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# I Hope It Rains So My Corn and Your Okra Grows: A Case Study of A Kindergarten Teacher'S Language Use In Expanding Children's Language Repetioires

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I HOPE IT RAINS SO MY CORN AND YOUR OKRA GROWS: A CASE  
STUDY OF A KINDERGARTEN TEACHER'S LANGUAGE USE IN  
EXPANDING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE REPETOIRES

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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University of South Carolina

2013

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my husband, Wes, and three children, Jennifer, Sarah, and Sam. My love for you is immeasurable. I can never express how much joy you have brought into my life. As our family grows with the addition of spouses, boyfriends, and grandchildren my cup overflows with joy.

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## ABSTRACT

The continuing disparity of academic success, commonly referred to as the achievement gap, the gap between economically disadvantaged subgroups and their more economically advantaged peers, is the greatest problem we face in the United States today (Slavin & Madden, 2006). In this dissertation, I studied in-depth the complexity of a quality teacher and her program at the kindergarten level, I focused my study on three areas, realizing that each of these areas is very complex. Although they overlap, they also have their own unique subtopics within the larger topic. The three areas of study are: oral language development, teacher/child interactions, and teacher quality. This teacher's success in closing or narrowing the achievement gap was a phenomenon worth studying.

For one year, I studied a kindergarten teacher and seven of her students who exhibited the lowest language and literacy repertoires in her class. She taught in a school with a 99% poverty index. In the analysis of the data, there appears to be a thread that ran or perhaps intertwined throughout the day in Mrs. Lucas' kindergarten class. It emerged as a critical tool in this teacher's ability to scaffold even the lowest performing students. The thread that intertwined throughout the day was the prevalence of talk used to foster language development and the prevalence of opportunities Mrs. Lucas set up for her kindergarten students to engage in talk. When a student's oral language is not yet where it should be, instruction needs to occur so the students' foundation will be sturdy. The results of this study will be beneficial to Head Start programs, Preschool programs and kindergarten teachers in public school settings and private school settings.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Stepping Out of the Classroom**

In 1999, I was hired as a Teacher Specialist On Site (TSOS) by the State Department of Education. The Teacher Specialist Program was a component of the Education Accountability Act of 1998. The goal of the program was for teacher specialists to help classroom teachers improve their instructional techniques and to help students improve their academic achievement. I was assigned to third grade in a rural school district about one hour from my home. The state department provided three weeks of training that summer. The training was geared towards helping us learn about our leadership styles and how to use our particular style to work with teachers.

As a third grade teacher, I had worked well with my students and was able to help them achieve at a high level. I also had worked well with my third grade team. We had planned our weekly lessons together, and I had shared current articles with my colleagues. However, I did not see myself as responsible for improving their instruction. My involvement in their teaching world ended there, with our planning. These two qualities helped me obtain my role as TSOS, but they did not prepare me for working with adults in a coaching role.

There were three teachers on the third grade team at the school where I was assigned. As I introduced myself to the teachers with whom I would be working, I received very different responses. The first year teacher was very excited. "Come into my room whenever you want," she said, "I need all the help I can get." At the time this response excited me. I thought it would be easy to improve her instruction. Another

teacher said, "Tell me what they [the state department] want me to do. I can do whatever they want me to." Again, I thought to myself that she, too, would be easy to work with. Finally, I was confronted with a very experienced teacher who, upon meeting me, grumbled, "Just how old are you? How long have you taught?" She emphasized the word *you*. At the time, this particular teacher concerned me. How could I convince her to change her instruction? The state department expected us to improve student achievement and to do this they assumed we would need to improve the instruction of the teachers. I had never positioned myself as an expert; however, what I failed to realize was that my new title, Teacher Specialist on Site, and the fact that I worked for the State Department, screamed "expert" to the teachers with whom I had been assigned to work.

A turning point in my thinking occurred that year. I had been working with one of the teachers for several weeks. I modeled lessons, we planned together, we stayed late looking at student data to develop our plans, and we co-taught. Then it was time for her to take over while I observed. It was a great lesson; I thought she did a great job. Later, while talking with my daughter about the lesson, she said, "Wow, Mom, she sounds like a mini you." I stopped. I thought to myself, "Is that what I am doing, trying to make clones of my teaching self?" I started reflecting on my reactions and the feedback I provided after an observation. Sure enough, the more the teaching imitated my model lesson or the more the teaching looked like something I would do, the more positive my response was. Sometimes a simple, innocent statement can cause tremendous change in thinking, and this was one of those times. The teachers at this school already felt defeated because they were working at a school the state had identified as a failing school. They were not going to benefit from me trying to change their instruction and make it

resemble my own. I realized that my goal was not to make clones of myself; rather, my goal was to create knowledgeable, thinking teachers who could make the best instructional decisions for their students at that time. This realization forced me to rethink my work with the teachers.

### **Merging Two Jobs**

After my first year as a TSOS, I was informed the TSOS would be participating in another initiative our state was beginning. For the next three years, I would be involved in the South Carolina Reading Initiative (SCRI). We would begin this journey the summer of 2000. I subsequently was both a TSOS and a Literacy Coach from 2000 to 2003.

Driven by research on teacher quality, professional development, and best practices, the SCRI was modeled after the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE) Reading Initiative (RI). The goal of the RI was "to broaden and deepen [teachers] knowledge base" through a three-year inquiry model that attempted to capture what reading and reading instruction could look like and sound like in classrooms. A state university and the state department worked together to create our state's version of NCTE's RI. As part of SCRI, teachers could volunteer to participate in school-based study groups, administrators would be required to attend. NCTE developed resources to support the study groups. These resources included a collection of videotapes, engagements, articles, and lists of professional books (Stephens et al., 2007).

The first group of literacy coaches participated in professional development from 2000-2003. Most of these coaches were assigned to four schools. They spent one day a week at each school and led two-hour long after-school study groups twice a month.

Literacy coaches also belonged to a cohort made up of other literacy coaches in their geographic area and was supported by a regional coach. The regional coach observed the literacy coaches in their assigned schools and provided them with feedback. For two days each month, literacy coaches from around the state met for professional development. A teaching team whose members were connected to universities within the state and who formerly had led NCTE Reading Initiative study groups led these cohorts. A state department person was assigned to a cohort to act as a liaison between the state department and the cohorts.

The experience Teacher Specialists had with SCRI differed slightly from that of other SCRI coaches. These differences, though small on paper, were huge when put into practice. As a TSOS, I was assigned to one grade level in one school; consequently, in my role as a literacy coach, I did not have to work in four different schools with multiple grades and numerous teachers. The school to which I was assigned had three other TSOS the first year and six TSOS the next two years. The six of us participated in SCRI. We had the privilege to be at our school every day and work closely with three or four teachers. We also were fortunate to have each other to collaborate with as we planned our after school study groups. We also collaborated on our everyday work with the teachers on our grade level.

SCRI began during my second year as a TSOS. I had begun to form trusting relationships with the three teachers to whom I had been assigned, but something happened during the second year. As after-school study groups began, the teachers and I began learning together. Slowly, we were forming a culture of learning - a culture of learning in which the teachers and I were willing to take risks in classroom instruction

and we were willing to open up about our perceived weak areas of teaching. We were beginning to trust each other and we were beginning to view our study group time as a place to learn together.

SCRI literacy coaches needed to have a Masters Degree. To become a TSOS, that degree was preferred, but not required. I did not yet have my Masters Degree so I decided to enroll in an M.Ed. The courses I was taking in SCRI were courses offered by a local university as part of both their M.Ed. and Ed.S. degrees, so the 27 hours I took counted toward my degree. I just needed to take an additional six hours. I received my degree in 2002.

### **The Best Change of All**

As a TSOS, I was "on loan" to the State Department for three years from the school district where I taught. After the three years, I was suppose to return to my home district. The three years turned into four. The small district in which I was working merged with a small neighboring district. I moved over to the elementary school in that district as a TSOS and as a SCRI literacy coach. Again, I was assigned to one grade level but because I was the only TSOS, I worked with other grade levels through my position as a SCRI literacy coach. Everyone in the school participated in study group. As we read and studied together, we created another culture of learning.

As the end of the year approached, my time as a TSOS was coming to an end. I was asked to stay at this rural school, one that I was falling in love with, and assume the role as the director of an Early Reading First Grant (ERF) they were about to receive through the Federal Department of Education. This grant was designed to increase teacher knowledge at the child development and kindergarten level. Professional

development was an essential part of this grant. The teachers and directors of the ERF grant visited other school districts, attended conferences, and continued to participate in study groups after school.

As I began to spend time in Child Development and Kindergarten watching and listening, I began to notice how some children were not talking, and other children were only speaking in two or three word phrases, or very simple sentences. I was drawn to these children. They are the children who eventually led me to this study.

The rural school district in which I was working had one of the highest poverty indexes in the state. In 2005, seventy-four babies in this rural county were born to mothers younger than age twenty; of these, 14 were not the first births to the teen mothers and, of these, 96.6% were born to single mothers (Child Trends & Center for Child Health Research, 2004; South Carolina Kids Count, 2009). I noticed that many of the children who demonstrated lower language and literacy abilities upon entering school, despite having average intelligence, were from families with a cycle of generational poverty. This cycle of poverty limited the variety of experiences the children had before they began their formal education, and the language they had available as a resource to talk about their experiences. It also influenced the range of literacy experiences the children had outside of school. Because of the high levels of poverty in that area, the disparities I saw in language and literacy abilities, and thus general achievement, persisted across the grades that I served (4K-5<sup>th</sup> grade).

### **My Learning Continues**

It was May of 2003. My daughter was graduating from college. Prior to her graduation, the students receiving their doctoral degrees were recognized. My mom

leaned over and whispered, "Wouldn't you love to do that, to get your doctorate?" "No, not really." I whispered in return. But, Mom had planted the seed. I was thirsty for more knowledge. I wanted to understand the development of oral language in young children and the role it played in school success. So, later that year, I enrolled in my first course, "Just to see what it was like," I told myself.

In 2004, the second year of the Early Reading First Grant (ERF), the district was given the opportunity to apply to the state for the Reading First Grant (RF). It looked as if I would once again have two jobs. The state had modeled their Reading First Grant after SCRI. I was very excited that all the learning we had done with child development and kindergarten would continue in grades 1-3. For two years, the school was part of ERF and RF. The two programs merged nicely. Because they were a small school, we also included 4th and 5th grade teachers in our learning. Being a part of an endeavor where the entire school was learning together was an awesome journey. In study group, a very experienced teacher commented, "Come on now, if this old dog can learn new tricks I know the rest of you can!"

As my knowledge increased, I started to notice the way a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Lucas, who would later become the focus of this study, talked with her students. It reminded me of a grandmother taking a walk with her grandkids. She was so attentive to each and every one of her students. Mrs. Lucas always took time to listen to what her students were trying to tell her. Very seldom would they walk in a straight line, with getting from point A to point B as quickly and quietly as possible the ultimate purpose. They walked in a group and when someone saw something interesting they stopped and had a conversation about it. Mrs. Lucas always seemed to have time to listen to her

students and she did not just listen to be able to reply, she listened to understand.

Watching her inspired me to learn more about the importance of talk and the importance of having conversations with young children.

In 2005, the school hired a new principal, Mrs. Jones. She had been a literacy coach in a much bigger neighboring county. We had read the same books and we had the same philosophies about teaching. Mrs. Jones had an Early Childhood background and we began looking at the oral language of our youngest students.

A study done by Huggins (2011) in the same county found that the vocabulary of the children entering the school's 4-year old program was significantly behind that of their peers:

Data collected in 2008 from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test III (PPVT), a test used to measure receptive language skills and a valid predictor of future reading ability (Dunn & Dunn, 1997), shows 23% of four-year-old preschool students entered school with a developmental age of two years old or less in language. An additional 42% of their peers scored at least one year behind in language development based on norms of the PPVT assessment. A combined total of 65% of four-year-old children began their school career at least one year behind their age level peers in 2008. (pp. 4-5)

As a Literacy Coach with RF, I had seen the positive influence of an early intervention program entitled Reading Recovery. Children made significant learning gains when they were tutored in a one-on-one setting as first graders. The research on Reading Recovery has documented, however, that language difficulties often slow children's progress, and sometimes results in children not reaching the average of their

class within the typical 12-week time frame set for services in Reading Recovery (Clay, 2001; Gentile, 2003). Consequently, many children with the lowest language and literacy repertoires, while making significant gains, are still referred for longer-term literacy and/or language services. I began to wonder about the impact an enriched language and literacy program in kindergarten might have on the development of children's academic discourse. Within the literature on children's language, the term "the language gap," which is used to describe the difference in the quality of language spoken by some of the different socio-economic groups, is characterized differently. Those who focus on an academic gap tend to locate "the problem" in the children themselves, which often leads to recommendations for remediation or identification of some children as "learning disabled." In another characterization, the focus is on the "opportunity gap," and these professionals focus on the opportunities that have not yet been provided to the children. In this latter case, the recommendation is to provide a variety of opportunities. Thus the problem is located outside of the children, rather than within them. The teacher at the center of this study, Mrs. Lucas, believed there was an opportunity gap; she sought to provide a variety of opportunities and simultaneously engage children in rich conversations.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Lucas, and her oral language and literacy program. More specifically, I wanted to better understand what was happening in her classroom that consistently produced significant academic growth in her students – students who were attending a school in an area of the country plagued with economic poverty. In my work as a Literacy Coach working with data, I

noticed very few of her students needed intervention by the time they were in third grade. To better understand the complexity of a quality kindergarten teacher's instruction within her language and literacy program, I focused my study on three areas, realizing that each is rather complex. Although these areas overlap, they also have their own unique subtopics within the larger topic of the study. The three areas were: oral language development, teacher/child interactions, and teacher quality. Given Mrs. Lucas' success in closing or narrowing the achievement gap, I believed that what was taking place in her classroom was a phenomenon worth studying.

The continuing disparities in academic achievement between economically disadvantaged subgroups and their more economically advantaged peers, commonly referred to as the achievement gap, is one of the greatest problems we face in the United States today (Slavin & Madden, 2006). One factor that contributes to this gap is oral language development. Children's oral language development has been thoroughly researched (Brown, 1970; Bruner, 1983; Dudley-Marling and Searle, 1991; Halliday, 1975, 1977; Rosenberg and Silva, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999; Wells, 1986). Wells (1986), for example, found that children's language ability at school entry predicted their academic achievement at the age of 10. Many of these researchers have concluded that parents and other caregivers play an important role in oral language development and their role is a key factor in school success. Another factor that contributes to this gap is mastery of basic language structures. Research identifies the importance of children's mastery of the basic language structures (Brown, 1970; Bruner, 1983; Dudley-Marling and Searle, 1991; Genishi, 1988; Gleason, 1977; Lindfors, 1999; Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1990; Snow, 1972; Snow, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999;

Wells, 1986). A third factor that contributes to this gap is teacher-child interactions. Studies have highlighted the importance of teacher-child interactions in early childhood as a key element in developing oral language abilities (Dickinson and Tabors, 2002; Hamre and Pianta, 2007; Mashburn and Pianta, 2008; Massey, 2004; Rosemberg and Silva, 2009; Snow and Dickinson, 1991; Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos, 1998). Taken together, these studies clearly identify factors that have a strong influence on academic achievement.

Other work points to the critical importance of teacher quality, particularly for students who begin schooling not yet at the level of their peers in oral language development. Students who are assigned to several ineffective teachers in a row have significantly lower achievement and lower gains in achievement than those who are assigned to several highly effective teachers in a row (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Indeed, teacher quality has more of an effect on student achievement than class size and money spent per pupil (Allington & Johnston, 2000; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). However, the teacher quality research and its impact on children in early childhood and elementary grades focuses mainly on preschool and first through fifth grades (Allington & Johnston, 2000; Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2005; Pressley, Wharton-McDonald et al; 2001; Seplocha, H. & Strasser J., 2008). Research has not been done on how kindergarten teachers might potentially narrow the gap by offering an enriched oral language and literacy program.

Therefore, in this study, I focused on Mrs. Lucas who has been successful in narrowing the opportunity gap. She consistently has successful student outcomes based on the *Dominie Reading and Writing Assessment* (DeFord, 2004), which is a district-required assessment. Table 1.0 below, reports Text Reading results using three

achievement bands, At-or-Above Grade Level (AGL), Needs Additional Intervention (NAI), and Needs Substantial Intervention (NSI). The number of students in the NAI category increases as the number of students in the NSI category decreases.

Table 1.1: Dominie Text Reading Results for Mrs. Lucas' Class

		At or Above Grade Level (AGL)	Needs Additional Intervention (NAI)	Needs Substantial Intervention (NSI)
<b>2007-2008</b>	Beginning of Year	15%	10%	75%
	End of Year	65%	20%	15%
<b>2008-2009</b>	Beginning of Year	*NA		
	End of Year			
<b>2009-2010</b>	Beginning of Year	17%	23%	60%
	End of Year	70%	23%	7%
<b>2010-2011</b>	Beginning of Year	20%	27%	53%
	End of Year	66%	24%	10%
<b>2011-2012</b>	Beginning of	12%	44%	44%

	Year			
	End of Year	75%	20%	5%

\* Teacher taught Child Development during that year.

### **Research Design**

I was interested in understanding the characteristics of a particular educational setting. This interest aligns with qualitative inquiry. Qualitative inquiry, or qualitative research, is a methodology used to understand some social phenomena from the perspective of those involved, in order to contextualize issues, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions (Glesne, 2006). Qualitative inquiry is a powerful tool for enhancing our understanding of teaching and learning. It allows us to be open to discovery.

The phenomenon I wanted to understand was how a teacher's language and literacy program enabled her to scaffold low performing children's oral language and literacy development. I chose to study this phenomenon using a case study methodology. Case studies allow us to examine a complex issue within its real-life context. The question of generalizability is raised with case studies, but the understandings that readers take from the study about what is applicable to them makes this design appropriate (Merriman 2009).

Yin (1984) defines the case study research method as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. According to Yin (2003) a case study design is of value when the

focus of the study is to answer "how" questions and the contextual conditions are relevant to the phenomenon being studied. I chose to conduct a case study because I was interested in how Mrs. Lucas closes the opportunity gap for her students. The opportunity gap occurs in precisely her type of classroom – a low SES rural setting.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically, I sought to understand:

1. What key instructional components were included in Mrs. Lucas' language and literacy program?
2. What was the nature of Mrs. Lucas' decision-making process related to instructional decisions for low performing children in her classroom?
3. What instructional moves did Mrs. Lucas make which supported children's language and literacy learning?
4. What were Mrs. Lucas' patterns of verbal interaction that scaffold low performing children's oral language and literacy development?

### **Limitations**

As with any study, there are limitations and biases the researcher needs to acknowledge at the outset of the study, while acknowledging that other limitations and biases might surface throughout the study. Conducting the study at my home school had its advantages and its limitations. The confidence and trust that I had developed with the community, administration, faculty, and students in my research site were already in place at the beginning of this study. Our history together had been a positive one. Moreover, as a result of our existing relationship, Mrs. Lucas felt comfortable with me observing in her classroom at any time. This trust enabled me to get a detailed picture of

her classroom. I also had access to student assessment information that she had collected and she had access to the additional assessment information I needed. Though I viewed our collaborative working relationship as an advantage, at the same time, I also understand how it could be seen as a limitation. When a researcher is closely tied to the person or topic being researched, objectivity is a factor. As the researcher, I had to continually attend to *what I saw*, not *what I thought I saw*, while still acknowledging the important role played by interpretation within qualitative inquiry. Consequently, I found that videotaping events in Mrs. Lucas' class helped me to triangulate and verify my findings.

Other limitations of the study are those mentioned under Influences Outside of School (p. 28) that affect student achievement. The school at which the study was conducted has a 98.7% poverty rate, so health issues at times interfere with achievement. Children do not always have access to the eyeglasses, medicine, and preventive healthcare that they need. The school has programs to assist with healthcare needs, but the process takes more time than it would if the children had access at the time of need. Student mobility is also a limitation. Students who attend this school do not move often, but mobility challenges are often reflected in their daily routines. For example, some students often stay between two to three houses during a single week. This causes a lack of stability, which can interfere with their academic achievement.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. Very little research has been conducted on how kindergarten teachers can narrow the opportunity gap by offering an enriched oral language and literacy program. Oral language is often overlooked as an

important component of literacy and focusing on oral language is of greatest importance for the children most at risk—children for whom English is a second language and children who have not been exposed at home to the kind of language found in written texts (Dickinson & Smith, 1994) and in K-12 classrooms. Indeed, the Common Core State Standards, Appendix A, state that in the early grades teachers should be aware of the influence of oral language on a child's later ability to read. Therefore, it is crucial to document how an effective teacher allocates instructional time to the Standards that address speaking (CCSS, pg.27).

This study examined the classroom of a highly effective kindergarten teacher in a high poverty area of our country. It is critical that we learn to recognize the factors that may help early childhood teachers meet the needs of all of their students. The findings of this study can aid early childhood teachers in implementing an enriched oral language and literacy program. While the issue of an achievement gap has existed in schools for decades, it is an issue that needs to be alleviated. I believe that providing a rich, detailed picture of one kindergarten teacher with a consistent record of effectively raising the literacy achievement of at risk children, may assist other teachers and other schools in understanding what has worked well in this classroom and perhaps ignite efforts that will begin helping teachers identify and address opportunity gaps that can help close the achievement in their classrooms.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Review Of Literature**

Oral language provides the foundation of literacy. The ability to think is often tied to oral language. Proficiency in oral language provides children with a vital tool for thought. Without fluent and structured oral language, children will find it very difficult to think (Bruner, 1983). Children arrive in kindergarten with huge discrepancies in oral language development . . . and the gap between language-advanced and language-delayed children grows throughout the elementary school years (Biemiller, 2001). These realities made me think about the relationship between oral language and school success. It also made me wonder about what needed to be done in the kindergarten classroom to narrow this gap.

In order to better understand the relationship that exists among oral language development, literacy, and school success, I reviewed the research in the following areas:

- Oral language development and school success
- Factors that impact language development
- Factors that impact achievement

#### **Oral Language Development and School Success**

Oral language development is complex; yet almost all children, by age five, have developed language sufficient to navigate their home and local community environment. A classic study by Wells (1986) followed 32 children from just after age one through to their tenth birthday. He asked several important questions:

If the language of the school is different from that of the home, what is the nature of these differences and do they affect all children equally? Is there a causal connection between socioeconomic status and language experience in the preschool years, and educational achievement? If so, what are the specific linguistic skills, important for success in school that are associated with membership of one social group rather than another, and what can be done to give children from all types of family background a more equal opportunity to succeed at school? (p. xi)

What Wells (1986) found was illuminating. Prior to school entry, children followed similar paths of development, with some making greater progress than others. The two biggest factors that differentiated those with greater language abilities at school entry were the quantity and quality of conversational experiences in the home (parents who were responsive to their children's conversational initiations), and the opportunity to hear stories. When Wells (1986) assessed students at school entry in terms of language and literacy ability, and compared their rank in class at age 10, he found little change in rank order. Those who were high, and those who were low, remained in the same relative rank in class. Wells documented that the early conversational interactions and levels of literacy knowledge established in the home were highly predictive of later academic success.

Another key finding in this classic study was that the quality of oral language in the schools was significantly different from that of the home. At home, children had three times more opportunities to speak with adults, initiate conversations and ask questions. In general, he found that schools were "not providing an environment that

fosters language development. For *no* child was the language experience of the classroom richer than that of the home—not even for those believed to be ‘linguistically deprived.’” (p. 87) At school, Wells found that children were more often assigned passive roles, asked to respond to an adult’s questions in shorter, phrase-level utterances, and adults ignored or talked over them, and dominated the conversations. The teachers did expand upon the concepts they introduced twice as often as parents were likely to do.

From the above research, Wells (1986) concluded that three aspects of oral language development were particularly important in developing foundational structures of language that influence school success: 1) progression of speech; 2) acquisition of language structures; and 3) concepts children acquire based on the context in which words are learned.

### **Progression of Speech**

Oral language development starts long before an infant says their first word. The progression of speech usually occurs in a predictable sequence (Wells, 1985). For example, babbling occurs before a child produces recognizable words. Two word phrases occur before simple sentences. When children enter school at five years of age, and are speaking equivalent to an 18 month old, a knowledgeable teacher needs to know how to accelerate their acquisition of oral language. Wells (1986) studied a cross section of British families, trying to examine different economic levels and how family support impacts language development. He found the majority of families engaged in similar conversations throughout the day; they talked about meals, dressing and undressing, and the performance of bodily functions. Wells (1986) argued that most important are the conversations between the child and adult about everyday occurrences. During these

conversations, the adult and the child focus on the same event when talking about everyday occurrences, such as getting dressed, so they are more able to figure out the meaning of each other's words. The adult in the conversation is aware of the developmental level of the child and monitors their language in certain ways. While getting dressed a child says, "Me shirt." Knowing the child speaks in two word phrases, the majority of the time the adult expands their phrase with a simple sentence. The adult may say, "Yes, let's wear your red shirt." The adult may not be conscious of why they are doing this but they adjust their speech to the child's current level of comprehension.

Interestingly enough, Wells found that some children heard language, but did not participate in conversations with an experienced language user. Genishi (1988) points out that such lack of participation hinders oral language development. As she notes, "Children are born not just to speak, but also to interact socially. Even before they use words, they use cries and gestures to convey meaning; they often understand the meanings that others convey" (p. 38). Specific interaction strategies, e.g., expansion and restructuring, have a positive impact on development; they promote understanding between the child and his/her caregiver (Brown, 1973; Bruner 1977; Nelson, 1977; Snow 1972, 1983). Expansion occurs when a parent or caregiver uses the language of the child and widens it by adding words to clarify meaning. Restructuring occurs when a parent or caregiver uses the child's idea and some of the child's language to reorganize the sentence syntactically. The sentence repeated back to the child, then, is a way to reaffirm or clarify oral language communication.

Brown (1973) suggested stage theory as a way to describe qualitative differences in children's oral language development. His five stages provide a framework to help us

understand expressive language development. This development is continuous with no distinct boundaries; language progresses from playing with sounds and babbling, to acquiring a vocabulary (mostly of nouns to name objects and people) in Stage I, through the development of complete sentences between the ages of approximately 15 to 52 months of age (See Table 2).

Table 2.1: Stage I Sentence Types (15 months-30 months)

<b>Operations of Reference</b>	<b>Example of what child says</b>	<b>Communicative Intent</b>
Nomination	that car	That's a car.
Recurrence	more juice	There is more juice.
Negation –denial	no wee wee	I didn't do a wee wee.
Negation-rejection	no more	I don't want more.
Negation-non-existence	birdie go	The bird has gone.
<b>Semantic Relations</b>	<b>Examples of what child says</b>	<b>Communicative Intent</b>
Agent + Action	Daddy kiss	Daddy is kissing.
	Doggie bite	The doggie is biting.
Action + Object	push truck	Pushing the truck.
	give ball	Giving the ball.
Agent + Object	Mummy 'puter	Mummy (is at the) computer.
	man hat	The man (is wearing a) hat.
Action + Location	go pool	(We) are going (to the) pool.

	in bath	(I) am getting (in the) bath.
Entity + Locative	Teddy car Dolly bed	Teddy (is in the) car. Dolly (is on the) bed.
Possessor + Possession (object)	Daddy car Baby toy	Daddy's car. Baby's toy.
Entity + Attributive	water hot truck big	(The) water (is) hot. (The) truck (is) big.
Demonstrative + Entity	that train!	(Not this one.)  (Not that one.)

Table 2.2: Brown's Stages II to V

<b>Stage II</b>	<b>28 to 36 months</b>	Present Progressive (-ing endings on verbs)	It going, Falling off
		In	In box, Kitty in
		On	On tree, Birdie on head
		-s plural (regular plurals)	My cars, Two ties
<b>Stage III</b>	<b>36-42 months</b>	Irregular past tense	Me fell down
		-s possessives	Doggie's bone Mummy's hat

		Uncontractible copula (the full form of the verb 'to be' when it is the only verb in a sentence)	Are they there? Is it Alison?
<b>Stage IV</b>	<b>40-46 months</b>	Articles	A book, The book
		Regular past tense (-ed endings on verbs)	She jumped, He laughed
		Third person regular present tense	He swims, Man brings
<b>Stage V</b>	<b>42-52+ months</b>	Third person irregular	She has, He does
		Uncontractible auxiliary (the full form of the verb 'to be' when it is an auxiliary verb in a sentence)	Are they swimming?
		Contractible copula (the shortened form of the verb 'to be' when it is the only verb in a sentence)	She's ready. They're here.
		Contractible auxiliary (the	They're coming.

		shortened form of the verb  'to be' when it is an auxiliary verb in a sentence)	He's going.
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In general, the research on children's language development indicates that when children enter kindergarten, they should be using language that is representative of all of the above stages. A child's level of comprehension of the spoken word is directly related to their level of oral language development; therefore, if the above structures are below expectation, it will be more difficult for children to converse and comprehend at the same level as their peers.

When children enter school as a four or five year old, their level of oral language impacts learning. The five most common English sentence structures are:

1. Simple Sentence: I want to play.
2. Sentences containing prepositional phrases: I want to play with my friends.
3. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a conjunction: I want to play with my friends because it is fun.
4. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by a relative pronoun: She saw the girl who took her toys.
5. Sentences containing two phrases or clauses linked by an adverb: She cried hard when they took her toys.

By the age of five, a child should be using all five types of sentences. Children who are not able to do this will not be as successful in school as their peers (Clay, 1991). As Clay

notes, “If children have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered fewer opportunities to hold conversations there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties with comprehending oral and written language” (Clay, 1991, p.38). Oral language needs to be an instructional focus in classroom instruction when it is not at the developmentally appropriate level for the child.

Gentile (2001) suggests that when children do not have control of the most common syntax, as listed above, they will have difficulty interacting with the teacher and with published materials used in reading instruction. This coincides with a longitudinal study (Loban, 1963) of kindergarten students that showed students in sixth grade who scored in the highest quartile of reading and writing also scored the highest on measures of oral language in kindergarten. This study also found students in sixth grade scoring in the lowest quartile in reading and writing scored lowest on the oral language measure in kindergarten.

As children acquire the ability to speak, they use a variety of sentence structures to communicate with people in their environment. Each child’s environment is different. Therefore, they learn words in different settings and this affects their understanding of concepts, and potentially the range of their oral language abilities and vocabulary prior to school entry.

### **Concept Acquisition**

Nelson (1988) believes that children use and understand language differently based upon how they first learned to use language; the words they learn are grounded in specific situations. For example, one child may learn that *restaurant* means getting in your car, pulling up to a speaker, ordering your food by talking into the speaker, pulling

up to a window and receiving your food in a bag. Another child may learn that *restaurant* means putting on nice clothes, driving to a nice building, going inside, and ordering your food by talking to a person and then waiting until the food is brought to you on a plate. The child's concept of restaurant develops based on key aspects of those situations. For each child, the situations differ and therefore their understanding of the concept differs. This is one explanation for the diversity we see in classrooms—there are differences in how language users (through speaking, listening, reading, and writing) understand and produce language. When different children hear or read the word *restaurant*, they bring to mind their personal concept of restaurant, an understanding that could be very different based upon situational differences.

In my family, everyone but my son requested cheesecake for their birthday. In our house, this meant we had a no-bake cream cheese, graham cracker crust type of cheesecake. My son did not like this cake, and so he decided that he did not like cheesecake. One day, when my son was living away from home, he was with a friend who ordered cheesecake. Out came a baked desert that looked different than he expected it to look. My son tasted it, and found he loved it. His concept of cheesecake was built around the situation in which he learned the word and that concept stayed with him for 18 years (and, as a result of his experiences, he stayed away from cheesecake!). All language users understand their world by attending to the relationship between words, categories of words, and ideas that form concepts. These concepts guide their thinking and actions. As Rosemberg and Silva (2009) noted, “Concept acquisition is precisely one of the aspects in child development where the connection between language and cognition is most obvious” (p. 573).

## **Factors that influence Language Development**

The Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (2000) stated:

"Almost all children learn to talk without explicit instruction, suggesting that language acquisition is a relatively resilient process, although they do not all learn to talk well, suggesting that language acquisition includes some more fragile elements. Starting from the first day of life, the development of communication skills, language, and literacy are significant accomplishments" (p. 126).

A child's oral language development is influenced by several key factors: 1) the role of parents and caregivers; 2) teacher and student interactions; and 3) school language.

### **The Role of Parents and Caregivers**

When babies are born and placed in their parents' arms, without specific guidance or direct instruction in how to do so, parents and other caregivers seem to set forth the necessary conditions in which the vast majority of children learn their mother tongue. Indeed, Dudley, Marling and Searle (1991) synthesized the literature on language acquisition in cultures around the world and concluded that across studies, there were two common elements. First, most parents trust their children will learn to talk, so they purposefully use language within the activities they do together. Secondly, parents provide frequent opportunities and guide children to engage in conversation within these authentic, meaningful settings. The point of learning language and interacting socially, then, is not to master rules, but to make connections with other people and to make sense of experiences (Wells, 1986). Conversations enable a child to see and hear language in use, and to participate as a language user, gradually taking on greater responsibility.

It is through these family conversations that children learn to talk. This has been well established in the literature. Indeed, many experts have agreed that language is best acquired through interactions with others (Gleason, 1977; Lindfors, 1999; Moll, 1990; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1999). As Gleason (1977) stated, “Language acquisition is to a great extent the learning of how to make a conversation” (p. 203). When children first acquire language, the conversation is heavily one sided. The caretaker does most of the talking. The child responds with a smile or utterance of some type and this keeps the conversation going. The main purpose of these conversations is communication. Parents or caregivers use language with their children to understand and communicate. Bruner (1983) concurred. He agreed that learning language is a negotiation between two or more people. Children not only increase their vocabulary through conversations but they also learn about their culture and the world in general.

### **Teacher and Student Interactions**

Much of what we know of how infants acquire oral language informs us about the development of language in classrooms as well. Teacher/student interactions are crucial to the continued development of a child’s oral language, just as parent/child interactions are crucial to the initial phases in the acquisition of oral language. Research on adult/child interactions in classrooms has identified some specific strategies used by teachers to increase oral language acquisition, enhance school based oral language, and support further concept development as well as impart knowledge about the larger culture in which they live. Rosemberg and Silva (2009) categorized those strategies used in the home and at school as denomination (adding more specific language), correction (providing an alternative term), expansion (adding additional information), generalization

(providing overarching concepts), and exemplary (adding descriptive information or other examples) (p. 576).

Table 2.3: Rosemberg and Silva's Categories

Category	Definition
Denomination Strategy	In the course of a verbal exchange, when a child alludes to a given concept using a vague or general term or he or she indicates it with a deictic expression or a gesture, the teacher offers a precise linguistic term to refer to that particular concept
Correction Strategy	When a child mentions a specific concept using a term that does not coincide with the scope or relation such a concept has in that social group. In those cases, the teacher offers an alternative name that coincides with the one used within the community.
Expansion Strategy	The teacher retrieves and widens the child's speech by focusing on the perceptual and functional characteristics of the given concept, as well as on the subject matter connections between that concept and others.
Generalization Strategy	The teacher mentions the superordinate concept in which the concept mentioned by the child may be included.
Exemplary Strategy	This category includes interventions where the teacher

	mentions concepts that are subordinate to the one referred to by the child
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In addition to the research on strategies teachers used to expand children's language, Hamre & Pianta (2007) argued that three distinct interactional domains build language as well as motivate children to expand their language: emotional, instructional and organizational. Mashburn & Pianta (2008) further explained these interactions. *Emotional interactions* are characterized by a positive emotional tone, a lack of negativity, and demonstrate that teachers are sensitive to students' emotional, social and instructional needs, placing a high regard on students' interests, motivations and points of view. In emotional interactions, teachers see all students as worthy human beings and interact with them in ways that protect and build their emotional needs. *Instructional interactions* are those that promote higher order thinking rather than fact-based learning to provide feedback to and expand students' learning and understanding rather than the correctness of students' responses. Finally, teacher interactions are *organizational interactions* when they effectively manage children's behavior, time and routines to maximize learning opportunities, and instructional activities and materials.

As children enter school, they bring diverse levels of language acquisition and diverse understandings of concepts to the learning process. Creating a supportive framework for oral language and concept acquisition is not easy but it is crucial to the child's continued development. That is because oral language plays an important role in supporting literacy, not just early literacy but also children's long-term language and literacy growth. Snow & Dickenson (1991) began the Home-School Study of Language

and Literacy Development in 1987. This was an intensive, longitudinal study. They looked at how parents and teachers of children from low-income families supported the development of language skills in young children. They found three categories that were of importance for a child's literacy growth: intellectually supportive environments, varied vocabulary, and extended discourse. They defined intellectually supportive environments as those that expose children to a variety of topics. This occurs through books, conversations, and excursions around the neighborhood. Exposing children to new and interesting words increases their vocabulary. Increasing their vocabulary helps them expand their knowledge of the world. Extended discourse further develops children's oral language and literacy skills by engaging them in cognitively challenging conversations. Extended discourse occurs when children participate in extended conversations where they hear and produce explanations, personal narratives and pretend talk.

This coincides with Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos' (1998) teacher verbalization scale where the highest level of teacher/student interaction occurred during pretend play. The teacher verbalization scale included seven points that assess the level of a teacher's verbal interactions:

1. Not talking with a child
2. Talking with children about assistance (getting materials, self-help, first aid, clean up)
3. Talking with children about their behavior (restating rules, redirecting children, telling children what to do)
4. Talking with children socially

5. Making simple statements or asking close-ended questions
6. Making simple statements or asking open-ended questions
7. Talking with children about fantasy play (teacher takes on a role).

According to Massey (2004), “Teachers devote considerable time to facilitating children’s play, but the conversations are not filled with rich, stimulating content” (p. 227). She challenged teachers to create cognitively challenging conversations with their students. This understanding, that conversation during pretend or fantasy play is very important in a child's oral language development, has huge implications for early childhood education. It lays the foundation for play and teacher-student interactions during that playtime as an integral part of the early childhood curriculum.

As Snow and Dickinson (1991) examined the data from early childhood through student achievement in fourth and seventh grades, they suggested that rich language experiences during the Early Childhood years played an important role in ensuring that children were able to read with comprehension when they reach middle school. Further, Dickinson and Tabors (2002) found the scores that kindergarteners achieved on certain measures (receptive vocabulary, narrative production, and emergent literacy) were highly predictive of their scores on reading comprehension and receptive vocabulary in fourth and seventh grade. In particular, they found that the ability to develop a narrative, a varied use of vocabulary, and children’s use of pretend talk, which is the talk they use as they engage in pretend scenarios taking on the roles of different characters, such as a mom, a dentist, a dragon etc. were highly relevant to overall literacy growth.

Rosemary and Roskos’ 2002 study examined teacher-child talk with 4- and 5-year olds in three childcare centers located in northeastern Ohio. Their data consisted of

audiotapes of the teacher and teaching assistant and field notes as they observed the two adults throughout the day. As they analyzed their recordings and notes, the goal was to locate and examine literacy-related adult - child verbal interactions. Then Rosemary and Roskos coded the literacy utterances. They found most of the interactions were about daily routines. Referring back to Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos' (1998) teacher verbalization scale, verbal interactions about daily routines, while necessary, is low on the scale of interactions that assist children in acquiring the oral language needed for school success.

A study from Argentina conducted by Rosemberg & Silva (2009) looked at teacher-student interactions and concept development in kindergarten. The participants in this study were three, four, and five year old children from suburban neighborhoods outside of Buenos Aires, Argentina. Six different kindergarten groups participated in the study. Weekly visits were made to the teachers in charge of these groups. They examined the connection between cognition and language. Their work furthers our understanding of linguistic strategies teachers use to promote the children's conceptual development.

Teachers in Rosemberg & Silva's study (2009) used the strategy of denomination (see Table 2.3, page 29) when they realized a student did not have the exact term for the concept being discussed. They reported that linguistic exchanges between teacher and child happened in the course of various activities throughout the day. They noticed that a shared mental text was required in order for all these activities and exchanges to occur. These mental texts formed a shared concept. In their verbal exchanges, teachers sometimes named objects when children had a pre-linguistic conceptual representation

for these objects. This expanded the child's understanding of the concept. Rosemberg & Silva described and gave examples of linguistic strategies teachers could use to promote children's conceptual development. They suggested that teachers apply these strategies when there were problems or confusions between their own representations and the children's. They state, "They [these strategies] bring about conversation routines in children's classrooms that bridge the gap between children's denomination and the community's" (p. 588).

### **School Language**

Unfortunately, for many children, the language of the home is drastically different from the language used in school. This can place many children at greater risk of failure. Most children come to school with oral language abilities that mirror the school based oral language that is necessary for academic success in the school setting. However, some do not. Some children from non-dominant groups, for example, come to school believing they should not elaborate when speaking, they should be direct and to the point. When these children enter school, teachers sometimes assess their oral language as lagging behind their peers because of their lack of details when telling a story. Research indicates, however, that teachers need to acknowledge the richness of the language all children bring to school (Heath, 1983; Michaels, 2005; Moll, 1990). They need to make sure they value the language the child brings to school and, as needed, help all children learn school based oral language. Students' language, culture and background knowledge need to become tools for learning (Dudley-Marling and Lucas, 2009; Dyson, 2003; Heath, 1983; Moll, 1990; van Kleeck, 2007).

Teachers need to distinguish between children whose home language differs from school language and children who come to school not yet where their peers are in oral language development. Children whose home language does not differ from school language are often where they should be in their acquisition of oral language. They are using the language structures and vocabulary that are appropriate for their age and appropriate for the more formal school setting. All students benefit from learning the language of school. For children who arrive at school not fluent in school based oral language patterns, teachers need to understand the concept of school talk, how school talk and home talk differ, and how the values and beliefs of some cultural groups may be at odds with various aspects of school based oral language patterns. Understanding teacher – student verbal interactions that help children acquire school based oral language is necessary to succeed in a school setting.

Children who come to school not yet where their peers are in oral language development do not yet have the language structures and vocabulary that are appropriate for their age. These children have trouble using language to navigate their home life. Understanding teacher – student verbal interactions that help children acquire oral language is different but also necessary to succeed in a school setting.

### **Factors that Impact Achievement**

The opportunity gap problem is difficult to analyze because of all the factors that affect a child's performance within a school setting. Schools cannot be the sole solution to the problem, but they do need to be part of the solution to this problem. Many social and economic inequalities existing outside school settings appear to be driving factors in generating academic gaps: 1) school-based issues that influence student achievement; 2)

factors outside schools that influence student achievement; and 3) factors that influence teacher quality.

### **Issues That Influence Schools**

The school setting can and should be part of the solution to closing the opportunity gap. Despite the Federal Government's attempts at improving the quality of preschools through Head Start, children are still entering kindergarten poorly prepared to handle the public school curriculum, particularly given the bias toward a middle class curriculum model. Dudley Marling and Lucas (2009) note, "Children's language plays a crucial role in school success...and school failure." At this early stage of a child's education, schools can be part of the solution if they choose to teach in ways that help all children, regardless of social economic status, or cultural background, acquire the oral language and literacy capabilities necessary for school success.

Schools can also be part of the solution when they provide teachers with an in-depth understanding of students' cultural backgrounds. Boutte and Hill (2006) help us understand the importance of studying and addressing the needs of respective cultural groups. Boykin (1994) suggested in the early years teachers embed the acquisition of cognitive skills in a context that is culturally congruent to the students in our classroom. In order to do this, teachers must understand the cultural backgrounds of their students. Three areas of importance are:

- Task Definition – How a particular skill or task is defined for students
- Task Format – How the skill or task is acquired and performed
- Task Ambience – How the environment envelops the task and forms the background for learning (p. 84).

One dimension of the African American culture is Oral Tradition (Boykin, 1994; Hale 2001). So, for example, if the task is to learn the elements of a story, it would be culturally congruent to African American students to learn these elements through storytelling. Instruction that uses students' cultures to help them be successful in school will be effective in closing the opportunity gap between students of color and white students. By embracing a culturally relevant curriculum, schools can begin to close the opportunity gap. However, if schools combine a culturally relevant curriculum while attending to key outside influences, it may be possible to close the gap at a faster rate.

### **Outside Issues that Influence Schools**

According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), international data on assessments like Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assessments in mathematics, science, and reading show that, the United States' low rankings are largely a function of inequality. The United States has the highest poverty rate of any industrialized nation. A child living in poverty may receive fewer health services. A healthy child has a better chance of being successful in school than an unhealthy child. Children of poverty also tend to live in inadequate and unstable housing. With inadequate and unstable housing, there is also a greater likelihood that families will move more often. This mobility issue affects the students' consistency in instruction and learning. It also interferes with the teachers' ability to establish trust and build relationships with children (Rothstein, 2005).

Funding is another outside factor that contributes to the achievement gap the United States has experienced, and is still experiencing, due to lack of adequate or equitable funding. Schools serving large numbers of students of color or children of poverty have significantly fewer resources than schools serving more affluent, white

students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Teacher pay is not equal either, and consequently, children of poverty and children of color often have the least experienced teachers. Once these teachers gain experience, they search for jobs in higher paying districts and so teacher turnover rates are higher in underfunded schools than in schools that are more affluent.

Darling-Hammond characterizes the achievement gap as *the opportunity gap* for these reasons. Other nations such as Finland and South Korea have almost closed the achievement gap by addressing the opportunity gap. She defines the opportunity gap as “the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources that support learning at home and at school” (p. 23). She identifies these key resources:

- High-quality curriculum
- Good educational materials
- Expert teachers
- Personalized attention
- Plenty of informational resources

While all of the above resources are key in supporting learning at home and school, expert teachers, or quality teachers, top the list.

### **Factors That Influence Teacher Quality**

Quality is a difficult word to define. Phillips and Howes (1987) studied day care programs and organized indicators of day care quality into three categories: (1) structural features (group size, staff-child ratios, caregiver training, equipment, space); (2) dynamic aspects (experiences and interactions); and (3) contextual features (staff stability and turnover, type of setting). A teacher has little to no control over structural and contextual

features. Hamre and Pianta (2001, 2005), have conducted several studies looking at the dynamic aspects, the experiences and interactions, of classrooms, which they believe are the indicators we need to look at as we try to define quality and identify the characteristics of a highly qualified teacher. A key indicator in identifying a highly qualified teacher is the teacher-student interactions that result in a positive personal relationship. The personal relationships that exist between teachers and their students significantly influence the social and academic development of their students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, 2005).

Effective teaching is complex and requires well-informed teachers who can routinely identify children's instructional needs and offer targeted lessons that foster development. Effective teachers use knowledge of a variety of models and theorists and match their instruction to the child's needs (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block & Morrow, 1998). After studying 30 first grade classrooms in five different states, Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block and Morrow (1998) concluded that these were the characteristics of the most effective classrooms:

- High Academic Engagement and Competence
- Excellent Classroom Management
- Positive, Reinforcing, Cooperative Environment
- Explicit Teaching of Skills (i.e., word-level, comprehension, writing skills)
- Literature Emphasis
- Much Reading and Writing

- Match of Accelerated Demands to Student Competence, with a great deal of Scaffolding
- Encouragement of Self-Regulation
- Strong Connections across the Curriculum

The students in these teachers' rooms had higher student achievement than students in other classrooms. They used a variety of materials and methods as they interacted with their students. These findings are consistent with other studies in finding that it is not particular programs or specific materials that explain why these teachers were highly effective.

Allington and Johnston (2000) found that, given the current sociocultural understanding of learning that is available within the professional literature, it is odd that so little attention is given to classroom language in previous studies (p. 10). They designed a study that looked at effective fourth grade literacy instruction. They found the following common features across 30 teachers in 24 schools located in five different states: the nature of classroom talk, curriculum materials, organization of instruction, and nature of evaluation. (See Table 2.4)

Table 2.4: Common Features in Effective 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Literacy Instruction

The Nature of Classroom Talk
Conversational talk
Public talk among students
Students encouraged to engage each other's ideas

<p>Classroom discussions</p> <p>Encouraged thinking or reflection about correct and incorrect answers</p> <p>Distributed authority</p> <p>Errors were a source of learning</p> <p>Made space for real dialogue</p> <p>Teachers demonstrated the limits of their knowledge and expertise</p> <p>Routine demonstrations of how literate people think as they read and write</p> <p>Instruction is largely conversational</p> <p>Inquiry processes a normal topic of conversation</p>
<p>Curriculum Materials</p> <p>Multi-sourced</p> <p>Traditional and nontraditional curriculum sources</p> <p>Strong literary emphasis</p> <p>Language itself was a curriculum topic</p>
<p>Organization of Instruction</p> <p>“Planful Opportunists” – A teacher who plans lessons that lend themselves to instructional opportunities on which he/she will capitalize.</p> <p>Planned for learner engagement first</p> <p>Personalized instruction- teachers knew their students</p> <p>Managed choice</p> <p>Multiple routes for demonstrating knowledge</p> <p>Tailored, collaborative, meaningful problem solving work</p>

<p>Integration across subjects, time, and topics</p> <p>Work was long term in nature</p> <p>Range of instructional formats – whole group, small group, individual</p>
<p>Nature of Evaluation</p> <p>Based more on improvement, progress, and effort</p> <p>Attended to individual student development and goals</p> <p>Holistic – focusing on complex achievements</p> <p>Provided focused feedback</p> <p>Self-evaluation encouraged</p>

Allington and Johnston (2000) concluded that the nature of talk that occurred in these classrooms was perhaps the most important feature and their findings were consistent with Dudley-Marling and Lucas. Children’s language plays a crucial role in school success and school failure (2009). These and other studies also show a connection between a student’s oral language and a student’s school success (Dickinson and Tabors, 2002; Hamre and Pianta, 2007; Howes, 1997; Mashburn and Pianta, 2008; Massey, 2004; Rosemberg and Silva, 2009; Snow and Dickinson, 1991; Wilcox-Herzog and Kontos, 1998).

Johnston (2004) wrote about how teachers’ language affects children's learning. He argued that, "Words and phrases exert considerable power over classroom conversations, and thus over students' literate and intellectual development" (p. 10). He posited that language is powerful and does so much more than deliver information. If used in a positive way, language builds emotionally and relationally healthy classrooms.

He listed several ways that teachers' language can affect students' learning and development:

- Identity
- Notice and Name
- Agency
- Strategy Use
- Flexibility
- Transfer
- Knowing

Talk plays a vital role in the success of a student. The ability to think, articulate your thoughts, and converse with others is a skill needed for success in school as well as in life. When any five year old walks into a classroom not yet where his or her peers are in oral language development, not yet able to speak in complete sentences, it is important that the teacher knows the most generative teacher/student verbal interactions, engaging instructional moves, and productive instructional components utilized by effective kindergarten teachers in order to be successful in closing the opportunity gap.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to examine a Kindergarten teacher's enriched language and literacy program. Specifically, it examined teacher/student interactions, teacher quality, instructional components and the instructional moves used to close the opportunity gap that exists between children with the lowest language and literacy repertoires and their age level peers in Mrs. Lucas' classroom.

When looking at teacher/student interactions, oral language development is a crucial component. Students who have not yet reached the level of their peers in their oral language development lack the words and sentence structures to interact verbally with the teacher at a level necessary for success in school.

Teacher quality, as discussed earlier, is very complex. Quality is difficult to define whether talking about teachers, programs, or schools. The research methodology literature defines two different indicators of quality (Bryant, Clifford, Early, & Little, 2005), process indicators and structural indicators. Process indicators are factors such as the types and nature of teacher-child interactions, and the components and engagements teachers use to promote learning in the classroom. Structural indicators are those regulated factors such as educational level of teacher, class size, and teacher/student ratio. Process indicators of quality were the focus of this study.

This study examined the different instructional components and moves within those components this teacher implemented to promote learning. In particular, data

collection focused on how she engaged the learners in her room, how she met the students where they were in their initial literacy and language understandings in order to describe how she scaffolded their language and literacy development toward independent reading and writing. I was most interested in discerning the characteristics of quality instruction, specifically at the kindergarten level in schools with high levels of poverty and a diverse student population to discover ways to improve children's literacy achievement in the first year of school. The following questions guided this study:

1. What key instructional components are included in this kindergarten teacher's language and literacy program?
2. What is the nature of this kindergarten teacher's decision-making process related to instructional decisions for low performing children in her classroom?
3. In what ways do instructional moves within the components offered by this kindergarten teacher support children's language and literacy learning?
4. What patterns of verbal interactions offered by this kindergarten teacher scaffold low performing children's oral language and literacy development?

### **Context of Study**

Historically, the district in which this study took place has been plagued with economic poverty, which classifies it as an At-Risk District. The unemployment rate of the county was 18%, the highest in the state at the time of this research. In terms of poverty, the district ranks the highest in the state today with a rate of 15.8%; the school also has the highest poverty index (99.69) in the state.

Thirty-six poor, rural districts in South Carolina, including the district where this study took place, sued the state citing the inequity in educational services provided to

students in their districts. Money needed to fund a successful educational experience for their students was not available from the combined funds provided by the state and the limited amount of taxes these individual districts were able to raise. Due to this financial situation, students in these thirty-six districts did not have access to the services, facilities, and opportunities that could be provided to children in other districts throughout the state. It was more than ten years before the lawsuit originally filed in 1993 came to trial.

Finally, on December 29, 2005 Judge Thomas Cooper in the case of *Abbeville v. South Carolina* handed down his decision. Based on his decision, it was determined that the only area in which the state was not meeting its responsibility for a minimally adequate education to children of poverty was in the area of early childhood education (*Abbeville v. South Carolina, 2005*). Judge Cooper agreed that children in the state's poorest schools were being denied their right to an education by the state due to the state's failure to fully fund early childhood programs. Early childhood programs were restricted to preschool programs alone. Judge Cooper's decision established the need for quality preschool interactions before the start of formal schooling.

The South Carolina Supreme Court has held that the state constitution requires the legislature to provide children with a "minimally adequate education," and a trial court ruled in 2005 that the state's failure to develop and fund early childhood intervention programs through at least grade three violated this mandate. Early childhood should include students up to and including third grade. The parties appealed, and the South Carolina Supreme Court again heard arguments in 2008 but, at the time I conducted this study, had not issued a decision. In the April 20, 2012, edition of the *Statehouse Report*,

Andy Brack addressed the topic and concluded that it's well past time for the state Supreme Court to have issued a ruling in this matter

(<http://educatingsouthcarolina.blogspot.com/2012/05/ruling-in-abbeville-v-south-carolina-is.html>).

The small district where this research took place pursued multiple grants to obtain additional funds in an attempt to provide more than a “minimally adequate education” for all of its students. Many of the teachers who teach at the elementary school in this district attended school in the district and have a great sense of pride and determination to provide the best education possible for the students in their classrooms.

### **School Setting**

The setting for this study was a small school situated in a rural part of South Carolina. The community is one of the oldest settlements in the county nestled between two branching rivers that extend northward in an area known as the Pee Dee. The town nearest the school is approximately 20 miles away.

The school in this community serves approximately 325 students in PreK through fifth grade. The ethnicity of the school is as follows: 80% African American, 17% European American, and 3% Mexican American. This Title I school has 99% of its students receiving free or reduced lunch.

In 2011, the school made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the third year in a row. The federal government established targets of achievement for AYP under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The degree to which students are improving their performance based on previously established targets determines if AYP is met. The school has been the recipient of some of the state’s highest educational awards for the

past two years: the Palmetto Gold Award given by the State Department of Education for academic achievement, and the Palmetto Silver Award for closing the achievement gap for historically underachieving groups.

## **Research Design**

### **Teacher Selection**

Mrs. Lucas, a kindergarten teacher, was chosen to participate in this study based on my observations. As the literacy coach at this school, I had the opportunity to observe in her classroom and wanted to do an in depth study to see what indicators I could identify that were helping her students make significant gains (See Table 1.1, pg. 5).

Mrs. Lucas, a European American, has taught for 15 years at this small rural school. The majority of those years have been spent in kindergarten. She attended school in the district as a young child, moved away for a few years, and then returned to finish her education in the district. In fact, the woman who works with Mrs. Lucas as her paraprofessional was the paraprofessional in the classroom when Mrs. Lucas was a kindergarten student. Up until three years ago, Mrs. Lucas lived in the community with her husband and daughter. Many of her relatives continue to live in the community.

Mrs. Lucas loves to tell stories to her children. She is very animated and uses specific vocabulary to make her stories interesting and to help her children increase their vocabulary. Through her storytelling her students get to know her as a person. She uses storytelling in all content areas. A principal, Mrs. Smith, from a very affluent school district outside of a major city observed Mrs. Lucas during her mini lesson of Writer's Workshop. Mrs. Lucas told a story about her family in her mini lesson. The principal later told me it was the best writing lesson she had ever seen. Mrs. Lucas values the

students' stories and spends time getting to know her students through their stories. These stories are used for instructional purposes as well as for developing relationships between her and her students.

Patton, 1990, refers to “purposive sampling” when subjects are selected because of some particular characteristic. I selected Mrs. Lucas based on the knowledge I had of her that met the purpose of the study. I felt a lot could be learned from this in-depth study to help other kindergarten classroom teachers be more successful in offering high quality language and literacy instruction to successfully close the opportunity gap. The critical case sampling seemed to be the most appropriate method of sampling used in the selection of this teacher. The school is located in a district that is the most poverty ridden in the state. I felt that if this teacher could be highly effective in this situation, other teachers could also become highly effective. If it is possible in this setting, it is possible anywhere (Patton, 1990).

During this study Mrs. Lucas had 27 students in her class and a full time assistant in the room with her. The ethnic composition of her class was as follows: 68% African American, 14% European American, and 18% Mexican American. There were 12 girls and 15 boys in her classroom.

### **Student Selection**

The sampling method used to select the students was what Patton (1990) called Homogenous Sampling. This is when a certain group is chosen to understand how the phenomenon being studied affects that group. These seven students were identified based on their PPVT scores at the end of Child Development, a four year old program, and Mrs. Lucas' recommendation based on their interactions with her and the interactions

with their peers during the first four weeks of kindergarten. Of the seven students, five were males and two were females. They were all African American students. Even though the interactions between the teacher and the Mexican American students were at a lower level than the seven children chosen for the study, it was decided that the study would focus on students who spoke English as their first language.

Jamal, an African American boy, attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. Jamal has an older sibling at the high school. He turned five in April and started kindergarten in August. As a kindergartner at the beginning of the year, he often sat quietly on the carpet without attempting to interact with Mrs. Lucas and his peers. He knew most of the students in his class because they had attended the 4 year old program with him. During whole group when asked what he thought about the story being read, he would turn his head away from Mrs. Lucas and not respond. She met with him in small group and one on one and could not get him to respond beyond one word. Jamal would often respond to her questions by pointing. This concerned her because she also noticed he very seldom interacted verbally with his peers while at lunch or while playing in centers. She began to notice in whole group lessons he often gazed off and did not look at the book they were reading or at her when she was talking and singing. She asked the nurse to check his hearing and sight and everything came back within the normal range. Mrs. Lucas wanted to look more closely at Jamal to figure out why he was not interacting with his peers and her verbally. It was mid September when she recommended him to be a focal student in this study.

Keith, an African American boy, was very attentive during whole group time. He attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. Keith has one

sibling who is older and attends the high school. He turned five in May and started kindergarten in August. As Mrs. Lucas read a story, he sat as still as a statue with his eyes glued to the pages of the big book being read. As she began to have conversations about the story and as she and the students retold the story she expected Keith to add to the retelling. When asked if he was wondering about anything in the story he often replied with one word, No. One day while writing/drawing clouds in her story during Writer's Workshop Keith said, "How many clouds dem is?" Mrs. Lucas was elated. Keith had articulated his wondering. She knew about African American Vernacular English and often /th/ is replaced with the /d/ sound. She knew this was his home language and she honored and valued his language. Her interest and the interest of this study was being able to articulate ideas verbally in simple sentences, simple sentences with prepositional phrases, compound sentences, and complex sentences. She recommended Keith for the study.

NarAsia, an African American girl was always smiling. She attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. NarAsia is an only child. She turned five in August and started kindergarten two weeks later. She loved to run with her friends at recess. During center time she played in the housekeeping center surrounded by her friends with a smile on her face. Mrs. Lucas noticed she was always smiling but rarely talking. As she tried to engage her in a conversation NarAsia would smile. Was she shy or not yet where she needed to be with her oral language development? When asked what center she wanted to go to she would point. When asked why she wanted to go to that center she would often say, "It fun." Mrs. Lucas indicated that NarAsia would be a good candidate for the study.

Jadon, an African American boy, attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. He has a three year old sister at home. Jadon is the oldest child in his family. He interacted with his peers in nonverbal ways. He would roll on the grass with his friends, chase his friend and be chased by them giggling and grinning the whole time. This was typical behavior during recess at the beginning of kindergarten. It was during Turn and Talk that Mrs. Lucas began to notice instead of articulating his own thoughts he was repeating what others said. During one on one writing conferences instead of telling a story about his drawing he would verbally label it. For example, one day during writing Mrs. Lucas asked him to tell her his story. Jadon pointed to parts of his drawing and said, "My house, de sun, de rain, etc. As with Keith she was not concerned about his use of African American Vernacular English, she was concerned about his inability to use sentences to tell his story. This was a pattern she saw over the first three weeks of school so Mrs. Lucas asked that he be included in the study.

Deonta, an African American boy, attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. His birthday was in February so he was five and a half when he entered kindergarten. He is an only child. He loved Mrs. Lucas' writing mini lessons when they included stories about herself, which they almost always did. When it was time to tell his own story he, like Jadon was just naming items that were in his story. Mrs. Lucas, wanting more information began to notice his oral language during recess, lunch, and center time. He played well with his peers, seemed to be well liked but didn't seem to interact verbally at the level most of the students were interacting. After helping Deonte think of a story and helping him draw his story using verbal prompts. (See entire example in chapter 4 p.) Mrs. Lucas tried to help him tell his story.

Mrs. Lucas: Well, you better put him in your story. Oh, I can't wait to see your dog! (Deonte draws his dog) Tell me your story. One day I...."

Deonte: I rode my bike.

Mrs. Lucas: You rode your bike on brown dirt. Tell me about your dog.

Deonte: I rode my bike on dirt. Alpo ran.

Mrs. Lucas: Great details! I can see you riding your bike on that brown dirt. It makes me smile to think about your little dog Alpo running while you rode you bike (October 22, 2011).

This example is similar to what she saw in August and September that helped make her decision to recommend Deonte for the study. He was using simple sentences and sometimes simple sentences with prepositional phrases when prompted.

Malik, an African American boy, attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. He has an older sibling who attends high school. He turned five in July and started kindergarten in August. He enjoyed school. He always came excited to start the day. When sitting on the carpet during whole group time he could start in one corner and in less than five minutes be on the other side of the carpet. Malik would speak in rapid simple sentences yet these sentences did not seem to connect to what was being discussed. In her experience, Mrs. Lucas often saw students who would say something in a whole group discussion that did not go along with the topic but this was different. In one on one conversations Malik would start rapidly talking, in simple sentences, that did not address what was being talked about. Often the sentences he was saying were not related to each other.

JyNya, an African American girl, attended this school as a four year old in the Child Development class. She has a two year old brother. She turned five in July and started kindergarten in August. JyNya tried hard to do what was asked of her. She got along well with her peers but often chose to play by herself during centers. When Mrs. Lucas would engage her in conversations she mostly spoke in phrases. During writing when asked to tell about her drawing she would point and verbally label using phrases such as: me and my daddy, in de park, swinging. Mrs. Lucas recommended her to be in the focal group. Mrs. Lucas would work to expand her sentence structures.

### **Instruments**

The instruments used in any study impact the validity and reliability of the study. Careful consideration was given to the instruments used in this study. The instruments used were the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test -IV (PPVT-IV) (Dunn and Dunn, 2007), the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI) (Gentile, 2011), and the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004, 2nd edition).

#### **Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - IV**

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test was first developed in 1959 by Lloyd M. Dunn and Leota M. Dunn. The purpose of the test is to measure the receptive language of people from ages 2 to 90+. It measures the verbal abilities in Standard American English. The original developers revised it twice, once in 1981 and again in 1997. Leota passed away in 2001 and Lloyd passed away in 2006. Their son Douglas co-authored the latest edition with Lloyd, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - IV. It was developed over a five-year period and published in 2007.

Several changes were made to the fourth edition. Pictures that were outdated were changed to reflect a more modern vocabulary, especially in the area of technology. The other three versions had black and white pictures, while this version has color pictures. The PPVT-IV contains 228 stimulus words. Three-fourths of the items are from the previous edition (PPVT-III) and one-fourth is new. Many very easy items were added to improve measurement of low-functioning preschool-age children. All of the items were evaluated for the appropriateness with a diverse population.

The norming sample was obtained using 450 examiners at 320 different locations. Those tested came from diverse backgrounds, which matched the 2004 U.S. Census for gender, age, ethnicity, region and socioeconomic status. The norms were developed during the fall of 2005 into the spring of 2006 ("PPVT-4 Publication Summary Form," n.d.).

The test has two parallel forms. It is divided into 19 sections, referred to as sets. Each set has 12 pictures. The test is untimed but usually takes 15-20 minutes to administer. The starting point is determined by the examinee's age. For example, an examinee who is five would begin testing at Set 4. The administrator then tests looking for the examinee's "basal" set and "ceiling" set. The basal set is the set where the examinee has no errors and the ceiling set is the set where the examinee has eight or more errors. The raw scores can be converted to standard scores, percentiles, normal curve equivalents (NCEs), and stanines. The administrator can also determine the age equivalent and grade level equivalent for the examinee.

The second edition of the PPVT, referred to as PPVT-R, was found to be biased towards African American students. It was found to produce different results for

European American and African American kindergarten-aged children. The difference between African American and European American children's scores on the PPVT-R remained close to one standard deviation apart, even after controlling for factors such as socio-economic status and parental education (Rock and Stenner, 2005). However, an investigation by Washington and Craig (1999) concluded that the PPVT-III was less biased towards at-risk African-American children than the earlier PPVT-R edition. Studies need to be done to determine the actual level of potential bias towards African American children that may be found in the PPVT-IV as compared to the PPVT-III.

### **Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI)**

Lance M. Gentile developed the Oral Language Acquisition Inventory in 2004. The second edition that was used for this study was released in 2011. The focus of his work has been on the development of oral language and second language acquisition. He also researched the social-emotional factors related to language and literacy development. This instrument is a formative, criterion-referenced language, literacy and learning behavior assessment (Gentile, 2011) that also provides for careful observations noted by the test administrator.

The OLAI2 is administered in a one-on-one setting and its purpose is to identify, and then provide instruction for, those students who are not performing adequately for their age and grade level. There are several components to this assessment. For this study, two parts were used. Students were assessed to see if they had control of the most common oral language structures and transformations. This was called the Repeated Sentence section. Students were also assessed to measure their ability to retell a story referred to as Story Retelling.

The Repeated Sentences section measures the student's degree of control of the grammatical structures most often found in written text. The administrator reads a sentence. The student is asked to listen to the sentence being read and repeat the sentence. The number of sentences the student repeats correctly is recorded. This number corresponds to Stage I - least experienced, Stage II - basic, or Stage III - most experienced in the Performance Profile. These stages help guide the teacher in providing the most appropriate instruction for the student.

The Story Retelling section measures the student's ability to link sentences in sequence to develop a logical narrative. The administrator reads a story to the student while showing picture cards. The student retells the story using the picture cards. The student is usually recorded as they retell the story. When scoring the story retelling section, two areas are given a score. The administrator listens to the retelling and circles the number of words the child says correctly. Correct being the exact words or synonyms or words that get the same idea across. The administrator counts the number of circled words and figures out the percentage of words that are said correctly. The administrator also listens for the child to include the characters, setting, problem and solution in the retelling of the story. They receive one point for each story element they include in their story retelling. As with the Repeated Sentences section, these scores correlate to Stage I, Stage II, and Stage III.

- Least Experienced (Stage I) – Indicates a need to address basic syntactic structures. This child uses phrases and some simple sentences.
- Basic (Stage II) – A child at this stage can usually use complete sentences, transformations, and common prepositional phrases and conjunctions

- Most Experienced (Stage III) – A child at this stage uses complete sentences with varied prepositions, conjunctions, relative pronouns, adverbs as well as more complex cohesive links.

This information is analyzed and used to determine the type of language instruction that will most benefit this child.

### **Dominie Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio**

Dominie Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio was developed by Diane DeFord (2004, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). The Assessment Portfolio is a collection of observation tools that provide a systematic and ongoing assessment of student growth in key areas of reading, writing, spelling, phonemic awareness, and phonics.

The Sentence Writing and Spelling task provides insight into the student's knowledge and use of phonemes and the student's use of conventional spelling of words common to their specific grade level. The administrator reads two sentences so the student can understand the meaning of the sentences. They then begin reading each sentence as slowly as needed, so the student can write the words or sounds they hear. The administrator scores the sentence dictation in two ways. They count how many phonemes the student heard. They also count how many words were spelled correctly. The third component of this task, story completion, is not required by the district.

The Show Me Book assesses the student's concepts of print and book handling. There are 17 points available when assessing The Show Me Book. This assessment assesses items such as return sweep, one-to-one correspondence, distinction between letters, numbers, and words, etc.

The Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio also has a text reading component that assesses a student's accuracy, self-correction ratio, and level of comprehension at these emergent reading levels. In the books appropriate for kindergarten, the administrator reads several pages to the student. The student reads a few pages that each contain simple sight words in groupings of one, two, or three words (like *No!* or *No! No!* and *Yes!* or *Yes! Yes! Yes!* and *Stop!* or *Stop! Stop!* and *Go! Go! Go!*). This task assesses reading accuracy and knowledge of one-to-one correspondence. The student then retells the story while the teacher marks the questions being answered through this retelling. The administrator can ask questions about the information not addressed during the retelling. Fluency is also assessed via a fluency rubric once the students are reading at a certain reading level.

### **Gathering Data**

In September, 2011, the data collection began. The school where this study takes place requires that kindergarten students be assessed using the sentence writing and spelling and text level components of the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio. In order to see progress over the entire year, data were collected on the seven focal students at the beginning of the year as well as midyear and at the end of the year. The Show Me Book included in the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio, OLAI2 and the PPVT-IV were also used although they are not required assessments for the school. (See Table 3.1)

During the classroom observations and teacher interviews, data was gathered about the teacher's instructional program. Data was also collected during the interview to determine how the teacher sets up her literacy instruction, the thinking behind what is

observed during the day, and how she determines what to do next in her literacy instruction. The stimulated recall interviews provided insight into the decision making process of the teacher as she interacted with the students. Analysis of all the data collected throughout the year provided insight into what this kindergarten teacher thinks, does and says that had an impact on increasing the language and literacy development of students who enter kindergarten with the lowest language and literacy repertoires.

### **Participant Observation**

As a participant observer, I sometimes just observed while taking notes or videotaping the classroom engagements. At other times, I was fully engaged in the lesson through interactions with the teacher or the student. Sometimes, students would approach me to engage in a writing conference, listen as they shared their writing, or to engage in a conversation about the book they were reading. The level of my participation varied according to the situation and the requests of the students (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). The more familiar the students became with me, the more they requested my participation in their learning. As a participant observer, I realize I may have had some influence on the scene. My close relationship with Mrs. Lucas, as her literacy coach, also may have had some influence on the scene. When interviewing her she would on occasion want to have the professional conversations about her instruction and her students that we were accustomed to engaging in.

I used four data collection techniques, generally implemented in three week data collection intervals, for the qualitative methods in this study: a) video-tapes, b) in-depth interviews, c) stimulated recall interviews, and d) field notes. The use of four different data collection techniques resulted in four discrete but interrelated sets of data, which

served to increase the study's authenticity and to provide added depth to the investigation of teacher thinking and teacher decision making about the language she chose to use as she interacted with the children. During the three weeks that data were not collected, I watched, transcribed, and coded the videotapes. I read my field notes and listened to the audiotapes of the interviews. (See Table 3.1)

### **In-Depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were conducted with the teacher. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative in-depth interviews as conversations where the researcher respects how the participant frames his/her responses. The teacher as a reflective practitioner constantly reflected on student work, her verbal interactions with the children and other areas as well. These interviews involved discussions around her reflections. Since qualitative research seeks an insider perspective on the phenomenon studied, it is important to see the phenomenon as the participant sees it not just as the researcher sees it. In- depth interviewing is an avenue in which that can occur.

### **Observations**

Observations also generated data for this study. I videotaped the seven focal children during certain times of the day as they interacted with the teacher. Videotapes also focused on the teacher's instruction during whole group, small group, and one-on-one conferencing.

### **Stimulated Recall Interview**

The third data collection technique used in this study was the stimulated recall interview. Stimulated recall is an introspective research technique. It has been used effectively where the thinking and decision making strategies held by students and

teachers during instructional activities are relevant to the study (Gass & Mackey, 2000). Through this technique, we can record the consciousness in the same way observations record the physical. In this study, I videotaped a segment of the teacher's day. As soon as possible, we watched the video. I would pause the video so a specific interaction could be discussed. Mrs. Lucas could also request the video be paused to discuss a specific interaction. The information being accessed by stimulated recall is the conscious thoughts of the teacher during her interaction with the students. The recall of these conscious thoughts, stimulated by the video of that activity and research question, is linked to the events that are observable (Leis, 2006). Non-directive questions were also used, "What were you thinking here/at this point/right then?" (Gass and Mackey, 2000 p. 154). Stimulated recall gave me insight into the thinking and decision making of this teacher as she interacted with children.

### **Field Notes**

Field notes were taken every step of the way during this research study. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, field notes are not random notes. A researcher needs a systematic, organized way to keep notes. In this study, field notes were both descriptive and analytic. These four data sources helped create a picture of the literacy learning occurring in this classroom.

### **Conducting Member Checks**

At the end of each videotaping session, the teacher and I would debrief the session and think deeply about her students. It was at this time, I could ask questions that would help me understand her intent. These conversations enabled me to write rich, dense descriptions of each videotaping session. As I began writing I would give a copy

to Mrs. Lucas to read asking her to provide feedback. I explained to her that I wanted to use words to paint a true picture of her classroom and of her interactions with the students. She was to inform me if we needed to make corrections, deletions, or additions to the writing. Often times her feedback would make my writing more detailed so people would see exactly what was happening in the classroom. This increased the trustworthiness of the study, making sure the findings capture what is really there.

Table 3.1: Timeline of Data Collection

<b>Week of:</b>	<b>Type of data collection:</b>
September 12, 2011	Initial Data on students: Show Me Book, Gentile’s Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI), PPVT Dominie Sentence Writing and Spelling, Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
September 19, 2011	Reflection Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
September 26, 2011	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
October 3, 2011	Stimulated Recall Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
October 10, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
October 17, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
October 24, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
October 31, 2011	Reflection Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
November 7, 2011	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
November 14, 2011	Stimulated Recall Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
November 21, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
November 28, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
December 5, 2011	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
December 12, 2011	Mid Year Data Collection: Show Me Book, Gentile’s Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI), PPVT, Dominie Text Level, Dominie Sentence Writing and Spelling
December 19, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
December 26, 2011	Collapse Data and Code Data
January 2, 2012	Reflection Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
January 9, 2012	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer’s Workshop
January 16, 2012	Stimulated Recall Interview

	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
January 23, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
January 30, 2012	Data Collection: Show Me Book, Gentile's Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI), Dominic Text Level, Dominic Sentence Writing and Spelling
February 6, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
February 13, 2012	Reflection Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
February 20, 2012	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
February 27, 2012	Stimulated Recall Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
March 5, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
March 12, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
March 19, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
March 26, 2012	Reflection Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
April 2, 2012	Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
April 9, 2012	Stimulated Recall Interview Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
April 16, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
April 23, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
April 30, 2012	End of Year Data Collection: Show Me Book, Gentile's Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (OLAI), Dominic Text Level, Dominic Sentence Writing and Spelling, PPVT Video: Center Time, Shared Reading, Writer's Workshop
May 7, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
May 14, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data
May 21, 2012	Collapse Data and Code Data

### **Analyzing Data**

After each three week cycle, I coded the data. I used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to gradually form categories. I began by transcribing the videos and the interviews and reading the field notes. I color coded patterns that began to emerge. In December of 2011, as I was coding the third round of data I began to notice patterns that would fall under categories used in relevant previous research. At this point, I began to code for specific categories from previous research studies.

According to Berg, generating concepts from previous studies is very useful for qualitative research (2001). Patterns that did not fit into these categories also began to emerge. I created categories for these emerging patterns. Data sometimes fit into more than one category. "Dual or even multiple coding is warranted if a segment is both descriptively and inferentially meaningful" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 64).

Moving from data collection to coding to generating categories helped me notice the relationships between categories. It also provided a level of coding integrity as I constantly reread the data collected so far to compare it to the new data as I determined if the new data would fit into an existing category or if I needed to create a new category.

After all the data was collected from the PPVT -IV, OLAI2, and the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment, I calculated the growth of each student. The PPVT-IV and The Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment allowed me to represent their scores using stanines. I began to create tables and charts looking at individual students across time and across assessments. I also created tables and charts to look at the data across students. This information is presented in the findings in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

In this study, I sought to understand what Mrs. Lucas does, thinks, and says during her language and literacy instruction that closes the opportunity gap for kindergarten children raised in a rural area plagued with economic poverty. Specifically, I sought to understand:

1. What key instructional components were included in Mrs. Lucas' language and literacy program?
2. What was Mrs. Lucas' decision-making process related to instructional decisions for low performing children in her classroom?
3. What instructional moves Mrs. Lucas made which supported children's language and literacy learning?
4. What were Mrs. Lucas' patterns of verbal interactions that provided a scaffold for low performing children's oral language and literacy development?

#### Research Question 1

*What key instructional components are included in this kindergarten teacher's language and literacy program?* Mrs. Lucas used a balanced literacy approach: the children read and wrote in a variety of groupings and authentic literacy settings. Her day consisted of several key literacy events: Read Aloud, Shared Reading, Guided Reading, Independent Reading, Shared Writing, Guided Writing, and Independent Writing. She also included literacy in her Centers

Table 4.1: Literacy Block Schedule

Shared Reading (30/40 minutes)
Independent Reading (30/40 minutes) Small groups and one-on-one conferencing occurs during this time
Writer's Workshop (50 minutes)
Centers (60 minutes)

In the course of a day, Mrs. Lucas spent approximately 120 minutes of uninterrupted literacy time in her literacy block. Center time was an additional 60 minutes beyond the literacy block that also included literacy experiences.

In an interview, I asked Mrs. Lucas to identify components she felt were most effective, and what aspects of these areas of her program contributed most to the children's growth in language and literacy. The conversation went as follows:

Researcher: What area of your day do you feel is critical to the children's growth in literacy?"

Mrs. Lucas: I think if I had to pick one it would be Writer's Workshop. During writing they get to use so much. They think of their own story, then they draw their story and depending on the child and the time of year they add words to their story. Oh, and all this time they are talking to each other so they use their oral language abilities.

Researcher: Are there any other parts of the day you feel are critical?"

Mrs. Lucas: I feel they are all important but I think centers are very important for our kids.

Researcher: What do you mean for our kids?

Mrs. Lucas: Our kids, not all, but most of our kids have trouble explaining what they are doing and they have trouble having a conversation. So centers are a time I can move from center to center playing with them and helping them improve their sentences. I also try to have conversations with them so we can work on that (Sept. 8, 2012).

As shown in Table 4.1, the two components that received the most time were the components Mrs. Lucas identified as the most critical to the literacy learning of her students, which were Writer's Workshop and Center Time. Each of these components is described briefly below.

**Read Aloud.** Mrs. Lucas read aloud to her students one or two times a day. During this time she used a variety of texts including fiction, poetry, riddles, informational text and plays. Every day she had a conversation with the students about the texts she read to them. Once a week she asked the whole group of students a question and she wrote down their responses in a notebook that she kept documenting the children's oral language and literacy strategies. Her questions pushed the students' thinking.

For example, after reading The Gingerbread Boy (1983), this exchange occurred:

Mrs. Lucas: How else could the Gingerbread Boy get across the river?

JaNya: He could swim.

Mrs. Lucas: He could swim but he might get soggy.

Deonte: On a floating log.

Mrs. Lucas: If he was on a floating log he would not get soggy.

She also read The Three Little Pigs (2001) and The Gingerbread Baby (2003) during that week. Similarly, as a part of those conversations about those books she asked questions like, “Which character was smarter: the fox in The Gingerbread Boy, or the wolf in The Three Little Pigs?” and “What could have happened to the Gingerbread Baby if they had not built the house for him?”

**Shared Reading.** During shared reading, Mrs. Lucas integrated her social studies and science content whenever possible. Later in the day, she had a Social Science time. The reading series her school adopted was Rigby. The Rigby series included Big Books as part of their Shared Reading. She also had access to a vast supply of Big Books in her school's Literacy Lab.

During the following example of a Shared Reading experience, Mrs. Lucas simultaneously built background knowledge, cleared up misconceptions, and worked on comprehension strategies. At times, all the students began to talk and she just let them talk. When this occurred, their responses were listed separately.

Mrs. Lucas: Look at the title of this book. BaaBooom! (Rigby, 2000)

Students: BaaBooom!

Mrs. Lucas: BaaBooom! Wonder what this story is going to be about?

JaNya: Something blowing up?

Mrs. Lucas: Like something blows up. What do you think might blow up in this book?

Malik: The balloon it might push. (Raises both hands as he says push)

Keith: He (points to bull) looks heavy like he could bust that balloon with the little short things on his head.

Mrs. Lucas: These (points to horns) those are called horns.

Keith: A bull could bump into the balloon with those things.

Mrs. Lucas: Those things are called horns.

Malik: Miss Hailey, why you didn't call that a cow? (The students call Mrs. Lucas by her first name.)

Mrs. Lucas: Well, it is a cow but it is a male cow and it is called a bull.

Jamal: It's a cow that gives lots of milk.

Mrs. Lucas: Oh no, no, no, no. (Smiling) You don't milk this cow and get milk. We don't get milk from bulls. Let me tell you what my brain just told me. Listen. You know what my brain told me while Keith was talking about the bull's horns. He was telling me about the bull and the balloon popping. He was saying those things, horns, could probably pop that balloon. And do you know what my brain said? It said, Hailey, he knows a lot about bulls. Remember I told you if your brain knows a lot about something it helps you understand the story. Remember that?

Students: Yes Ma'am

Mrs. Lucas: Well, my brain tells me you know a lot about bulls because you knew his horns were sharp and could pop a balloon. Didn't you tell me your Daddy had a bull?

Jadon: Are some cows black?

Mrs. Lucas: Yes, baby, some cows are black and some are black and white. Some cows are brown. Cows are different colors.

Jadon: They look like zebras.

Mrs. Lucas: They are not striped. Zebras have black and white stripes. Cows are black and white but not striped like a zebra.

Mrs. Lucas: (Begins reading, sometimes pointing to the words and sometimes sliding her pointer under the words as she reads.) Clucky-Cluck found a balloon. She blew and blew and it grew and grew until..."

Mrs. Lucas pauses.

Students: It pops.

Students: The chicken popped it.

Mrs. Lucas: She blew and blew and it grew and grew until... (turn page) it was just the right size. I think some people thought it was going to pop. When we read we need to think about what is going to happen. We predict what we think will happen and keep reading to see if our prediction was right.

Table 4.2: Instructional Examples

	Built Background Knowledge	Cleared Up Misconceptions	Comprehension Strategies
	"These (points to horns) those are called horns."	"You don't milk this cow and get milk. We don't get milk from bulls."	"Wonder what this story is going to be about?"
	"Those things are called horns."	They are not striped. Zebras have black and white stripes. Cows are black and white but not striped like a zebra."	"What do you think might blow up in this book?"
	"Well, it is a cow but it is a male cow and it is called a bull."		"When we read we need to think about what is going to happen. We predict what we think will happen and keep reading to see if our prediction was right."
	"Yes, baby, some cows are black and some are black and white. Some cows are brown. Cows are different colors."		

Table 4.2 shows Mrs. Lucas building background knowledge, clearing up misconceptions, and using comprehension strategies to comprehend a story all within a discussion of a story she read to her students. Mrs. Lucas and the students continued reading the story making predictions throughout the lesson.

**Small Group Instruction.** Mrs. Lucas' class had small group instruction in reading and in writing. At the beginning of the year, Mrs. Lucas read to them, showed them a picture and engaged them in conversation, or she helped them acquire the strategies they needed to read written text. The small groups ranged from oracy groups,

which helped children increase their oral language, to guided reading groups, which help children learn how to read print.

Guided writing groups also consisted of three to five children. During Independent Writing, Mrs. Lucas sat with her guided writing group; she had her focus planned, and used their current writing to teach the focus. She often used familiar texts and writing she generated to show the children how writers write.

The following sample of a guided writing group demonstrates how Mrs. Lucas helped the children add details to the drawings of their stories. The students she met with were four of the seven students in the focal group for this study. She met with the students at their table. Mrs. Lucas felt it was important to sit with the students at their tables instead of calling them to sit at separate table away from their tablemates. She felt these types of moves interrupted their thinking. She found it to be more effective if she moved from table to table conducting small groups or one-on-one conferencing. In the following example, she noticed that no one had started writing their stories yet and so this conversation occurred.



Figure 4.1: Small Writing Group

Mrs. Lucas: What are you writing about NarAsia?

NarAsia: I'm thinking.

Mrs. Lucas: What's your story about Malik?

Malik: Thinking.

Mrs. Lucas: OK, Jadon, what are you doing

Jadon: I's thinking

Mrs. Lucas: You're all doing the right thing! You need to think first and decide what your story will be about. (NarAsia started to write her name in the middle of the page.) Baby, put your name up here, that way you've got a lot of room to draw your story.

Deonte: Miss Hailey, I don't know fall.

Mrs. Lucas: (In her mini lesson, Mrs. Lucas had written a story about signs of fall that she had seen over the weekend.) That's ok, you can write about whatever you want. What did you do this weekend?

Deonte: Ride my bike

Mrs. Lucas: That would be a great story. See, I wasn't there so I need you to tell me all about it. Get your crayons and think about what was outside while you were riding your bike. Everybody, listen to this. Malik's story is about riding his bike. In a story you want to add details. Details are things you saw, the color they were, anything that will help the person looking at your story really know what

was happening. So, were you riding your bike on cement, on dirt, were you on the grass? Think, what do you remember?"

Deonte: Dirt

Mrs. Lucas: You rode your bike on dirt. What color was the dirt? Draw that dirt that you were riding your bike on.

NarAsia: Me and my daddy.

Mrs. Lucas: What about you and your daddy? What did you do?

NarAsia: We at the park.

Mrs. Lucas: All right, draw that. I can't wait to see what you and daddy played on at the park. I can't wait to see your details. I wonder if you went down the slide or swung on the swings.

Deonte: Here's my dog.

Mrs. Lucas: You got a dog? You know how I love dogs. Is it a big dog or a little dog?

Deonte: Little.

Mrs. Lucas: Well, you better put him in your story. Oh, I can't wait to see your dog! (Deonte draws his dog) Tell me your story. One day I..."

Deonte: I rode my bike.

Mrs. Lucas: You rode your bike on brown dirt. Tell me about your dog.

Deonte: I rode my bike on dirt. Alpo ran.

Mrs. Lucas: Great details! I can see you riding your bike on that brown dirt. It makes me smile to think about your little dog Alpo running while you rode you bike (October 22, 2011).

Mrs. Lucas reminded all four students to add details and moved on to confer with other students.

**Independent Reading.** The students in Mrs. Lucas' class spent about 30 minutes a day browsing books. During this time, they read a Big Book, teacher-made charts containing group songs, or poems she and the children often revisited, and songs or books from the room or from the library. Sometimes, students read by themselves and sometimes they read with a partner. Mrs. Lucas encouraged them to talk with a friend about their book and to use the pictures to help them understand the story. One day in a mini lesson before she was going to send them off to Independent Reading, she showed the students the cover of the book Kakadu Jack (Rigby, 2007).

First, Mrs. Lucas showed the cover of Kakadu Jack,

Mrs. Lucas: Today we are going to look at the pictures in this book, Kakadu Jack. I am not going to read the words. This is what I want you to do. I want you to look at the pictures and think about what is happening in the pictures because the pictures are going to tell you a story.

She opened the book and let them talk. As she got ready to turn the page she said, "Let's see what happens next and then..." After the students talked for a while she said, "I can hear all that noise that's happening on that page in my brain. Can you hear it in your brain?" All the students began to talk:

JaNya: The bird is loud.

Keith: I hear the people laughing.

Deonte: That man is yelling. Give me back my food.

JaNya: The bird is bad.

After letting them talk for three or four minutes, Mrs. Lucas told them:

Mrs. Lucas: Now you are going to see how the story ends. Are you ready?

(She turns the page.) Now that you've looked at all the pictures tell me what you think was happening.

The children responded:

NarAsia: Everybody was outside buying stuff.

Keith: The bird was everywhere and then everything came down.

Deonta: People were running around.

Mrs. Lucas concluded:

Mrs. Lucas: Do you see how when you take a book down and look at the pictures, every detail, it tells you a story? That's what I want you to do today. Work together. Everybody get a partner.

At the end of Independent Reading, Mrs. Lucas had a student share. On this day, a student shared how he worked with Mrs. Lucas to figure out an unknown word.

Keith: I didn't know this word (points to *likes* as he uses the document camera to show his classmates the sentence he is trying to read).

Mrs. Lucas: So what did you do?

Keith: I sound *L*. I looked at the *L*.

Mrs. Lucas: He looked at the *L* and couldn't figure it out. He looked at the picture and still couldn't figure it out. So tell them what we did.

Keith: I jumped over the word.

Mrs. Lucas: Yes, we jumped over, or skipped over, the word and went to the next word. When we got to the end of that sentence he went back to figure out what that word was, what it could be, what would make sense. This is what he did. He \_\_\_\_ to play."

Keith: He likes to play.

Mrs. Lucas: So when you are reading, and you can't figure out a word and the picture does not help, jump over the word and read to the end of the sentence then go back and think about what would make sense (January 10, 2012).

**Writer's Workshop.** Mrs. Lucas identified Writer's Workshop as critical to the literacy growth of her students. She began with a mini lesson where she drew her story as she told it.

Mrs. Lucas: I'm going to show you what happens inside my head when I go to write a story because my brain is thinking and when you think you get good ideas. Now, I was thinking on the way to work what I was going to write about today. I know y'all want to hear a good story because everyone loves good stories. So my story started yesterday at my house. So, the setting is my house. The characters, oh there were so many characters, there were like twenty characters in my story because it was my whole family. So here we are (she begins to draw) here's my house.

She continued drawing and telling her story talking about her husband grilling on the deck of her house.

Malik: I have a connection.

Mrs. Lucas: You do? What is your connection?

Malik: Me and my daddy grillin'.

Mrs. Lucas: Did that connection help you understand my story?

Malik: (Nods head.) Smells good when we grillin'.

Mrs. Lucas: Did you think about the smell? That's how it smelled in my story!

The story continued with conversational interactions between the students and the teacher.

After the story was over they decided on a sentence to write about her story.

Mrs. Lucas: Now, we are going to use our sounds to write words. We need to come up with a sentence that tells about this story. A student raised his hand and she called on him. He just looked at her drawing. She waited and then said, 'Think about it. Let your brain work.' She called on another student. He retold the whole story.

Mrs. Lucas: Wow, you retold the entire story. Let's think of a sentence that makes it shorter—a sentence that will tell about the whole story.

Deonta: Everybody came to your house."

Jamal: Everybody ate.

JaNya: There was a cook out.

Mrs. Lucas: Thinking about those sentences, can we say we had a cookout?

She counted the words on her fingers. Keith was mouthing the four words in the sentence as he counted the words on his fingers. He did this three times. Mrs. Lucas noticed and smiled. Together, the class wrote the sentence with Mrs. Lucas, she emphasized when a capital was needed and why, what they did when they came to the

end of the line if it is not the end of the sentence and why, and what they did as they listened for the sounds they heard in the words they wanted to write. This instructional component occurred daily in Mrs. Lucas' classroom.



Figure 4.2: Drawing/Writing Lesson

Later in the year, she added labels to her drawings and then she added sentences to her drawing. The length of time of this engagement depended on her students.

Generally, her mini lessons involved the process writers go through as they construct a story. She included the thinking required, the story elements most stories included, and the word work necessary to write words that tell the story.

**Independent Writing.** After Mrs. Lucas modeled writing her story, the students wrote their stories. During this time, she held individual conferences and occasionally guided writing groups. Students spent time thinking before they began drawing their story. Some student's stories were complete when their drawing was completed, some students labeled their story and some wrote a sentence about their story. As the students began their writing, she approached a group of students to conduct a guided writing group.

During one of our interviews, she talked about knowing her students as people and as learners. She said, "The more I know about my kids, the easier it is to figure out what I need to do. The best way I know of to get to know them is when I work or talk with them one on one. I love to listen to their thinking. It makes me smile!"

**Centers.** Mrs. Lucas identified Centers as critical to the literacy growth of her students. Students in Mrs. Lucas' class spent an hour a day in centers such as: housekeeping, blocks, puzzles, writing, reading, art, sand and water, music, dramatic play, and story retelling. Mrs. Lucas' school had a center room that was shared with the other kindergarten teacher and the Child Development teachers. The teachers changed the centers every four to six weeks, aligning the centers with their science or social studies content. For example, during the transportation unit, the teacher set up centers such as: chairs set up as a bus or airplane with headphones used for the pilot, a travel agency with brochures and maps, a passport center with cameras and stamps to use when someone was traveling. They also added airplanes, tractors, etc. to the block center.

During centers, students had time and opportunities to engage in conversation with each other and with Mrs. Lucas. At the beginning of the year, Mrs. Lucas spent the entire hour in the centers with the students. During this time she joined their play and refrained from asking questions such as "What are you doing?" or "Who are you pretending to be?" which are typical teacher questions. Instead, she actively engaged in their pretend play, taking on the role of another peer in their group. For example, one day, during the farm unit, Mrs. Lucas entered the block center where several of the focal students for the study were playing. They were playing with a barn and setting up a fence.

Mrs. Lucas: Hey, my name is Farmer Joe. One of my cows got loose and I can't find it.

Malik: I don't see your cow.

Jadon: Don't see him.

Mrs. Lucas: You didn't see my cow. Can I help you put up your fence?  
(Students nodded their heads and they started putting up the fence.)  
I sure hope my cow comes back because he is my favorite cow!

Malik: This farm has a horse.

Mrs. Lucas: My farm doesn't have a horse but I wish it did. I just planted some okra. I hope it rains tonight so my okra will grow. What did you farmers plant? The students look at each other and laughed.

Malik: We are not farmers.

Mrs. Lucas: Pretend like you are so we can play.

Jadon: I planted corn.

Mrs. Lucas: Well Farmer Jadon, I hope it rains so your corn and my okra will grow (December 12, 2011)

They continued to play for about five more minutes. Mrs. Lucas expanded their sentences as she interacted with them in their play scenario encouraging pretend talk. When she felt the majority of her students were better able to use oral language to interact with her and their peers, she reduced the time she spent entering their play in centers to 30 minutes and spent the other 30 minutes with small groups.

## Research Question 2

*What is the nature of this kindergarten teacher's decision-making process related to instructional decisions for low performing children in her classroom?* Mrs. Lucas made her decisions on what the children need based on her observations, her interactions with the students, and her knowledge of the reading and writing process. After deciding what she needed to focus on, she would consider her content standards, ELA standards, and then choose a book that would help her teach her focus.

**Observations.** I wanted to delve into Mrs. Lucas' thought process as she made instructional decisions during planning. She made instructional decisions based on her observations of the students.

Researcher: When planning, what do you use to make your instructional decisions?

Mrs. Lucas: Honestly, I depend on my observations from the past week. I know who needs to work on oral language, who needs to work on their alphabet, on sounds, on sense of story, on figuring out words so I just pay attention to those things during the week. It helps me plan.

Researcher: Do you use any formal assessments?

Mrs. Lucas: Probably not as much as I should. Our monthly writing prompts give me a lot of information but I pretty much already know what it shows me from our writing time together. When I work with them. Also, I know what they need to be able to do as they are

learning to read and this helps me decide what to focus on in Shared Reading. Like understanding story and one to one.

**Interactions with students.** Mrs. Lucas also based her instructional decisions on information she gleaned from the interactions she had with the students. As she talked with them, she listened to their sentence structure, their content knowledge, and their level of literacy knowledge. This information helped her make instructional decisions.

Mrs. Lucas: Wow, you retold the entire story. Let's think of a sentence that makes it shorter—a sentence that will tell about the whole story.

Deonta: Everybody came to your house.

Jamal: Everybody ate.

JaNya: There was a cook out.

Mrs. Lucas: Thinking about those sentences, can we say we had a cookout?

Researcher: What made you decide to tell them they needed to think of a sentence that told about the whole story?

Mrs. Lucas: I did hesitate because I was trying to figure out, in my head, what to do. That student is doing great. He is already writing sentences so I thought I should encourage him to write the whole story. That's what he will have to do in first grade but then I was worried about my kids who are not there yet. I just want them to practice writing one sentence that matches the pictures and use their sounds. I decided to go with what would help the kids who are lower than him. When they went to write I met with that student and told him it is great that he can retell the whole story and if he wanted to

write the whole story I would be so excited. I was afraid I would confuse and lose their attention if we tried to write the whole story.

**Knowledge of Reading and Writing Process.** In one key event, after Mrs. Lucas completed a mini-lesson on drawing your story and using words to write your story, she noticed that some students tried to write a sentence about their story, too. But they were writing words all over their drawing on the blank paper she had given them that day. So she introduced paper that would accommodate what she saw them doing and guided them so they could also have a place to write their sentences.

During another stimulated recall interview, she commented that when making an on-the-spot decision she found herself thinking about herself as a little girl. As a child, it bothered her when adults did not take time to explain why she could or couldn't do something, so as a teacher she always tried to explain and take the time to listen to her kids and try to understand what they were telling her.

### **Research Question 3**

*In what ways did the instructional moves offered by this kindergarten teacher support children's language and literacy learning?* I defined instructional moves as engagements within the components of Mrs. Lucas' literacy block. The instructional moves were opportunities Mrs. Lucas provided for students to think and articulate their thoughts. Some of the instructional moves Mrs. Lucas used were:

- Turn and Talk
- Talk into the Air
- Create a story based on a picture or a series of pictures
- And Then... Retell a story

**Turn and Talk.** Students in this class turned and talked to each other several times during the day. During Read Aloud and during Shared Reading, they were asked what they were thinking. They then turned to their partner and talked about their thinking. After reading a Big Book about different types of vehicles, Mrs. Lucas asked the students to turn and talk to their partner about their favorite mode of transportation, their favorite vehicle. She asked them to talk about why that was their favorite mode of transportation.

**Talk into the Air.** Mrs. Lucas often asked a question and then just let the kids talk as she listened. She encouraged them to say whatever they were thinking. As she heard comments that supported her focus, she repeated them, or asked the student to repeat what they said so others could hear the comment that was made. Kindergarten children often just wanted to voice their thoughts so the need to have a specific person to talk to was not necessary. Mrs. Lucas used this strategy when the students were asked to look at the pictures in Kakadu Jack and talk about what was happening.

**Creating a story based on a picture, a series of pictures, or a math problem.** Mrs. Lucas used this instructional move throughout the day. One day they were looking at three pictures. The first picture showed a young girl and a woman standing on a baseball field. The second picture showed a girl holding a baseball bat about to hit the ball that was sitting on a tee. The third picture showed the young girl running to first base. Mrs. Lucas asked the students to work with their partner and make up a story about the beginning of the story, pointing to the first picture, the middle of the story, pointing to the second picture, and the end of the story, pointing to the third picture. She reminded them that they were working on characters and what characters say. She asked them to

include talking between the characters. Then Mrs. Lucas gave the children the opportunity to share their stories.

Mrs. Lucas also used this instructional move to encourage the students to use their words, their ability to tell stories, and to talk about mathematical concepts such as addition and subtraction. One day, the morning message included a picture of a baby duckling that was separated from its family (See figure 4.3 below) and Mrs. Lucas asked the students to create a story based on the picture.

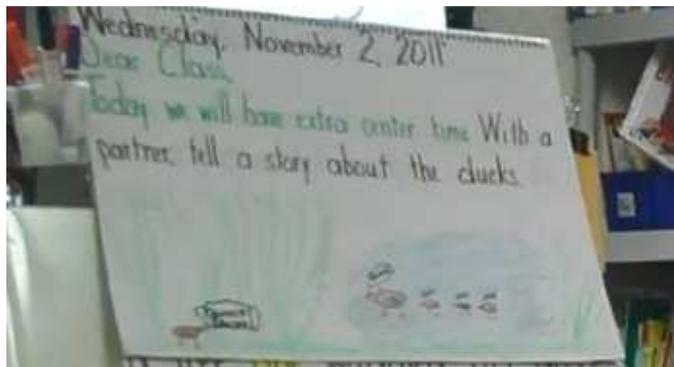


Figure 4.3: Morning Message

**And Then... Retelling a story** - Mrs. Lucas read about this instructional move in the article, "Uniquely Preschool" (Bodrova & Leong, 2005), which the authors called *And Then....* Once she read about this instructional move, Mrs. Lucas used it regularly in her classroom. This instructional move occurred after she read a story to her students. Mrs. Lucas and her students sat in a circle to retell the story. Mrs. Lucas used a talking stick to denote who should be talking. The person holding the talking stick looked at the picture on the first page of the story Mrs. Lucas had just read. The student began to retell the story. When she finished with her part she passed the talking stick to the person

beside her and said, “And then...” At this point, Mrs. Lucas turned the page and the next student continued the story retelling using the picture to support the oral retelling.

In summary, these four instructional moves required different types of talk from the students. Turn and Talk often required the students to talk about their thinking with a partner. During these conversations, they had to justify their thinking. Talk into the Air provided the students with the opportunity to share their thinking as the thoughts came to them, which helped them use new ideas and match these ideas with oral language phrases and new vocabulary. Mrs. Lucas used this when she asked the students to interact with a text. Mrs. Lucas read and then paused letting them express the thoughts that were occurring inside their heads. The students also had the opportunity to use language to talk as they worked with a partner to create a story based on a picture or a series of pictures. Talk into the Air was used during Literacy instruction and during math instruction. The And Then ... instructional move gave the students the opportunity to talk as they retold a story Mrs. Lucas read to them. These were the main instructional moves Mrs. Lucas used throughout the year. The students were very comfortable with these instructional moves and were therefore able to put their focus on their oral language, their thoughts, and their ideas, trying out new language and vocabulary.

#### **Research Question 4**

*What patterns of verbal interactions offered by this kindergarten teacher scaffold low performing children's oral language and literacy development?* Verbal interactions in a previous study conducted by Hamre & Pianta (2007) discussed three distinct interactional domains that build language as well as motivate children to expand their language: emotional, instructional and organizational. The majority of verbal interactions

between Mrs. Lucas and her students could be coded as instructional and emotional.

Care seemed to be an underlying theme in most of her work with the students. One of the focal students told a story she created based on a series of three pictures. This interaction could be coded as instructional but care/emotion was an underlying theme.

NarAsia: Her and Jada were playing ball and McKinley they were playing ball. That's all.

Mrs. Lucas: You named your characters today, NarAsia. I am so proud of you for giving them names. Our stories are more interesting when the characters have names. Remember how we were talking about making our characters talk? Let's think of something Jada might say about playing ball.

During Shared Reading one day, the students had trouble settling down. Mrs. Lucas said, "Remember how we talked about numbers having places and how the place they are in is very important? Look under yourself, make sure you are in your place, your hands are in your lap, and your eyes are watching me." Her interaction addressed an organizational issue yet still contained a positive, supportive tone.

After an in-depth analysis of the verbal interactions between Mrs. Lucas and her students, the artfulness of her language emerged. I defined Artfulness of Language as the different functions, or purposes that guide Mrs. Lucas' language, the quality of the interactions she purposefully constructs for the students, and how she uses language to build self-worth, and create self-confident, independent learners.

## Artfulness of Language

Mrs. Lucas spent a large portion of her day engaging her students in higher order thinking and providing feedback to them. All of her interactions with the students had an emotional overtone. I felt I needed to go deeper and unpack the artfulness of her language. She simultaneously:

- Accepted the student where she was
- Noticed and named what the student could do
- Situated what the student could do in the context of the literacy event (e.g. elements of story)
- Built a sense of agency
- Promoted risk taking
- Provided a supportive environment
- Held high expectations
- Provided a scaffold to support students' using more complex sentence structures
- Used playfulness with language
- Valued African American Vernacular English
- Used rich instructional language with all students

For example, the artfulness of Mrs. Lucas' language was evident in the following interaction where NyAsia, told a story based on three pictures.

NarAsia: Her and Jada were playing ball and McKinley they were playing ball. That's all.

Mrs. Lucas: You named your characters today, NarAsia. I am so proud of you for giving them names. Our stories are more interesting when the

characters have names. Remember how we were talking about making our characters talk? Let's think of something Jada might say about playing ball.

Analyzing the above interaction between Mrs. Lucas and NarAsia I saw the artfulness of her language, as I peeled back the layers of their instructional conversation. When Mrs. Lucas said to Nar Asia, you named your characters today, she noticed and named what NarAsia had done. Johnston (2004) states that the importance of noticing and naming is in helping children learn what is significant. Mrs. Lucas, through her language, let Nar Asia know that naming your characters in a story was significant in the world of literacy.

Mrs. Lucas accepted where NarAsia was in her ability to create a story based on pictures. She situated NarAsia's ability to name her characters in the larger literacy context of storytelling when she said, "Our stories are more interesting when the characters have names." She was specific when she told NarAsia she was proud of her. Mrs. Lucas told her what she did that made her proud - naming her characters. This specific praise helped NarAsia develop a sense of agency. A sense of agency, according to Johnston (2004), is fundamental to our well-being. Students need to feel like they can be successful. Mrs. Lucas asked the students to name their characters and have them talk in their story. NarAsia is given a sense of agency, a sense that she was successful in naming the characters as she was asked to do.

Mrs. Lucas' artfulness did not stop there. She also had high expectations for NarAsia within a very supportive environment. This support encouraged NarAsia to take risks in her learning. When Mrs. Lucas said, "Remember how we were talking about

making our characters talk? Let's think of something Jada might say about playing ball,” she was saying to Nar Asia you named your character—now let's go further, with my help, let's think of something Jada might say.

The artfulness of Mrs. Lucas' language seen above was evident in the majority of her interactions with her students. This next example shows additional strategies that contribute to Mrs. Lucas' artfulness in helping children develop more complex language. This segment was from a Shared Reading time in which Mrs. Lucas asked the students a question to encourage thinking. She also simultaneously worked on using complete sentence structures during these discussions.

Mrs. Lucas: I'm going to read you a book today and it's called I Wish I Had A Monster (Rigby, 2000). Why would it not be good to have a monster?

JyNya: He could clean you out of the house.

NarAsia: Eat you.

Mrs. Lucas: NarAsia, what might eat you?

NarAsia: Monster

Mrs. Lucas: So, a monster might eat you?

Keith: It could tear up de flowers.

Mrs. Lucas: It could tear up the flowers around the house.

Jadon: It could smash up the car.

Mrs. Lucas: If it's a big monster it could smash up your car. Jamel, why do you think it would be bad to have a monster?

Jamal: It could tear up.

Mrs. Lucas: Tear up what, baby?

Jamal: Your sink

Mrs. Lucas: It sure could tear up your sink.

Malik: The monster. I'll eat you.

Mrs. Lucas: Look at the cover of our book. Look at this little boy's face. Does he look like he is worried about any of that?

Students: No

Keith: Maybe they had a good time ride and dem never be scardy.

Mrs. Lucas: Keith, I love how you inferred by looking at the boy's face. You inferred he wasn't scared because he was smiling. Kiss your brain—that was some good thinking.

Throughout this conversation, Mrs. Lucas expanded her students' utterances into more complex sentences, provided a scaffold for them toward more academic language. When NarAsia said, "eat you." Mrs. Lucas expanded the phrase into the following simple sentence: So, a monster might eat you. When Keith said a simple sentence, "It could tear up de flowers." Mrs. Lucas expanded it to a simple sentence with a prepositional phrase, "It could tear up the flowers around the house." Wherever the children were in their development of sentence structure, she expanded the sentence to incorporate additional complexity. When Keith used African American Vernacular English she accepted and valued his home language. She exposed him to rich instructional language instead of "correcting" his sentences. Mrs. Lucas acted on the principle that a person's self-worth and identity is directly related to having their home

language accepted and valued. This belief helped her build a caring relationship with her students.

Mrs. Lucas praised Keith's ability to look at a picture and infer. Her praise was specific when she named exactly what he did well. Her specific praise also helped him build a sense of agency. Keith began to feel successful in his ability to infer. He began to develop confidence in his literate abilities. When Mrs. Lucas said, "Kiss your brain," Keith grins. She demonstrated playfulness with language, which the children understand in the context of use. They sing a song called Kiss Your Brain by Dr. Jean, so "kiss your brain" became a playful phrase that Mrs. Lucas used when she was excited about what the students had done. Within this brief interaction, Mrs. Lucas accomplished many things.

Table 4.3: Instructional Examples 2

Provided a scaffold to support students' using more complex sentence structures	Valued African American Vernacular English	Noticed and Named What The Student Could Do	Built A Sense of Agency	Used Playfulness of Language
Student: "Eat you" Teacher: "So, a monster might eat you."	Student: "It could tear up de flowers." Teacher: "It could tear up the flowers around the house."	Teacher: Keith, I love how you inferred by looking at the boy's face. You inferred he wasn't scared because he was smiling.	Student: Maybe they had a good time ride and dem never be scardy. Teacher: Keith, I love how you inferred by looking at the boy's face. You inferred he wasn't scared because he was smiling.	Teacher: "Kiss your brain - that was some good thinking."
Student: "It could tear up de flowers." Teacher: "It could tear up the flowers around	Student: Maybe they had a good time ride and dem never be scardy.			

the house."				
Student: "It could tear up." Teacher: "Tear up what, baby." Student: "your sink" Teacher: "It sure could tear up your sink."				

As seen in Table 4.3, Mrs. Lucas' use of language is an art. Within a brief period of time she was able to use language for a variety of authentic functions. She did this in a conversational way. In this study, I found the majority of her interactions with the students used language for a variety of functions.

The components Mrs. Lucas used during the day were important, the instructional moves she used within those components were important, and her decision-making process was important to her literacy instruction. The artfulness of her language was interwoven throughout her language and literacy program, within all aspects of her day, as she sought to guide their literacy and language development. Through the artfulness of her language she was able to accomplish growth with students who had not yet reached the level of oral language abilities that their peers had reached.

### **Characteristics of the Day**

Originally, I had asked four questions but in analyzing my data I realized there was another category that arose. These were broader than the instructional components and broader than the instructional moves, yet just as important. These were behaviors, ways of instructing, that made it possible for Mrs. Lucas to facilitate learning across the day. The category characteristics of the day consisted of the subcategories of narrative

production, connections across curriculum, data driven instruction, and joint

conversations: thinking and acting together, key literacy elements, and opportunity to talk.

Table 4.4 - Definition of Subcategories under Characteristics of Day

Characteristics of Day
A) <i>Narrative Production</i> is when students create their own stories which could be based on pictures or when students retell a story. This could be done orally, through drawings, or through written text.
b) <i>Connections Across Curriculum</i> are when the teacher purposefully shows the students that what they are learning during one part of the day is connected to other parts of the day.
c) <i>Data -Driven Instruction</i> is using informal assessments, formal assessments and knowledge of students to make instructional decisions.
d) <i>Joint Conversations: Thinking and Acting Together</i> is when the teacher instructs in a way that makes students feel like they are learning together, like their input is a vital part of the learning process.
e) <i>Focus on Key Literacy Behaviors</i> is when teachers know and understand the literacy behaviors their students are ready for and integrate them throughout the day.
f) <i>Opportunity to Talk</i> is when the teacher purposively plans times for her students to engage in productive talk and capitalizes on those unplanned opportunities that present themselves during a lesson.

These subcategories were found throughout Mrs. Lucas' day. The table below shows the ways these subcategories were implemented within each of her literacy components, and they are further discussed below.

Table 4.5 Characteristics of Day - (Shared Reading -SR, Writer's Workshop - WW, Small Group - SG, Read Aloud - RA, Reading Conference - RC, Centers - C)

<p>Narrative Production</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a story using a picture, a series of pictures, or props (SR, C, SG, RA, RC)</li> <li>• And Then Engagement (SR, SG, RA, RC)</li> <li>• Draw a story (C, WW)</li> </ul>
<p>Connections Across Curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informational Text (SR, SG, RA, WW, RC, C)</li> <li>• Write about content areas (WW, C)</li> <li>• Using Math content to create a story (SR, WW, SG)</li> </ul>
<p>Key Literacy Elements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story Elements (SR, WW, RA, RC, SG, C)</li> <li>• One to One (SR, WW, SG, RC, C)</li> <li>• Conventions (SR, WW, SG, RC, C)</li> <li>• Letter/Sound Relationship (SR, WW, SG, RC, C)</li> <li>• Distinguish between letter, word, and sentence (SR, WW, SG, C, RC)</li> <li>• Comprehension Strategies (SR, WW, SG, C, RC, RA)</li> </ul>
<p>Joint Conversations: Thinking and Acting Together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Storytelling (SR, WW, RA, SG, C, RC)</li> <li>• Story Discussions (SR, WW, RA, SG, RC, C)</li> <li>• Verbal Interactions (SR, WW, RA, SG, RC, C)</li> </ul>
<p>Data Driven Instruction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal Assessments (SR, WW, SG, RC)</li> <li>• Informal Assessment (SR, WW, SG, RA, RC, C)</li> </ul>

#### Opportunity to Talk

- Turn and Talk (SR, WW, SG, RC, RA)
- Talk into the Air (SR, WW, SG, RA)
- And Then... (SR, RA, WW, RC, SG)
- Create stories using pictures, a series of pictures, or props (SR, WW, SG, RC, C)

### **Narrative Production**

Throughout the year, Mrs. Lucas devoted a large portion of her instructional time to helping her kindergartners develop a concept of story. She did this by having them work with a partner to create their own stories based on a picture, by having them retell a story they heard, and by listening to her model her thinking as she told and drew her stories in Writer's Workshop. Whenever they were telling or retelling stories, Mrs. Lucas used certain words, setting, characters, details, problem, and solution, so they could learn the literary terms while developing an understanding of how stories work.

### **Connections Across the Curriculum**

During Shared Reading, Mrs. Lucas would often use informational texts that would address her state standards in Science and Social Studies. Her stories during her writing mini lessons would often include aspects of the content material they were covering. When studying about the weather, her stories included clouds or what her family did because of the weather. Mrs. Lucas also used literacy during other parts of the day. Her students created stories during math instruction, they wrote or drew about their observations in Science, and they used their oral language to have discussions about what they were learning throughout the day.

### **Key Literacy Elements**

Literacy elements occurred throughout the day in all areas of the day. For example, one literacy concept, one-to-one, was demonstrated throughout the entire day. In Mrs. Lucas' class, she demonstrated and encouraged the use of one-to-one matching. This was seen in centers as they lined up cars and counted them, in writing as they helped her create a sentence to write about her story and they held up a finger every time she said a word as she repeated the sentence they had created together, and during Shared Reading when she emphasized moving her pointer every time she said a new word.

### **Joint Conversations: Thinking and Acting Together**

Mrs. Lucas interacted with her students as fellow learners. When conferencing with them about their writing she gave them authentic feedback as they conversed about their story. During Shared Reading, they talked about books, during science, while dropping objects in a bowl of water they talked about objects that sink and objects that float, and while putting a puzzle together of a fire truck they talked about community helpers. In these interactions, Mrs. Lucas sought to increase their knowledge and expand their sentences as they engaged in conversations.

### **Data Driven Instruction**

Mrs. Lucas used formal and informal assessments to guide instruction. As stated in an interview, she relied more heavily on informal assessments. She often told her students what she noticed that led her to a certain instructional decision. While writing one day, she noticed several of her students were trying to write sentences about the stories they had drawn. Up to this point, they had been drawing on unlined blank paper. They were writing their words all over the paper. The next day during her mini lesson,

she told them what she had noticed and introduced them to paper that had a line at the bottom for them to write their sentence.

### **Opportunity to Talk**

This was coded as a subcategory but is more of a thread that ran through all aspects of Mrs. Lucas' day. Talking to a child who could not think of what to write about one day, she said, "James, you told me some very exciting news this morning at breakfast. Remember, we were sitting at the table and you told me something exciting that was happening at your house." Talking was used as an instructional tool in the classroom and outside of the classroom. Students were encouraged to share their thinking with their peers and with Mrs. Lucas. Talking was a way Mrs. Lucas could informally assess their oral language development, their literacy understandings, their mathematical understandings, their level of confidence in trying a difficult task, and their overall feelings about learning. These subcategories emerged as vital aspects of Mrs. Lucas' day as a Kindergarten teacher. These subcategories were evident throughout her day.

### **Student Impact**

The purpose of Mrs. Lucas' instruction was to transform her students' language: to help them acquire foundational language structures, to develop new concepts and vocabulary within rich literacy and language contexts, and to participate in conversations with their peers and other experienced language users. Mrs. Lucas' students language progressed in many ways, as can be illustrated by examples from their beginning and ending Oral Language Acquisition Inventory (Gentile 2011) story retells.

Table 4.6 Student Language used to retell Stories

	Student Utterances/Sentences	Language Progression
Beginning of the Year	<p>Talking Bunny Horse Girl</p> <p>His face Pony Popcorn Kick feet Girl mad Bird and bunny</p> <p>Dey had fun. He was brown. Her look at the horse. The girl and Popcorn laughed.</p>	<p>Single Words used to label pictures</p> <p>Phrases used to label or used to describe</p> <p>Simple sentences used to describe or retell a story.</p>
End of the year	<p>He is so glad. He hold the bike. When Sally had waved at Mike. Her was a good rider. Mike think her might fall.</p> <p>Hi, can I ride your bike?</p> <p>Mike has a new bike for his birthday. He has a bike with red handlebars and a bell.</p> <p>He helped her get on the bike. Sally went to ride and he said, "Let me hold the bike." Sally saw Mike den said, "Let me have a turn, let me have a turn." His friend Sally came and said, "Oh Mike, can I get a turn when you stop?" He help her up and thought she a good rider, too. Sally said, "Mike if I get a bike for my birthday, we could ride together? If I get a bike for my birthday, we could ride together</p>	<p>Shifts noted:</p> <p>1) Simple sentences with early developing descriptive elements; some complex sentences (one independent clause with at least one dependent clause) used to retell the story.</p> <p>2) Question transformations become evident.</p> <p>3) Complex sentences: Simple sentences with prepositional phrases, descriptive words used to retell the story.</p> <p>4) Dialogue and complex and/or compound sentences (multiple independent clauses with no dependent clauses) used to retell the story.</p>

Table 4.6 shows at the beginning of the year the seven focal students used single words, phrases, and simple sentences when retelling a story. When the students used

single words and phrases they were not retelling the story, they were labeling the pictures and sometimes describing the pictures. By the end of the year, no one was still using single words or phrases. They were all using at least simple and complex sentences to retell the story. Many of Mrs. Lucas' students had progressed to using compound sentences and sentences that contained dialogue.

### Achievement Data

Achievement data were also collected on the seven focal students from Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio, PPVT IV, and the OLAI2. The district required all students be assessed using the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio.

Table 4.7 - Research Test Data

	Show Me Book Stanines			Text Level Growth						SWS Phonemes Stanines		SWS Spelling Stanines	
	Beg.	Mid.	End	Beg.	GE	Mid.	GE	End	GE	Mid.	End	Mid	End
Jamal	1	3	3	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	2	3	2	2
Malik	1	3	4	NS	NS	1A	0.3	1B	0.6	1	5	2	3
Keith	6	7	9	1	0.1	2A	1.0	2B	1.2	9	6	8	7
NarAsia	3	6	9	NS	NS	1B	0.6	2A	1.0	4	6	2	7
Jadon	3	4	5	NS	NS	1A	0.3	2A	1.0	3	6	2	6
JaNya	3	3	4	NS	NS	1B	0.6	2A	1.0	5	5	2	4
Deonta	2	3	6	NS	NS	1A	0.3	2A	1.0	5	6	2	6

\* GE - Grade Equivalent \*\*NS - No Score - The task was too difficult for the student to obtain a score.

In Table 4.7, I used stanines to record the students' level on the Show Me Book and the Sentence Writing and Spelling assessment. Each stanine represented approximately 11% of the population. Stanines 1, 2, and 3 indicate a student is performing below average, stanines 4, 5, and 6 indicate a student is performing within the average band, and stanines 7, 8, and 9 indicate a student is performing in the high achievement band, or above grade level.

All seven students improved on book handling and concepts of print as measured by the Show Me Book. They all changed, shifted to higher stanines indicating changes in achievement ranks. They showed strong growth patterns in the areas of concepts of print and book handling. They showed growth in items such as return sweep, one-to-one correspondence, distinction between concepts differentiating letters, numbers, and words, etc. Eight-six percent of the students moved two to four stanine bands, thus closing the gap by approximately 22%-66% over their previous achievement rank, while 14% grew one stanine, showing approximately 11% improvement in achievement rank.

When assessed on the Text Level portion of Dominie, which is a criterion referenced assessment, 86% of the students grew two or more book levels, while 14% did not grow at all. At the end of the year, 71% of the students performed on grade level or slightly above grade level, while 29% of the students performed below grade level.

The results of the phoneme portion of the Sentence Writing and Spelling assessment showed, 71% of the students moved up one stanine or more, 14% of the students stayed at the same stanine, and 14% of the students slid back more than one stanine. The spelling portion of the Sentence Writing and Spelling showed similar results but different students fell into these categories. However, end-of-year stanines

documented that 83% of the children scored in the average band on phoneme representation and 67% of them scored in the average band in spelling ability.

Two other assessments not required by the school were given to the seven focal students. These assessments were the PPVT - IV and the OLAI2. The PPVT-IV assessed vocabulary. The OLAI2 has several assessments. Two of the assessments were used for this study: the repeated sentence and the story retelling. The repeated sentence assessment tested a students' use of the five most common English sentence structures. The story retelling assessed the students' ability to retell a story after listening to the teacher tell a story using picture cards.

Table 4.8 Research Test Data 2

	OLAI/Repeated Sentences 29 total sentences			OLAI/Story Retelling			PPVT Stanine	
	Beg.	Mid.	End.	Beg.	Mid.	End	Beg.	End
Jamal	Stage I/ 14%	Stage I/ 59%	Stage I/ 48%	Stage I/10%	Stage I/ 22%	Stage I/ 37%	1	3
Malik	Stage I/ 31%	Stage II/ 76%	Stage II/ 66%	Stage I/20%	Stage II/ 44%	Stage I/39%	4	5
Keith	Stage I/34%	Stage I/ 59%	Stage I/ 59%	Stage I/ 1%	Stage I/ 5%	Stage I/ 24%	4	6
NarAsia	Stage II/ 83%	Stage III/ 90%	Stage III/ 93%	Stage I/ 20%	Stage I/ 32%	Stage I/ 37%	5	4
Jadon	Stage I/ 41%	Stage III/ 90%	Stage III/ 97%	Stage I/15%	Stage I/ 29%	Stage II/ 43%	5	4
JaNya	Stage I/ 59%	Stage III/ 86%	Stage II/ 79%	Stage I/ 14%	Stage I/ 32%	Stage III/53%	4	4
Deonta	Stage II/ 66%	Stage II/79%	Stage III/93%	Stage I/ 24%	Stage I/37%	Stage II/ 46%	5	4

The OLAI2's results are reported in stages: Stage I is Least Experienced, Stage II is Basic, and Stage III is Most Experienced. In the Repeated Sentence Assessment, 100% of the students showed growth from the beginning of the year to the end when looking at the percentages. For 29% of the students, it was not enough growth to move to the next Stage even though in some cases the student went from retelling 14% of a story to retelling 48% of a story and retelling 34% of a story to retelling 59% of a story. In these cases, the students moved from the beginning of a particular stage to the end of that particular stage. The majority of the students, 71%, moved to the next Stage. One student moved from Stage I to Stage III.

On the Retelling portion of the assessment, 43% of the students moved up a level. All students showed growth but not as much growth as was seen in the repeated sentence portion of the assessment. Fifty-seven percent of the students did not show enough growth to move to the next Stage.

The results of the PPVT- IV were reported in stanines. Of all the assessments given to the seven focal students, this one showed the least growth. As pointed out earlier in Chapter 3, it is also the test that shows the most bias against African American Language users. Eighty-seven percent of the students started out in the average range. Of that 87%, several students, 49%, went down one stanine although they still remained in the average range. One student began at a Stanine 1 and moved to a Stanine 3, which showed great growth but he still remained in the below average range.

Mrs. Lucas' instruction impacted the learning of her students. The characteristics of her day and the artfulness of her language helped close the opportunity gap for her students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **Discussion And Implications**

Based on this study, I realized it was not the components within the instructional program that an effective teacher has in place that made a difference in student achievement. Across the district where this study took place, most teachers used Shared Reading, Guided Reading, Writer's Workshop, Read Aloud, and Independent Reading. However, few got the results Mrs. Lucas was able to achieve. What was critical to closing the opportunity gap for children from low socio-economic settings was what occurred *within* the components—this was the most important finding of this study. The critical difference in developing children's language and literacy capabilities was in two areas: 1) the characteristics of Mrs. Lucas' day, such as providing opportunities to use language in purposeful ways, allowing time for the children to produce language, and providing ways for the children to use a wide variety of literacy materials that were engaging; and 2) the artfulness of Mrs. Lucas' language as she interacted with her students. Mrs. Lucas was very non-judgmental; she accepted the students where they were in their literacy and language abilities and with great skill, she supported them in strategic ways to lift their performance toward the next instructional goals she observed were their next steps.

## Discussion

"Children arrive in kindergarten with huge discrepancies in oral language development . . . and the gap between language-advanced and language-delayed children grows throughout the elementary school years" (Biemiller, 2001).

The ability to think, articulate your thinking, and converse with others is a skill needed for success in school as well as in life. In my study, there was a thread that ran throughout the day in Mrs. Lucas' kindergarten class. Mrs. Lucas used her own language and knowledge about language development to advance language development in her students. Mrs. Lucas set up multiple opportunities for her kindergarten students to engage in talk, to tell stories, and to hear stories within purposeful literacy activities. In Mrs. Lucas' class, there were ample opportunities for the students to verbally interact with her and ample opportunities for them to verbally interact with each other. In essence, Mrs. Lucas created the optimal environment to develop the very competencies demonstrated by the schools' more advantaged children. As Wells (1986) stated, the two biggest factors that differentiated those with greater language abilities at the beginning of school were both the quantity and quality of conversational experiences in the home (parents who responded to their children's conversational attempts), and the greater opportunities they were afforded to hear stories.

Wells (1986) also concluded that three aspects of oral language development were particularly important in developing foundational structures of language that influence school success in the first years at school: 1) their continued opportunities to engage in speech; 2) their acquisition of new language structures; and 3) further development of concepts children acquire within the contexts in which new words are learned. It was

these opportunities and capabilities that Mrs. Lucas created for her students to experience such that their language repertoires, concept development and vocabularies would accelerate and develop toward more academic language and academic experiences.

Mrs. Lucas' verbal interactions with her students accomplished more than just increasing their literacy knowledge. She increased their knowledge at the same time she increased their sense of agency and their confidence as learners. In Mrs. Lucas' class, she listened carefully to what her students said and responded in ways that scaffolded their learning while taking into consideration their emotional needs. Mrs. Lucas developed personal relationships with each of her students through her verbal interactions. As Johnston (2004) stated, teachers' language affects children's learning. He found that teachers' language was powerful and did much more than deliver knowledge. With the use of a single phrase, Mrs. Lucas built agency in her students, noticed and named what they did, built a positive relationship with her students, and honored their home language.

The seven focal students benefited from Mrs. Lucas' strategic use of instructional components, her instructional moves, and her verbal interactions. They benefited from the characteristics of her day and from the artfulness of her language. Five of the seven focal students ended the year on grade level according to the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004).

### **Keith**

Mrs. Lucas described Keith as a very attentive, quiet boy. He started the year listening to stories but not yet able to join in a conversation about the story. In September, when he was assessed with the OLAI story retelling he scored the lowest of all seven students. He could only retell 1% of the story. Most of his language was at the simple

sentence stage and often it was just words and phrases. For example, at the beginning of the year, during Writer's Workshop when Mrs. Lucas was in the middle of drawing her story-the following interaction occurred between Mrs. Lucas and Keith.

Mrs. Lucas: You know Mr. Wendell's Mama, Ms. Pat, has been real sick. So we were going to Conway.

Keith: (He mumbled one word that Mrs. Lucas could not understand.)

Mrs. Lucas: What, Keith?

Keith: (He again mumbled one word that Mrs. Lucas could not understand.)

Mrs. Lucas: What, Keith?

Keith: (points to her drawing) Your lights

Mrs. Lucas: My lights (she pauses for a moment) You know what? I'm glad you said that. When you try to make your picture have a lot of things to look at, what do we call those things?

Students: Details

Mrs. Lucas: Details. And I noticed some of you

Student: (interrupts) and words to remember what you say.

Mrs. Lucas: That's right. You write your words so you remember what to say. But I noticed some of you didn't put details in your pictures. Keith does, so thank you Keith for reminding me to put my headlights. We didn't have them on so I won't make those lines that make them look like they are shining.

Keith expressed his thoughts by verbalizing two words, *your lights*, but Mrs. Lucas took what he said and situated it in the larger literacy context. She paused to figure out what he was telling her. She then responded to his intentions to make meaning. This brief interaction began to build a sense of agency for Keith.

By October, Keith was forming simple sentences and questions. One time, for example, when Mrs. Lucas was drawing clouds in her story Keith asked her, "How many clouds dem is?" She was pleased that he was able to articulate his wondering in the form of a question. It wasn't long before Keith started decoding words. He was learning sight words. Mrs. Lucas was pleased with his ability to figure out words but still concerned that he could not yet use his words to retell a story.

In January, I administered the OLAI to Keith. This time he could retell 5% of the story. He was making small steps forward. At the same time, Keith's reading level was assessed using the Text Reading Assessment within the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004). He read at a first grade level, so he could read a story with multiple lines of text after the teacher established the pattern. Still, Mrs. Lucas was concerned. While he could answer questions, he could not retell the story. Because of this, often, when the students in her class worked with a partner to tell a story based on a picture she was Keith's partner. By the end of the year, Keith was performing above grade level in every assessment except his ability to retell a story. He had progressed from being able to retell 1% of a story to being able to retell 24%. Towards the end of the year, I was in Mrs. Lucas' classroom and Keith wanted to tell me his story and read what he had written. He had drawn a picture and written his story: I found a big treasure in my back yard. Keith has finished with first grade now and has continued to progress in

his ability to retell a story. At the end of his first grade year, he read at a 2.1 grade level (second grade first month), with 100% comprehension.

### **Jadon**

Jadon enjoyed his kindergarten friends. From the beginning of the year to the end Jadon always had other students around him at recess. His laugh was contagious. He ran, he played, he laughed, yet he did not verbally interact with Mrs. Lucas or his peers. Mrs. Lucas listened to her students' language during informal times, such as lunch and recess. When she did not hear them speaking in sentences during these times she became concerned. Jadon was assessed on the retelling section of OLAI in September. He could retell 15% of the story yet his retelling was done in phrases as seen below:

Researcher: Jadon, did you like that story? (Researcher had just told Jadon a story using picture cards)

Jadon: Yes (nods his head)

Researcher: Now you get to use these cards and retell the story.

Jadon: Pony Popcorn, the girl (Jadon looked at the first card and named who he saw) Kick feet, girl mad (second picture) Pony talk to girl (third picture) Bird, bunny, horse, girl (fourth picture)

Researcher: Thank you Jadon!

In January, Jadon was assessed again on the retelling section of OLAI. This time he could retell 29% of the story. At this time of year, he was reading on a 0.3 (third month of kindergarten level) according to the Text Reading Assessment within the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004). So he was able to control one-to-one matching and read Stop and Go each time these words occurred in a

story the teacher read. Jadon's favorite time of the day was recess and centers. Mrs. Lucas spent time playing with Jadon in centers engaging him in conversations during their play scenarios. She extended his phrases into sentences and by January she extended his simple sentences into more complex sentences. By the end of the year, he had progressed from being able to retell 15% of a story to being able to retell 43% on the OLAI retelling task. It sounded like this:

Researcher: Jadon, did you like that story? (Researcher had just told Jadon a story using picture cards)

Jadon: It was good.

Researcher: Now you get to use these cards and retell the story.

Jadon: (Card one) Mike got a new bike for his birthday. It was red and Mike was happy. (Card two) Sally wave and shout, "Mike! Can I have a ride? Can I have a turn when you done? (Card three) He help her up and thought she a good rider, too. (Card four) Mike said, "Sally, I didn't know you could ride. You a good rider, too." Sally said, "Mike if I get a bike for my birthday, we could ride together.

Mrs. Lucas was pleased. He used a variety of sentence structures ranging from simple sentence, complex sentences, and compound sentences. As mentioned in chapter three, Mrs. Lucas understood and valued her students' home language. In Jadon's retell he often used his home language, African American Vernacular English. For example, when she read the transcription of his retell and he said, "He help her up and thought she a good rider, too.", Mrs. Lucas noticed he put two thoughts together and formed a

compound sentence. Jadon's ability to speak in compound sentences would make it easier for him to read and understand texts with compound sentences. Mrs. Lucas' focus was on developing Jadon's oral language and helping him articulate his ideas in more complex language structures. *He help her up* conveys the same thought as He helped her up. Her rich instructional language helped Jadon grow in his oral language development. Another confirmation of this occurred in May when Jadon read at a 1.0 (first grade level) with 100% comprehension on the text reading assessment, so he could read a story with multiple lines of text after the teacher established the pattern. Looking at the school's records a year later, Jadon had finished first grade. His teacher jokingly said she could not imagine him not interacting verbally with his friends. He read at a 2.0 (second grade) level with 100% comprehension at the end of first grade.

### **Deonte**

Mrs. Lucas described Deonte as a sweet child who always tried to do what was asked of him. At the beginning of the year, he drew pictures about simplistic stories that few details. When asked to tell his story he pointed to his drawing and named what he drew. One day, during a guided writing lesson, Mrs. Lucas prompted Deonte as she tried to help him tell a story.

Deonte: Miss Hailey, I don't know fall.

Mrs. Lucas: (In her mini lesson, Mrs. Lucas had written a story about signs of fall that she had seen over the weekend.) That's ok, you can write about whatever you want. What did you do this weekend?

Deonte: Ride my bike

Mrs. Lucas: That would be a great story. See, I wasn't there so I need you to tell me all about it. Get your crayons and think about what was

outside while you were riding your bike. Everybody, listen to this. Deonte's story is about riding his bike. In a story you want to add details. Details are things you saw, the color they were, anything that will help the person looking at your story really know what was happening. So, were you riding your bike on cement, on dirt, were you on the grass? Think, what do you remember?"

Deonte: Dirt

Mrs. Lucas: You rode your bike on dirt. What color was the dirt? Draw that dirt that you were riding your bike on.

In January, Deonte scored a 0.3 (third month of kindergarten) on his Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004), so he was able to control one-to-one matching and read Stop and Go each time these words occurred in a story the teacher read. He retold 37% of a story on the OLAI. Mrs. Lucas conferred with Deonte at least three times a week.

By May, Deonte was reading at a 1.0 (First Grade) on Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004) on the text reading assessment, so he could read a story with multiple lines of text after the teacher established the pattern. He had progressed from being able to retell 24% of a story to being able to retell 46%. Deonte went to first grade on grade level. He finished first grade reading a 2.0 (second grade) with 75% comprehension.

### **JyNya**

JyNya was a young girl who spent a lot of time by herself during recess and at centers. When other children joined her in a center she played beside them but did not

interact with them. During Independent reading, she often laid on the carpet looking at Big Books they read as a class.

In September, JyNya retold 14% of a story according to the OLAI. When Mrs. Lucas joined her she asked JyNya what she thought was happening in the picture they were looking at. JyNya sat quietly or named what she saw in the picture.

In January, JyNya read at a 0.6 (6 month of kindergarten) when she read a simple patterned story after the teacher established the pattern, but Mrs. Lucas was still concerned. JyNya was not using a variety of sentences to express her thoughts. She had progressed from being able to retell 14% of a story to being able to retell 32%. JyNya went to first grade reading a 1.0 (first grade) but still Mrs. Lucas was concerned. JyNya's ability to use language to interact with Mrs. Lucas and her peers was not yet at the level of her peers. JyNya finished first grade reading on a 1.5 (first grade fifth month) reading level.

### **NarAsia**

"NarAsia is such a joy to be around," said Mrs. Lucas. NarAsia was a hard-worker. Mrs. Lucas spent time with her in centers expanding her oral language through their play scenarios. In September, NarAsia retold 20% of a story based on the OLAI. She repeated 24 out of 28 sentences on the repeated sentence section of OLAI. These were good results for the beginning of the year. However, there was a difference between these scores and her use of oral language with Mrs. Lucas and her peers. In October, the housekeeping center was turned into a market where the students could sell and buy fall vegetables. NarAsia was selling vegetables when Mrs. Lucas joined their play.

Mrs. Lucas: M'am (talking to NarAsia) may I please have a big pumpkin and a small pumpkin?

NarAsia: Yes (then she tapped Brandi on the arm and pointed towards the pumpkins)

Brandi: Ms. Hailey, I get you pumpkins. How many do you want? Do you want three? This one's pretty.

Mrs. Lucas: Brandi, thank you. I think I just want two. Will you get me a big one and a little one and let NarAsia tell me how much it costs.

NarAsia, how much do I owe you for the pumpkins?

NarAsia: One.

Mrs. Lucas: Do I owe you one penny or one dollar.

Nar Asia: One dollar.

Mrs. Lucas set up opportunities for her and NarAsia to engage in conversations.

In January, Nar Asia's oral language used in the classroom began to reflect her scores on formal assessments. She still read at a 0.6 (the sixth month of kindergarten), which showed she could read a simple story wherein the sentences followed a pattern after the teacher established the pattern, and she retold 32% of a story. By the end of kindergarten, NarAsia was reading at a 1.0 (first grade) level, so she could read a story with multiple lines of text after the teacher established the pattern. She was ready for first grade. In examining the school records a year later, NarAsia had finished first grade. She left first grade reading at a 1.5 level (first grade fifth month), showing that she could independently read a less predictable story.

## **Malik**

Malik was a sweet, energetic boy. He spun in circles, jumped up and down, was in constant motion while he talked. He used a lot of words juxtaposed together. Mrs. Lucas was concerned because the words he put together did not make sense. He put random words together. He was a young kindergartner just turning five three weeks before starting school. When Malik's sentences articulated a thought they were simple sentences. His ability to retell a story according to OLAI produced interesting scores. At the beginning of the year, he retold 20% of a story, in the middle of the year he retold 44% of a story, yet at the end of the year he only retold 39% of a story. Towards the end of the year, during writer's workshop, Mrs. Lucas and the students were trying to think of a sentence to write about her story. The story was about her son-in-law's dog, Molly. The students wanted her to write Molly bit me. After they helped Mrs. Lucas figure out what letters to write she was ready to send them off to write their own stories. The following conversation happened:

Malik: Ms. Hailey, you could add Molly bit me and she is bad.

Mrs. Lucas: Malik, I sure could add that. (Mrs. Lucas points to a chart on the wall that lists what they could do when they think they are finished writing. She points to the item that says "Add words") so, does everybody see this it says when I am finished drawing my story I could add words. So, I could go back, Malik, and add those words to my sentence.

Malik had taken a simple sentence and expanded it without any prompting from Mrs. Lucas. She was thrilled with his progress. By the end of the year, Malik was still

spinning in circles and jumping all the time but he had made great gains in his literacy knowledge. He was reading at a 0.6 (sixth month of kindergarten) by the end of the year, showing he could read a simple story wherein the sentences followed a pattern after the teacher established the pattern. The school records a year later indicated that Malik just finished first grade. He was reading at a 1.3 (first grade third month) reading level, indicating that he could independently read a less predictable story.

### **Jamal**

Mrs. Lucas was most concerned about Jamal. Often times, he did not respond at all when she tried to hold a conversation with him. As she watched to see how he interacted with his peers she noticed that he didn't interact with his peers. He seldom played with anyone at recess and usually played by himself at center time even if he was sitting next to a group of students engaged in play. Mrs. Lucas noticed he often sat during whole group time staring off into space. In September, Jamal could only repeat 4 out of 28 sentences on the OLAI repeated sentences section. He retold 10% of the story on the OLAI story retell section. It sounded like this:

Researcher: Jamal, did you like that story? (Researcher had just told Jamal a story using picture cards)

Jamal: Nods his head

Researcher: Now you get to use these cards and retell the story.

Jamal: Horse, girl (Jamal looked at the first card and named who he saw)  
Horse, girl (second picture) Horse, girl (third picture) Bird, bunny,  
horse, girl (fourth picture)

Researcher: Thank you Jamal! You named all the characters in the story.

In January, Jamal could not score on the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004), which showed he was unable to control one-to-one matching or read high frequency words like *yes* or *no* when asked to read them in a story the teacher read. However, his ability to retell a story had improved. He retold 22% of the story. Mrs. Lucas tried to engage Jamal in conversations all throughout the day. He was reluctant to participate in whole group discussions so she worked with him one on one. By the end of the year, his retelling of a story sounded like this:

Researcher: Jamal, did you like that story? (Researcher had just told Jadon a story using picture cards)

Jamal: Ok

Researcher: Now you get to use these cards and retell the story.

Jamal: Mike got a brand new bike. It had a bell. (Jamal looked at the first card and named who he saw) Sally, can I have a ride? Can I have a turn when you stop? (second picture) He help her up. She was a good rider. (third picture) If I get a bike for my birthday, we could ride together (fourth picture)

Researcher: Thank you Jamal!

Jamal made great gains. He now retold 27% of a story based on OLAI. He still could not score on the Text Reading assessment in the Dominic Reading and Writing Assessment Portfolio (DeFord, 2004). Mrs. Lucas talked to his parents about letting him be in kindergarten again next year with her. In the state where this study took place, kindergarten is not mandatory so it is the parent's choice whether to let the student repeat kindergarten. Jamal's Mom decided to send him to first grade.

In January, of Jamal's first grade year he was reading at a 0.3 (third month of kindergarten) level, and now demonstrated that he could control one-to-one matching and read Stop and Go each time these words occurred in a story the teacher read. At this point, his first grade teacher talked to his Mom and they agreed to let him join Mrs. Lucas' class for literacy instruction. Jamal was more responsive in Mrs. Lucas' room now than when he was as a kindergartner. His confidence began to increase. He was engaging in whole group discussions. Mrs. Lucas and Jamal's first grade teacher met once a week to discuss his progress. By the end of first grade, he was reading on a 0.9 (ninth month of kindergarten) level, demonstrating he could read a story with patterned sentences after the teacher established the pattern. It was decided Jamal would repeat first grade.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study show that what we, as teachers, say and what we do matters. It mattered a great deal for the children that Mrs. Lucas taught who did not have the opportunities with language and literacy prior to school that they needed to be able to use in an academic setting as kindergarteners and first graders. Mrs. Lucas took every opportunity to extend her student's oral language. Again, she accepted where they were and extended their oral language to the next level. She purposively planned so that opportunities to engage in conversations with other language users happened throughout the day. The instructional moves within her components and the characteristics of her day gave her opportunities to expand their language, provide new experiences, and use high quality literacy materials. She also found these opportunities during center time, recess, lunch, and during those grandmotherly walks down the hall.

This study also showed teachers play a role in the language acquisition of their students. Teachers who observe and take notice of where their students are with their oral language development can help them further expand their language repertoire. Teachers who are knowledgeable about oral language development can help their students' make accelerated progress. A student's oral language abilities play such an important part in their ability to read and write text, so it is crucial that students acquire oral language at the level of their peers as soon as possible.

Based on this study, I believe the field of early childhood needs to relook at what is happening in our kindergarten classrooms, especially for students who enter with low language and literacy repertoires. Oral language is a component of literacy and as a field we need to see a teacher's attempt to expand their students' sentence structures as academic learning. Entering a students' play with the purpose of building their concepts, expanding their sentence structures, and increasing their vocabulary is important academic work. It is teaching.

Oral language is the foundation of literacy. We need to be careful we are not trying to build a student's "reading house" on a shaky foundation. When a student's oral language is not yet where it should be, instruction needs to occur so the students' foundation will be sturdy. As seen in this study, oral language instruction can occur alongside instruction about print and instruction about stories. The Common Core State Standards address the importance of students gaining control over the most common sentence structures in the Language section of the standards (CCSS p.26).

Table 5.1 Common Core State Standard: Language

Demonstrate command of the grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
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Kindergarten	First Grade
K.1f Produce and expand complete sentences in shared language activities.	1.1j Produce and expand complete simple and compound declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences in response to prompts.

Teaching is complex and talk is a very important instructional tool that needs to be used more often in our classrooms. Each student is unique in the way they learn. The complexity of Mrs. Lucas' interactions, decision-making, and design of her day are made attainable due to her knowledge about teaching, learning, and her students. Through verbal interactions, talk, she learned about her students. Talk is a way to invite another person into your thinking. Mrs. Lucas and her students did this. Her thinking and her persistence in making her thinking public expanded their knowledge. And their thinking and talk helped her understand how they were trying to make meaning.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to learn what Mrs. Lucas said, did, and thought as she sought to scaffold the learning of her students with the lowest language and literacy repertoires. Through this study, I saw the power of talk, the power of relationships, and the power of teacher knowledge. These data demonstrated that when a student's oral language was not yet where it should be, the language of instruction needed to demonstrate language across a variety of settings in order to scaffold students as language users in authentic language and literacy events, and open avenues for more expanded language to occur. In this way, teachers will close, or narrow, the opportunity gap.

It is my hope that other kindergarten teachers, as well as those making school, district, and state decisions will understand the necessity of taking the time to build the

oral language foundation of our students. Students who have a solid oral language foundation are able to learn to read and write with greater ease. Building a strong oral language foundation for those who enter kindergarten without it will make learning to read and write easier for them. It is time worth taking.

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