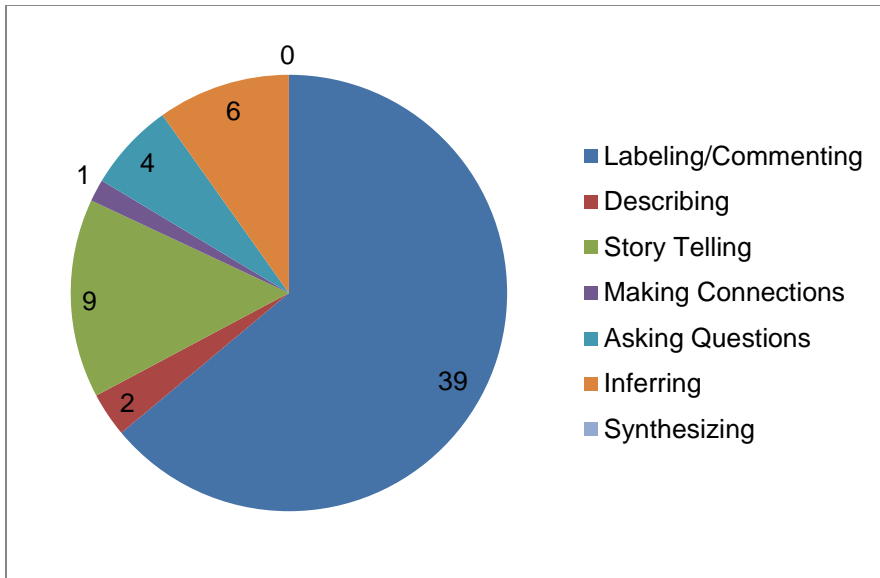
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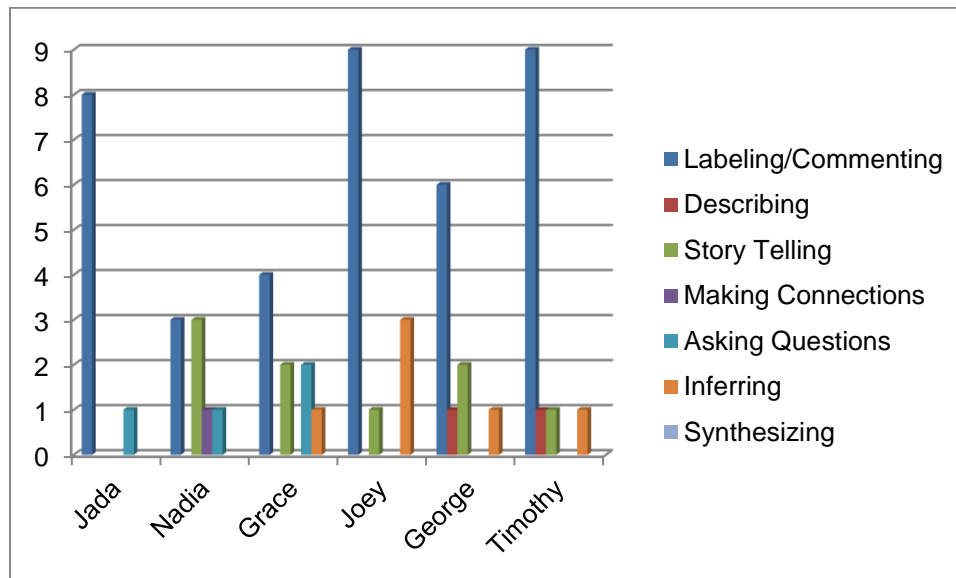
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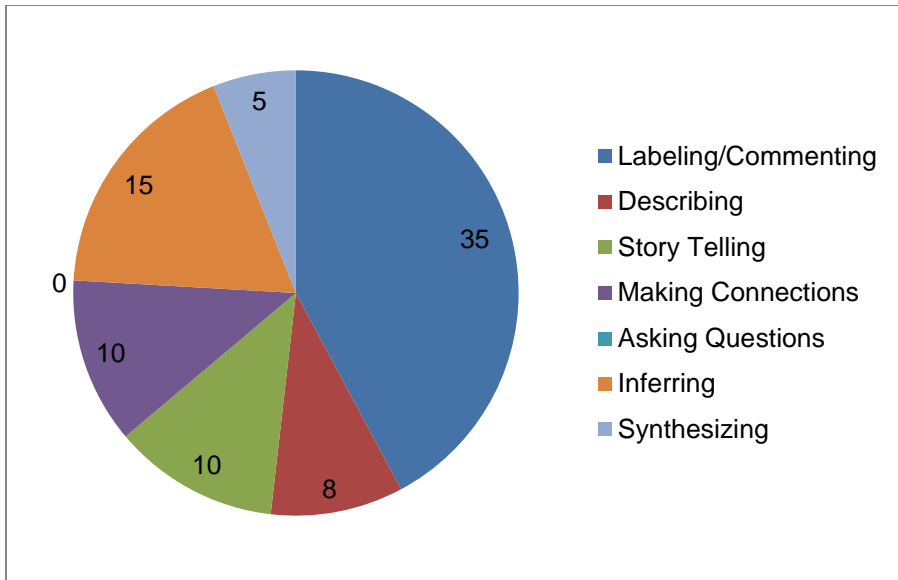
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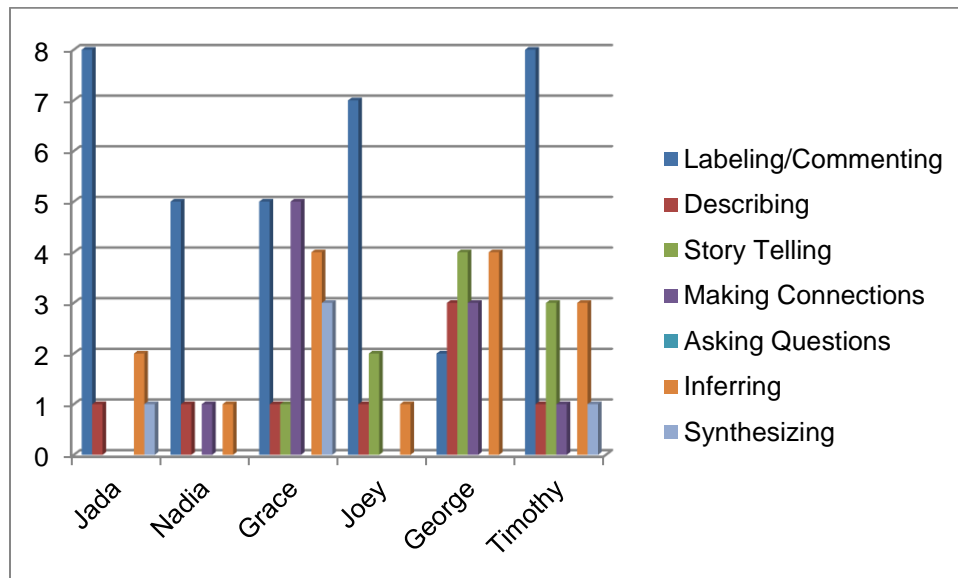
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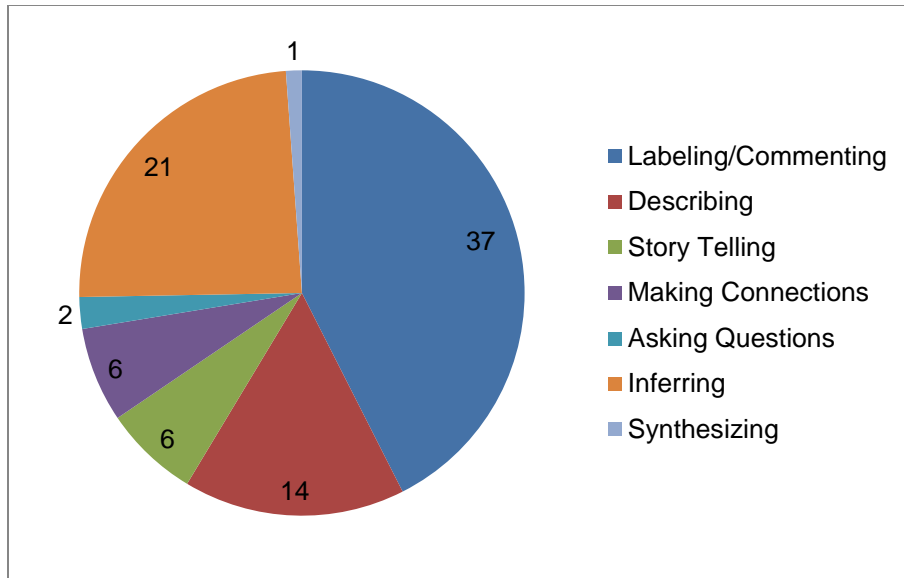
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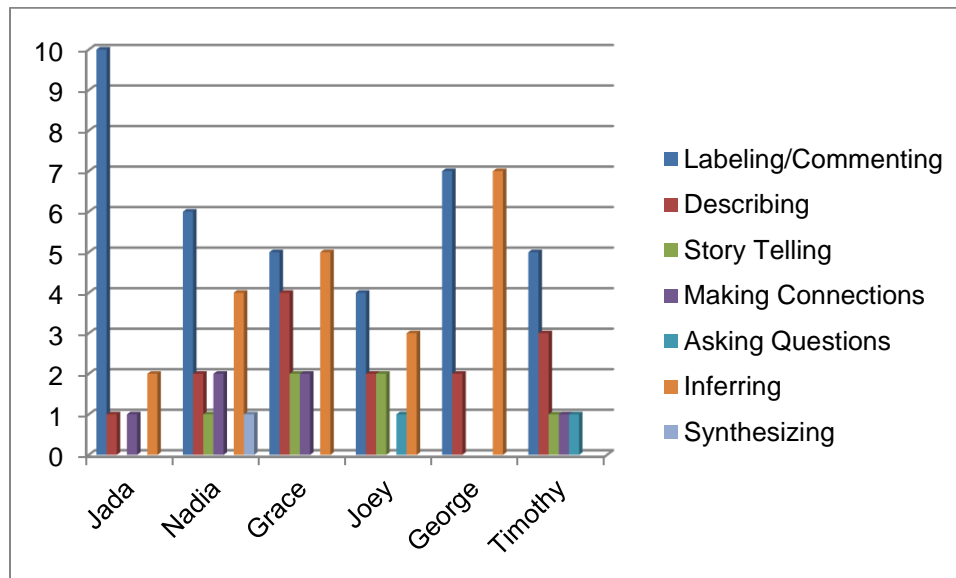
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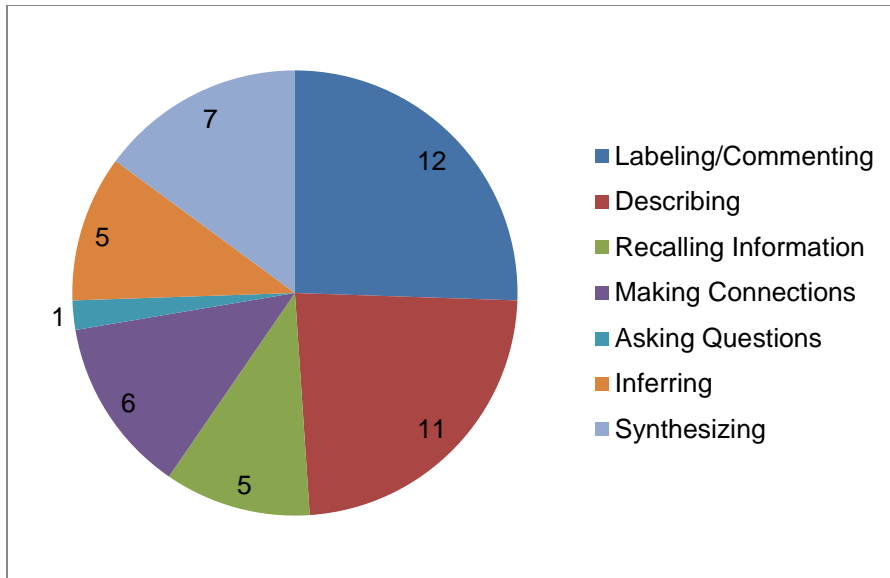
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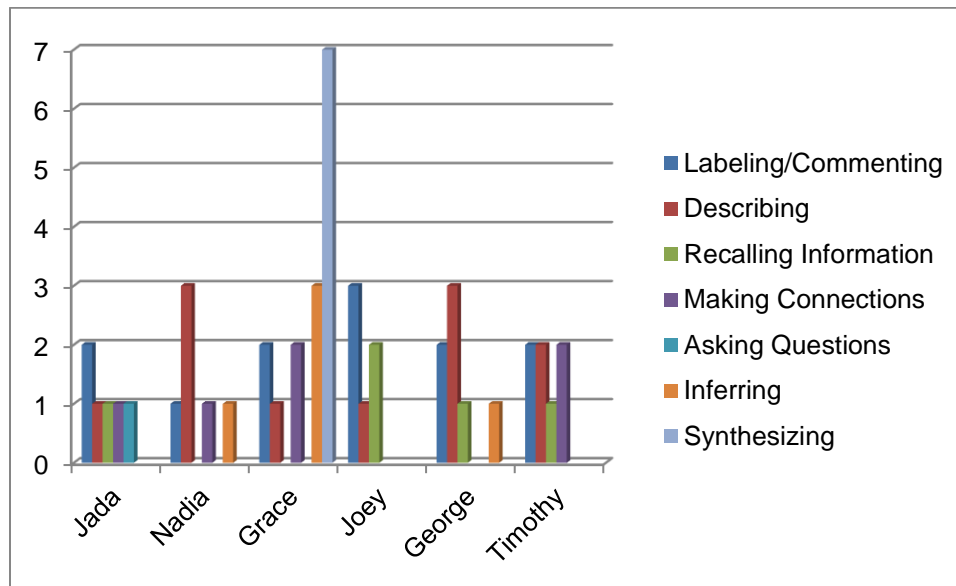
Figure A-22. Sun Up. Sun Down - Individual Responses

Figure A-23. Motion - Group Responses
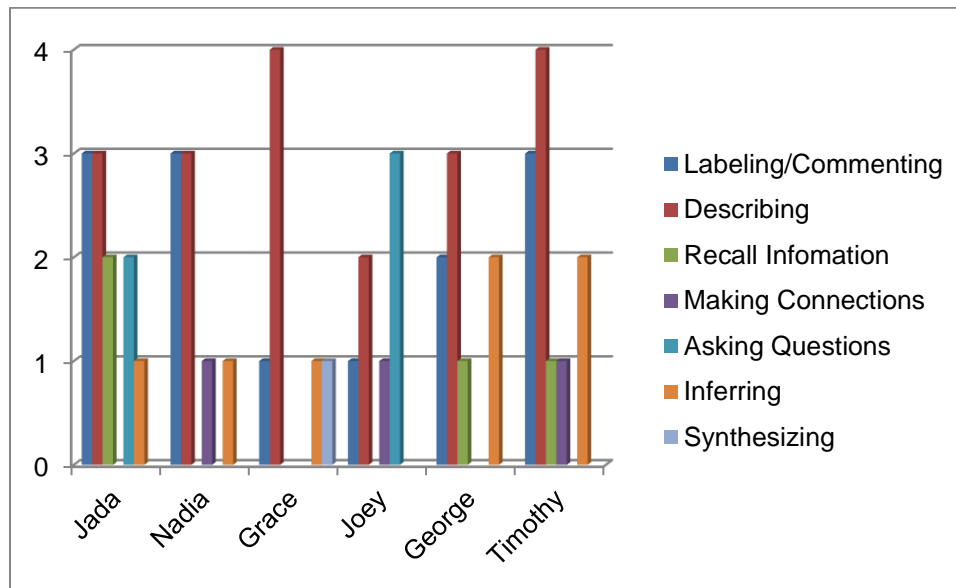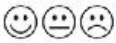
Figure A-24. Motion - Individual Responses

Appendix B

Kindergarten Oral Language Survey

Name: _____ Date:_____

Kindergarten Oral Language Survey

1. How do you feel when you look at pictures?

2. How do you feel when someone reads to you?

3. How do you feel when someone talks to you?

4. How do you feel when someone asks you a question?

5. How do you feel when about watching a movie?

6. How do you feel when you read a book?

7. How do you feel when you talk about a book you are reading?

8. How do you feel when you talk about a book someone else is reading to you?

What is your favorite part of reading?

Figure B-1. Kindergarten Oral Language Survey