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The Role of Oral Language in Kindergarten Students Comprehension

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THE ROLE OF ORAL LANGUAGE IN KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS COMPREHENSION

by

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Dedication

To my parents, John and Helen Thompson, who made it possible for me to go back to school and complete this dissertation. Without your constant love, support, and assistance this would not have been achievable.

To my fiancé Christopher, I appreciate your patience and support in my journey to continue my education. Your belief in me and constant encouragement helped me to succeed.

To my teaching assistant Sarah Budetich, without you by my side in the classroom this literally would not have been possible. Thank you for your understanding and help. Thank you for ensuring our students started the year strong even when I was busy with research.
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I would like to acknowledge the people who have supported and helped me through this dissertation process. To my committee chair, Dr. Kenneth Vogler, thank you for challenging me and always pushing me to do my best. To Dr. Susan Schramm-Pate, thank you for your guidance and help throughout the program. To Dr. Richard Lussier, thank you for your input and encouragement in completing my dissertation. To Dr. Suha Tamin and Dr. Vic Oglan, thank you for your willingness to serve on my committee. I could not have completed this dissertation without the feedback, support, and guidance of all my professors and committee members.
Abstract

The present quantitative action research study examined two classes of Southern kindergarten students in a Title I school and their oral language and comprehension abilities as measured by standardized tests. The identified problem of practice involved incoming kindergarteners’ lack of preparedness for reading. The research question that guided this quantitative study was: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language ability relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them? Assessments of overall oral language, wordless picture book comprehension, and listening comprehension comprise the data set. Data were collected at the beginning of the school year. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to determine if a relationship existed between oral language and listening comprehension as well as between oral language and wordless picture book (reading) comprehension. Findings include a strong, positive connection between oral language and reading comprehension for the participants in this study. The researcher reflected on the data with her colleagues to determine implications. An action plan was designed based on these findings to improve instruction for beginning of the year kindergarteners at the researcher’s school. The action plan includes using developmentally appropriate practices to provide additional instruction in oral language and comprehension strategies as well as engaging in more research on this topic.

Keywords: oral language, comprehension, kindergarten, developmentally appropriate
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# List of Abbreviations

- **DAP** .................................................. Developmentally Appropriate Practice
- **DIBELS** ............................................. Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills
- **DiP** ................................................................. Dissertation in Practice
- **DRA-2** ................................................... Developmental Reading Assessment 2
- **MGES** .................................................. Morning Glory Elementary School (pseudonym)
- **PoP** ............................................................... Problem of Practice
- **SES** ............................................................... Socioeconomic Status
- **TOLD P:4** ...................... Test of Oral Language Development Primary: Fourth Edition
Chapter 1: Introduction

Topic

Kindergarten has changed from a place of play and discovery where students first become adjusted to school to a place focused on creating academics with high expectations for the quality and quantity of reading and writing that the students are expected to attain. Recently, questions have been asked regarding what is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten and what should be expected of early childhood classrooms is being questioned (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015). What used to be expected from our first grade students is now an expectation for our kindergarten students. Kindergarten has become the new first grade (Miller & Almon, 2009). The latest standards presume students have already had experiences where language and early reading skills have been developed. However, in reality, in the researcher’s Title I school, the majority of kindergartener students enter school with no previous education and are likely not developmentally ready for the presented learning targets.

Problem of Practice

Currently at Morning Glory Elementary School [pseudonym] many students begin the school year without the necessary pre-requisites for reading. From the research, it is clear that a strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Department of
Education, 2011). With Morning Glory Elementary School being a high poverty, Title I school, our incoming kindergarteners often lack this necessary language development. Standards and curricula are created based upon the needs of white-middle class students, thus causing schools to operate as a deficit-model when their demographics do not meet that target. A lack of language is perceived based upon those norms, but regardless of the perceived need for language development, the high expectations required of kindergarteners pushes our kindergarten team to immediately start reading instruction. Rather than filling in the gap some students have with oral language, we begin phonics instruction during the first week in order to implement reading groups several weeks into the school year.

Morning Glory Elementary School is a personalized learning school. This means that our vision is to provide instruction to students based on their individual needs. By filling gaps in learning rather than skipping over them, children should experience more success. Pushing students when they are not ready will only end in frustration and less overall academic success. Expectations derived from the state standards expect students to have a foundation in oral language and reading skills. Yet, the reality is that, “two-thirds of America’s kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the oral language skills of kindergarten students and the relationship of those skills and comprehension. It is the goal of the researcher to determine whether the academic push toward reading at the start
of kindergarten is appropriate for her group of students, or if more developmentally appropriate practices, such as oral language instruction for those who need it at the start of the year, will help students meet the district’s reading goals.

**Rationale**

Teachers did not create the idea of developmentally appropriate practices for students—rather, the material stems from theories. Specifically, it is related to the ideas and theories of Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. Both Vygotsky and Piaget believed that learning is routed in play for children (Mooney, 2000). During playtime in the kindergarten classroom, students are able to develop oral language by working with peers on activities that may be described as play but incorporate cognitive skills.

Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development demonstrates that it is important for teachers to “observe children carefully and plan curriculum that encourages children’s emerging abilities” (Mooney, 2000, p. 84). Therefore, we need to meet each student’s developmental needs and plan activities that will take him or her to the next level. For instance, we would not plan an algebra lesson for first graders unless there was proof they were ready for it (Crain, 2000). Teachers should not jump students’ learning up the ladder without the lower rungs in place.

According to Piaget, kindergarten students are in the preoperational stage of development (Mooney, 2000). In this stage, children are forming their own knowledge based on experience (2000). However in our kindergarten classrooms, there is currently too much that is mandated and little time for students to have worthwhile experiences that may result in natural learning.
Language learning is another area that is important for cognitive development. Vygostky believed that through working on a child’s language, one was, at the same time advancing his or her cognitive development (Mooney, 2000). In order to do this, kindergarten classrooms need to place more emphasis on play and oral language development.

Unfortunately, these theorists represent how kindergarten should be, and not necessarily how it is. Early childhood education is going backwards rather than forwards in its progress toward meeting the needs of students. The difficulty lies within attempting to merge the developmentally appropriate practices outlined by these key theorists with 21st century requirements of rigorous curriculum and importance placed on testing and data.

**Conceptual Framework**

The key constructs that will be investigated in this study are developmentally appropriate practices for kindergarten, oral language, storytelling, and comprehension.

*Figure 1.1* A conceptual framework for the relationship between developmentally appropriate practices and comprehension in regard to kindergarten.
A conceptual framework for the aforementioned constructs in this study is represented in Figure 1.1. *Developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP) refers to the learning strategies and curriculum that should be introduced to kindergarteners. This decision is made based on where 4 to 6 year olds are developmentally and what they can handle emotionally and academically. According to Vygotsky, students in this age range need to be provided instructional support, or scaffolding, at their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Mooney, 2000). Thus, students need to be assessed individually and teachers must instruct them based on that assessment and not necessarily based on standards the school district has in place. Piaget and Vygotsky agreed that this type of learning is best done through play in which children are involved in cognitive and language development (Mooney, 2000).

In order for this learning to occur, oral language instruction needs to be provided in kindergarten. Practice and instruction in oral language, as well as having students engage in storytelling, are DAP for kindergarteners. Oral language concerns a child’s vocabulary as well as his or her ability to speak clearly and fluently and understand conversations with others (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012). Not all students begin kindergarten with these skills in place. According to Burke (2010), “often overlooked in the race to teach young children to read is the development of their oral language abilities” (p. 26).

Storytelling is a DAP that utilizes and strengthens a child’s oral language. Teachers are able to use play, as suggested by Piaget and Vygotsky, in order to have children engage in oral storytelling. Through being allowed to play with words in storytelling, students are not only developing oral language, but are also demonstrating an
understanding of stories and structure (Burke, 2010). These DAP’s of oral language and storytelling are able to work together to influence a child’s comprehension.

Comprehension can be defined as “a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text” (Pardo, 2004, p. 272). In this framework, comprehension refers to listening to and reading texts. In kindergarten, reading comprehension is related to both wordless picture books and emergent texts. Due to the timing of this study, it will focus on wordless picture books in regard to reading comprehension since the majority of kindergarten students cannot read emergent texts at the beginning of the school year.

Overall, this study will look at kindergarteners’ oral language skills. It will then examine the same students’ listening and reading comprehension. Reading comprehension will be defined according to the ability to read the pictures of a wordless picture book due to students’ limited reading ability at the beginning of the school year. The researcher then examines whether there is a relationship between language and comprehension, as well as analyze overall achievement in each area, to determine if the aforementioned DAP’s should be utilized more at the beginning of the school year in order to increase comprehension later.

**Methodology**

**Positionality Statement**

The researcher was raised in upstate New York and attended parochial school. She grew up reading constantly and was surrounded by opportunities to engage in all areas of learning. She did not experience the struggle of poverty or lack of parent
involvement that her students encounter. It is because of this upbringing that she has worked hard to become a teacher and constantly seeks to better herself for the benefit of students and the school community. Growing up, the researcher’s parents always valued education. It is due to the values they instilled in the researcher that she is pursing her doctorate in education.

As a preschooler, watching her brother in elementary school and feeling jealous, the researcher had her mother create homework for her to complete each night. During elementary school, she constantly played school at home enrolling dolls, stuffed animals, and neighbors who were not always thrilled at the prospect of more work on weekends and in the summer. In middle and high school, free time was spent teaching and helping children. The researcher babysat, worked at a daycare that stressed academics, taught church school, and volunteered at Head Start and the local elementary school. Going into the field of education was not a choice: it was a calling from a young age.

The researcher currently works as a kindergarten teacher in a Title I school in coastal South Carolina. In addition to teaching, she has previously been the chair for her grade level, has sat on the school PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) committee, and has attended monthly kindergarten literacy cohort meetings. This journey has led her to pursue her doctorate degree and become an action researcher. The researcher constantly seeks to better herself, her students, and the school community. Through taking on a leadership role by researching the correlation between oral language, storytelling, and comprehension of kindergarten students, the researcher seeks to help inform her teaching as well as the teaching of colleagues in the school and the entire
school district. Chapter 2 of this dissertation, which includes a review of the literature, will delve more into the researcher’s philosophy concerning leadership and research.

**Action Research**

Action research was utilized in order to answer the research question. It is a method used by a researcher who is invested in a situation and seeks a change that will benefit her or his teaching and the learning of students. This method of research is used in order to improve education in a planned way. It involves researcher taking on the role of a participant who investigates relevant questions (Mertler, 2014). However, action research does not usually provide a one-time answer. It is a cyclical method that requires constant reflection on the part of the researcher in order to test out ideas that may need to be changed and implemented again (Mertler, 2014). There are four specific stages of action research: the planning stage, the acting stage, the developing stage, and the reflection stage (Mertler, 2014). While the reflecting stage is at the end, it is important to point out that reflection occurs through all stages just as it occurs consistently in good teaching. Upon reflection, the researcher may need to go through the process again in order to reach his or her goals (Mertler, 2014).

Action research was chosen rather than traditional research due to the need to be directly involved in the research process. Research took place in the researcher’s classroom among her students with the hope of finding a way to change the researcher’s teaching that will benefit student learning. In order to accomplish this aim the researcher needed to have an active role in instruction and assessment, which action research enabled.
**Participant Selection**

Participant selection was random due to not having any control over it. This study took place in the researcher’s kindergarten classroom and in the classroom of her teaching partner. The researcher elicited the permission of her teaching partners, and the researchers own, assigned kindergarten students’ parents. The letter of consent can be seen in Appendix A. Consent was obtained for 39 students to participate in this study.

Participants were 4 or 5 years old. Approximately 56% of students had prior schooling. The diversity of participants was based on random assignment from the school. In regard to gender, 24 students identified as male, and 15 female. Racially, 22 students identified as African-American, 9 identified as White, 5 identified as Hispanic, 2 identified as Asian, and 1 identified as mixed-race. Due to being at a Title I school, the majority of students came from low-income households; however, there was a possibility of having a few students from higher income households. The diversity, in regard to gender, race, and previous schooling, was considered when analyzing the results at the end of the study.

**Research Site**

Research took place in an elementary (grades CD through 4) school in coastal South Carolina. It is a public, Title I school in an urban area. According to the 2014 South Carolina State Report Card, the school is meeting, but not exceeding standards. A new overall rating will not be provided until spring 2018. The school serves approximately 760 students. Eighty-one percent of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The largest ethnic group is African American, which makes up more than half the student population. In addition, the school is made up of the following
ethnicities: Asian, Hispanic, White, and Pacific Islander. Recently the English as a second language (ESOL) population has been on the rise. However, the entire school is not part of the study. The researcher’s focus is on two of the five kindergarten classrooms in the school.

Even though the study concentrates on two kindergarten classrooms, the research will ultimately be applicable to the school as a whole. While kindergarten is not a tested grade, it does provide the basic building blocks that students will build on as they progress through school. Through finding a valuable, developmentally appropriate way to teach reading comprehension this research can affect the scores of the tested grades once the researcher’s students reach those grades.

Research Questions

The research question that guided this quantitative study was as follows: How does kindergarten students’ oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?

Sources of Data Collection

At the beginning of the school year, three assessments were administered to students: the Test of Language Development-Primary: Fourth Edition (TOLD-P:4), the Listening Comprehension Assessment from Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment, and a teacher-created wordless picture book comprehension task.

The TOLD-P:4 was administered to assess oral language ability. This test assesses oral language in relation to the follow areas: picture vocabulary, relational vocabulary, oral vocabulary, syntactic understanding, sentence imitation, morphological completion, word discrimination, word analysis and word articulation. These areas allow
the researcher to determine a score for overall language ability. Descriptions of the subtests are located in Appendix B.

Listening comprehension was assessed using the Listening Comprehension Assessment from Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment. This assessment asks one question in each of the following areas: vocabulary, key detail, character analysis/analyzing relationships, inferring, and main idea. The assessment provides each student a score out of five. A copy of the teacher directions for this assessment is located in Appendix C.

While the school’s mandated reading assessment is the Developmental Reading Assessment-2 (DRA-2) it will not be utilized as the reading comprehension measure because comprehension is not scored until level 4 texts. Since a level 4 text is the reading goal for the end of kindergarten (May) it is not appropriate to use this assessment as a measure of reading comprehension at the beginning of the year. Instead, a wordless picture book was used. Students were encouraged to read the pictures to the teacher. They were then asked a series of questions to measure their comprehension of the text. This assessment is teacher-created; however, it was modeled from the Narrative Comprehension Task (NC Task) that Alison Paris and Scott Paris (2003) developed. The NC Task can be seen in Appendix D, and the teacher-created wordless picture book comprehension assessment is located in Appendix E. Appendix F contains the letters received by the researcher for permission to reprint pages from all three-assessment measures.

Scores for overall oral language were compared with scores of listening comprehension, as well as wordless picture book comprehension, to determine
correlations. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will describe the research design and instruments in more detail.

**Limitations**

This study was only able to determine that a connection exists between oral language and reading comprehension. The study could not determine whether there was any causation between these variables or how, exactly, they relate. In addition, this study included participants from two classes: the researcher’s students and her co-teacher’s students. Due to testing occurring in the beginning of the kindergarten year, results of the assessments could be skewed due to the lack of a relationship between the researcher and the participants. The researcher knew her students for only two-weeks, and did not have much contact with her co-teacher’s students at that point. This lack of a relationship could have resulted in students not being as open with their talking and answers, which would greatly affect the results of this study. Completing the testing once trust and a relationship had been built may have affected the accuracy of the assessments.

**Dissertation Overview**

Chapter 1 of this DiP was a brief overview of the completed research. In Chapter 2, the researcher delves into prior research and literature related to the DiP’s problem of practice. Chapter 3 details the specifics of this study, such as the participants, the research setting, the research design and instruments, and data analysis strategies. Chapter 4 offers an overview of the findings in consideration of the research question. Thereafter, Chapter 5 includes a summary of results, an interpretation of their implications, and a discussion of the research.
Conclusion

The present research study looked at the achievements of two classes of kindergarten students, a sample size of 39 students, at the researcher’s Title I school in South Carolina to determine achievement levels in oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension upon entry to kindergarten. Participants were assessed in all three areas with the intent to answer the research question how does a kindergarten student’s oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them? This research study found a strong connection between oral language skills and reading comprehension ($r=0.7079$) as well as an overall lack of achievement in oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension for incoming kindergarten students at the researcher’s school. While conclusions could not be drawn in regard to race, females generally out-performed males in all three areas, and an overall lack of language confirmed the word gap that Hart and Risley (2003) found in regard to low-income children. An action plan was created that restructured beginning of the year kindergarten instruction in the researcher’s school. The plan included more oral language instruction, a continued personalized approach to instruction that provides explicit instruction in the areas of this study, and further research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The United States, as well as the industrialized world, expect more and more of young students. In fact, kindergarten has become the new first grade (Miller & Almon, 2009). What used to be expected from our first grade students is now an expectation for our kindergarten students. The latest standards presume students already had experiences wherein language and early reading skills were developed. In reality, though, many kindergarteners are entering school with no previous schooling and are likely not developmentally ready for the presented learning targets. Students are entering kindergarten at four or five years of age and are being rushed into reading and writing instruction in order to meet the demands of society. Can we require students to read and write stories when they cannot orally tell or retell one? Recently, questions have been asked regarding what is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten and what should be expected of early childhood classrooms (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015). It is important for teachers to meet their students’ developmental and academic needs in order to provide the best instruction to help them reach grade-level standards.

Chapter 2 of this Dissertation in Practice (DiP) describes the related literature in early childhood education, language, and literacy. The chapter begins with a description of theory, which is followed by an overview of the history related to early childhood education and literacy, it concludes with a glossary of keywords associated with this DiP.
The identified ‘problem of practice’ for this DiP revolves around kindergarten in the United States and specifically the State of South Carolina where the participant researcher is a teacher. The researcher is interested in the current phenomenon of reading curriculum and pedagogy in kindergarten and the pressures put on students in contemporary public school classrooms in the United States.

**Problem of Practice**

Currently at Morning Glory Elementary School (MGES) [pseudonym], many students begin the school year without the necessary pre-requisites for reading. From the research, it is clear that a strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Department of Education, 2011). With Morning Glory Elementary School being a high poverty, Title I school, our incoming kindergarten students often lack this necessary language development. Standards and curricula are created based upon the needs of white-middle class students, thus causing schools to operate as a deficit-model when their demographics do not meet that target. A lack of language is perceived based upon those norms, but regardless of the perceived need for language development, the high expectations required of kindergarteners pushes our kindergarten team to immediately start reading instruction. Rather than filling in the gap some students have with oral language, we begin phonics instruction during the first week in order to implement reading groups several weeks into the school year.

MGES is a personalized learning school. The school’s vision is to provide instruction to students based on their individual needs. By filling gaps in learning, rather than skipping over them, children should experience more success. Pushing our students when they are not ready will only end in frustration and less overall academic success.
Expectations derived from the state standards expect students to have a foundation in oral language and reading skills. However, the reality is that, “two-thirds of America’s kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the oral language skills of kindergarten students and the relationship of those skills with comprehension. It is the goal of the researcher to determine whether the academic push toward reading at the beginning of kindergarten is appropriate for her group of students, or if more developmentally appropriate practices at the start of the year, such as oral language instruction for those who need it, will help students meet the districts reading goals.

Research Questions

The research question that guided this quantitative study was as follows: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?

Philosophy

A person must embody leadership characteristics in order to become an action researcher. Chapter 1 of this dissertation introduced my positionality and what has led me to complete my research concerning the correlation between a child’s oral language and ability to tell a story and his or her comprehension. The following details what literature has stated about leadership and my philosophy of leadership. Leadership, as it is described below, needs to exist in the school culture in order for research to occur.
An effective leader values the opinions or and collaborative opportunities with others (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011/2013; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010/2013; Robinson, 2011/2013; Sergiovanni, 1992/2013; Snyder, 2006/2013). Effective leaders accomplish their aims through using collective leadership, which is leadership that involves working together, soliciting diverse opinions, and sharing power (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011/2013). It includes members of the school faculty as well as parents and the entire school community. A leader who works hard to create meaningful community involvement creates a positive school culture that leads to increased student performance (Gordon & Louis, 2012/2013; Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010/2013). This is important because, ultimately, the goal of being a school leader is to make decisions that best serve the needs of students. In order to make this happen, leaders need to “start viewing parents and community stakeholders as vital partners in the learning process” (Gordon & Louis, 2012/2013, p. 361).

In addition to collaborating, it is also important for a leader to set up a culture of respect and openness that is centered on important values such as creating life-long learners. Certain qualities of a healthy culture should be established and maintained including collegiality, trust, support, celebration, and communication (Barth, 2004/2013). Leaders should create an environment in which their employees feel comfortable coming to them for direction or guidance (Snyder, 2006/2013). Trust needs to be developed through respect, a show of concern, and the availability of an open door policy (Leithwood, Harris, & Strauss, 2010/2013; Robinson, 2011/2013). This type of school culture also fosters learning for students and for educators as well (Barth, 2004/2013).
Essentially, a good leader is one who promotes education, regardless of his or her exact job title. Currently, the researchers view of leadership involves a teacher who is the leader of her classroom and strives to be a leader among her colleagues. However, the values and ideas that make up this philosophy are ultimately transferable to any leadership position.

Leaders have the courage to do what is right. They must be equipped to make important decisions and embrace change when needed. Changes occur yearly; a change can pertain to curriculum, assessment, or pedagogy, and it can potentially separate people into categories of those who are eager for it, those who grudgingly accept it, and those who refuse to be a part of it. Leaders must work hard to bring people together when a change will have a positive outcome. They must also be brave enough to speak up if they feel a change could have a negative effect.

Educational leaders always have student learning in mind. Student’s education should prepare them for the world in which they exist and for the choices and challenges they will face. We should understand that to be a happy and productive member of society, certain emotional characteristics such as empathy, compassion, self esteem, and reason should be intermingled with learning to read, write and compute mathematic equations. The latter will help students function in the world and become independent while the former will help them be happy in the world and coexist with others. A good leader is one that will lead his or her students by setting this example.

For the researcher, being a leader and a teacher means to the researcher that she will earn the respect of my students so they will want to succeed not only for her, but even more so, for themselves. The researcher wants all of her students to understand that
all mistakes are learning opportunities and that together they will learn. While she does think that students should be corrected if they have not mastered a concept or skill, she seeks to do so in a manner that is not belittling and will leave them with a confidence in their abilities as well as with a new goal. The researcher believes in teaching and disciplining each student with dignity and respect.

Another goal for leaders is to help determine how each child will succeed in the classroom as well as outside of school. This may seem like a lofty and arduous task but if one child fails to learn then we need to work harder to get through to her or him. The researcher does not want to be the type of leader, who hinders learning by inducing fear. Rather, she seeks to foster an atmosphere of positive emotions and to instill a desire to be helpful to all students in the class. She believes in promoting a school environment where caring and compassion are just as important as academics. This encourages students to be more socially adept and empathetic to all individuals inside and outside of the classroom.

This philosophy of leadership demonstrates the researcher’s readiness for research and for taking on the leadership role that comes with it. The researcher recognizes, understands, and embodies the qualities needed to be a leader for the completion of this action research study. Through taking on a leadership role by researching the relationship and achievement of oral language, storytelling, and comprehension of kindergarten students, the researcher seeks to help inform her own teaching as well as the teaching of colleagues in the school and district.
Purpose of the Review

A literature review was conducted for this study through focusing on the areas of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), comprehension, and oral language. In general, the purpose of completing a literature review is to provide a researcher with a deeper understanding of current and historical literature and research studies pertaining to their problem of practice. Conducting a review of literature enables a researcher to better formulate her research problem, to gain insight into different ideas, perspectives, and approaches, and to help the researcher understand the findings from her own study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005), ”The more you know about investigations and perspectives related to your topic, the more effectively you can tackle your own research problem” (p. 65). Thus, it is the job of the researcher to read as much as she can about her topic in order to become an expert in that area.

When beginning a study, reviewing research allows the researcher to delimit the research problem. It also helps the researcher to find gaps in what has been done in order to direct the current study. Additionally, reviewing related literature can aide in uncovering an appropriate methodology and research design for the researcher’s proposed study. It allows the researcher to discover what has been done before and what has worked as well as suggestions for how to try it differently. Finally, through understanding current opinions in the field being studied, the researcher is able to better guide the creation and implementation of her study. As a result of keeping up with these contemporary views on the subject, changes to the study’s design or focus may occur as new information is published.
Without a review of literature, the researcher would ultimately be giving an opinion without a solid base. This review must occur in order to provide rationale for the researcher’s problem of practice and methodology and to substantiate any claims made due to the results from the study.

**Methodology**

**Action Research**

To develop a solution to this study’s problem of practice, action research was utilized. Action research is a method used by researchers who are invested in a situation and seek a change that will benefit them as teachers or the learning of their students. This method of research is used in order to improve education in a planned way, wherein the researcher is a participant and the questions are relevant to her (Mertler, 2014). However, action research does not usually provide a one-time answer. It is a cyclical method that requires constant reflection on the part of the researcher in order to test ideas that may need to be change and undergo reimplementation (2014). There are four specific stages of action research: the planning stage, the acting stage, the developing stage, and the reflection stage (2014). While the reflecting stage is at the end it is important to point out that reflection occurs through all the stages just as it occurs consistently as good teaching practice. Upon reflection, the researcher may need to go through the process again in order to reach her goals (2014).

School curriculum is often developed based on the best practices determined through educational research studies. Teachers often find that many of these practices do not meet the reality of teaching. Notably, Mertler (2014) discussed this gap between theory and practice, “Often, these research findings do not appreciate or even take into
account teachers’ points of view, the complexities of the teaching-learning process, or the practical challenges teachers must address in their classrooms on a daily basis” (p. 22).

Action research allows teachers to have direct involvement in the research process to determine the best practices because they act as participant researchers and are using their own environments (e.g., schools and classrooms), to ensure relevance, to collectively reflect on data, and to share effective practices with their colleagues.

Based on the identified ‘problem of practice’ and in order to answer the aligned research question the researcher used a quantitative action research design. Quantitative action research is used to determine relationships among constructs when data can be quantified as numerals. This study looks at two main variables: (a) oral language and (b) comprehension. The variable of comprehension will be separated into two measures: reading comprehension and listening comprehension. These variables were measured in each student in order to determine achievement levels and if any relationships existed. Specifically, this study will examined the relationship between these variables to determine if oral language has an effect on a kindergarten student’s ability to comprehend different types of text. Therefore, in regard to specific designs of quantitative action research studies, in order to determine if a relationship existed within her students’ beginning-of-the-year data, the researcher used a correlation design. Chapter 3 of this dissertation will describe the research design in detail.

Related Studies

Most studies related to measures of oral language and of comprehension are quantitative in nature. They have sought to determine a relationship between two variables and therefore, are considered correlation studies. One related study, “Young
Children’s Oral Language: Effects of Task”, applied repeated measures analysis of variance to determine the areas of oral language that were used for different tasks (Nurss & Hough, 1985). While this study included more variables than the present study, finding correlations proved effective to observe relationships between each oral language task. In addition, when looking at narrative comprehension, Paris and Paris (2003) also chose to use correlation to determine if a relationship existed between variables. Spira, Bracken, and Fischel (2005) also used correlation when looking at kindergarten measures and the extent to which scores changed each year.

Another oral language study examined the effectiveness of a specific literacy intervention using pre- and post-tests (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). This design may be incorporated into a later study. If a correlation is found between oral language and comprehension, then the next step may be to implement a change in instruction that would best be assessed using a pre-test, post-test design.

Theory

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Joel Spring (2014) touched on the idea of developmentally appropriate practices in The American School: A Global Context. Concerning teaching methods, Spring (2014) discussed Johann Pestalozzi’s idea of methods of teaching being related to human development. Emphasis was put on loving encouragement in order to guide a child’s personal experiences (Brosterman, 1997). Teachers should be changing their method of instruction in order to fit students’ level of human development. According to Pestalozzi, instruction should be active, hands-on, and conducted in small groups (Brosterman, 1997). This view is based on the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau- specifically, that
young children are not capable of reasoning and instead need to learn from experience and nature (Spring, 2014). Both Pestalozzi and Rousseau recognized there are different levels of human development and the need to alter methods of teaching depends on a student’s level.

Through the work of theorists John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky the importance of developmentally appropriate practice has been further emphasized. According to Jean Piaget, kindergarten students are in the preoperational stage of development (Mooney, 2000). In this stage, children are forming their own knowledge based on their experiences (Mooney, 2000). Dewey stresses the importance for teachers to observe students to determine their interests and the experiences they are ready to have (Flinders & Thornton, 2013; Mooney, 2000). However, in contemporary kindergarten classrooms, there is too much that is mandated and only minimal time for students to have worthwhile experiences that may result in natural learning.

One study demonstrated how teachers recognize the need for DAP with kindergarten students, but the pressure of academic requirements causes these teachers to stray from what they know is best (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). This is due to the pressure for kindergarten students to meet “inappropriate expectations including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 3). The building blocks of reading are being ignored with the push toward academics in kindergarten. Children need to develop oral language, play, and experiment with symbols and printed words because they are all important components of later reading (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). These vital components of reading are being skipped, though, without consideration of the detriment it could pose for student learning.
Oral Language

Elliot W. Eisner (2001/2013) stated, “The function of schooling is not to enable students to do better in school. The function of schooling is to enable students to do better in life” (p. 281). The purpose of school is to help students positively contribute to and succeed in life- not simply to excel on tests. One way to use schools to prepare students for life rather than for tests is through helping students engage in challenging conversations (Eisner, 2011/2013). Teachers need to allow time to talk and work through problems using conversation. As Eisner (2011/2013) noted, “Perhaps we should be less concerned with whether they can answer our questions than with whether they can ask their own” (p. 283).

Language learning is an important component of cognitive development. Lev Vygotsky believed that through working on a child’s language, one was at the same time advancing the child’s cognitive development (Mooney, 2000). In order to do this, kindergarten classrooms need to place greater emphasis on play and oral language development. A strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Department of Education, 2011). Thus, we need to rethink the stresses we are putting on kindergarten students to begin reading early in the school year. Instead we need to focus more on language development and developmentally appropriate practices of play and experience in order for students to be more successful in the long run.

Reading

In The Simple View of Reading, Hoover and Gough (1990) stated that the ability to read for meaning involves one’s ability to decode text and her or his comprehension of language. In Hoover and Gough’s (1990) opinion, decoding and comprehension work
together during the act of reading. Other reading theories include the top down theory and the bottom up theory. The *top down theory* emphasizes that meaning is the focus when trying to read text. The bottom up theory, on the other hand, asserts that phonics must be taught first; meaning occurs after accurate decoding (Department of Education, 2011).

As Lucy Calkins (2001), a member of the Teacher’s College Reading and Writing Project based at Columbia University, asked, “If we want to help our children think deeply about texts and live comfortably in the world of ideas, won’t we want to introduce them to this kind of thinking from the very start?” (p. 305). This ‘thinking deeply’ about texts is how young children engage in comprehension. According to Calkins (2001), even young children need to be taught about and engaged in comprehension. *Comprehension* refers to the process in which readers create meaning with a text through their use of prior knowledge and experience, the information presented, and their attitudes toward the text (Pardo, 2004). Marie Clay (1991) defined reading as “a message-getting, problem solving activity which increases in power and flexibility the more it is practiced” (p. 6). Thus, reading is not simply the process of decoding words but is instead the ability to make meaning or to comprehend.

One way to engage young children in comprehension is through the use of meaningful conversations (Calkins, 2001). As Vygotsky (1978) concluded, “The most significant moment in the course of intellectual development, which gives birth to the purely human forms of practical and abstract intelligence, occurs when speech and practical activity, two previously completely independent lines of developments,
converge” (p. 24). When related to Clay’s viewpoint, speech refers to discussions and practical activity refers to the act of reading.

History

Origins of Kindergarten

The concept of kindergarten originated from Friedrich Froebel in Germany in 1840 and was adapted in the United States in the 1860s and 1870s (Spring, 2014). Until Froebel’s introduction of kindergarten, students under age 7 did not attend school (Brosterman, 1997). Froebel’s view of kindergarten was that it should be a place where children explore their interests and the teacher merely serves as a guide (“Friedrich Froebel,” 2000). Students engaged in building with blocks, singing, dancing, drawing, using clay to make models, paper-cutting, and observing nature (Brosterman, 1997). Kindergarten was intended to be a place of self-discovery. The work done in kindergarten “would have been considered play outside of the schoolroom” (Brosterman, 1997, p. 12). Rather than being told what to learn, teachers simply guided students in order to meet individual needs.

Froebel’s kindergarten was designed to meet each child’s need for: physical activity, the development of sensory awareness and physical dexterity, creative expression, exploration of ideas and concepts, the pleasure of singing, the experience of living among others, and satisfaction of the soul. (“Friedrich Froebel,” 2000, p. 63)

In Froebel’s kindergarten, play was essential (Brosterman, 1997). This created a “sensitive and inquisitive child with an uninhibited curiosity and genuine respect for nature, family, and society; a reasoning and creative child who would later have few
problems learning the three Rs or anything else” (Brosterman, 1997, p. 39). Through play and discovery, Froebel prepared students for the academic work that lay ahead.

When the idea of kindergarten was adopted into the United States, it was based on Froebel’s ideas. Kindergarten was meant to provide socialization, protect children from negative influences, and prepare them for regular schooling (Spring, 2014). Ultimately, the purpose of kindergarten was more for socialization and the teaching of school norms than for the teaching of academic skills. Attitudes about this purpose changed drastically in the 1970s. Rather than worry about protecting children, the concern was now to prepare them for what was ahead (Spring, 2014). This change in society’s viewpoint of childhood caused a change in how kindergarten needed to function. Rather than using play as a method for learning and allowing children to cultivate their imaginations, children are now tested on literacy and math skills (Miller & Almon, 2009).

In 2002, The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) placed more stress on academics. About 56% of children were enrolled in full-day kindergarten in 1998, whereas in 2014 that number increased to 80% (Bassok, Claessens, & Engel, 2014). As Spring (2014) noted, “Preparation replaced protection and innocence as even children in kindergarten were educated to be global workers” (p. 353).

Standards and Curriculum

According to Sleeter and Stillman (2005/2013), “Across the United States, in an attempt to raise standards for student learning, states have developed curriculum standards that specify what students are to learn” (p. 253). In South Carolina, reading standards have been referred to as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS); however, beginning in fall 2015, they became the South Carolina College and Career Ready
Standards (SCCCRS) for English Language Arts. Both sets of standards are highly similar at the kindergarten level. However, the new state standards address the need for developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten.

In regard to both Inquiry-Based Literacy Standards, and Communication Standards, the need for daily opportunities for play and exploration are addressed in the SCCCRS (South Carolina, 2015). While it is imperative that the importance of play and discovery is once again included in the standards, academic requirements for reading comprehension are still high. The SCCCRS for English Language Arts (2015) still require students to read emergent level texts with purpose and understanding and also require higher-level comprehension of texts read aloud.

While emergent level texts are thought to be simple, repetitive texts (a guided reading level of B), most districts in SC require kindergarteners to finish the year reading at a guided reading level C or D (or a DRA level of 4-6). Thus, kindergarten teachers need to find a way to take students who enter in the fall with a limited understanding of the alphabet, story structure, and often times language in general and find a developmentally appropriate way to have them successfully exit in May. In particular, students need to be able to read as well as understand texts read both independently and aloud at levels often higher than developmentally appropriate.

In 2014, South Carolina passed The Read to Succeed Act aimed at increasing literacy across the state. Portions of the act look specifically at early childhood education, and early reading. For instance, Element 6 calls for expanding pre-kindergarten programs and ensuring students are strong in language and literacy (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). Increased opportunity for this development in
pre-kindergarten may result in more students being ready to learn to read in kindergarten. In addition, Element 2 explains that the implementation of readiness assessments will be required for both pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2015). These assessments will ensure teachers are aware of student’s beginning literacy levels; however, they do not specifically address the issue of those students who are not developmentally ready for the academics involved in kindergarten.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) sponsored The Foorman Study, which resulted in a push for phonics instruction for beginning readers (Sleeter & Stillman, 2005/2013). Phonics instruction helps a child learn associations between letters and sounds and how to use them effectively to read words. However, it does not instruct students in regard to comprehending what he or she reads. Reading is considered the ability to both decode and read words but also to create meaning from text. The Reading First initiative’s goal is to have students reading at, or above, grade level by the time they reach third grade (“An Overview,” 2015). In order to accomplish this aim, the recommendation is to focus on five key areas in reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (“An Overview,” 2015). In kindergarten, the focus is currently placed more on phonemic awareness and fluency than on the other three key components.

While The Reading First initiative and the South Carolina Standards recognize the importance of comprehension in kindergarten, the curriculum still focuses more on phonemic awareness and phonics. The district this study was completed in requires kindergarteners to be assessed three times a year using the Aims Web test. Aims Web for reading assesses four areas: letter naming, letter sounds, phonemic segmentation, and
nonsense words (“AIMS web,” 2012). Essentially, this test measures how quickly students can say letter names, letter sounds, phonemes in orally presented words, and the sounds of visually shown non-real words. It does not assess the ability to read or comprehend real texts.

The Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) measures students’ instructional reading level in relation to their ability to decode words and understand text. This is required to be administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the year; however, the lower text levels do not include a comprehension assessment. If the goal of Reading First is to have students reading at or above grade level by third grade, then teachers need to worry more about reading as a whole (decoding and comprehension) in kindergarten rather than focusing on phonics instruction to learn to decode.

Comprehension is the process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text through the combination or prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text.

(Pardo, 2004, p. 272)

Comprehension is a process that needs to be modeled and taught. In kindergarten, teachers need to find a way through the use of texts read aloud and books at children’s instruction reading levels to teach the strategies needed in order to engage in true reading. While phonics instruction is a part of reading, it should not be the sole focus.

**Oral Language**

Oral language refers to spoken language- i.e., talking. Whether it is a conversation, a speech, or telling a story, it is regarded as oral language. Methods to improve oral language in kindergarten include the following: practice with phonemic
awareness activities, oracy groups, storytelling opportunities, and play centers that include elements such as blocks, a kitchen, and puppets. Of these listed methods, engaging children in phonemic awareness activities is the only method completed every day in the majority of the five kindergarten classrooms in the Title I school where research occurred. This portion of the literature review will look at oral language in regard to the functions of language and storytelling.

**Functions of language.** Eisner (2011/2013) commented that in order for students to do well in life, which is the true reason for schooling, they must be able to engage in intellectual conversations. In order for students to be able to develop their own questions and engage in intellectual conversations that further learning and the thinking process, they need to have been taught the basics of oral language. The term *oral language* describes the ability to engage in conversations, use vocabulary and grammar correctly, ask and answer questions, listen and follow directions, and demonstrate phonemic awareness skills (i.e., identify, segment, blend, and change syllables and phonemes orally) (North Carolina State Dept., 2001). Oral language can be used for different purposes. The seven functions of oral language are as follows:

1. Instrumental (using language to get what one wants)
2. Informative (using language to tell what one knows)
3. Personal (using language to express one’s identity)
4. Heuristic (language used to speculate and predict: problem solving)
5. Regulatory (language used to control: telling someone what to do)
6. Interactional (language used to work with others and have relationships)
7. Aesthetic (language used to entertain and show imagination)
(North Carolina State Dept., 2001)

Each of these functions needs to be modeled and practiced. While this is often done in the home environment, many low-income students arrive at school without these functions in place. Thus, it becomes the teacher’s duty to fill the gaps and strengthen that child’s oral language. This is important because “oral language is the foundation on which reading is built” (North Carolina State Department, 2001, p. 1).

**Storytelling.** Storytelling refers to the act of a child using her or his oral language to create or retell a story. Storytelling helps children to build story skills. Additionally, “telling a story is their way of showing understanding and interpreting what they know” (Burke, 2010, p. 40). Through incorporating storytelling into curriculum for young children, they can become readers and writers at a younger age than is typical (Bhattacharyya, 2010). Storytelling helps build oral language, which in turn builds a stronger foundation for reading (Burke, 2010). It allows for a meaningful transition between a symbolic use of letters to genuine reading and writing (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

**Comprehension**

Reading skills, especially phonics and decoding, are being pushed starting at the beginning of kindergarten. However, according to the National Reading Panel’s (2000) report “Comprehension is critically important to the development of children’s reading skills and therefore the ability to obtain an education” (p. 13). Reading First, a federally funded program meant to increase the success rates of students from low-income families, helped increase kindergarteners’ ability to decode words; however, comprehension was not improved (Miller & Almon, 2009).
According to David Pearson, Reading First has resulted in less time for children to read for meaning as well as less time engaged in class conversations about texts (Allington & Pearson, 2011). In a discussion about DIBELS and early literacy, Richard Allington commented that the DIBELS assessment (focused on phonics and phonemic awareness) does not predict reading achievement and that using this as an assessment creates a society where “kids can read fast and accurately, but don’t comprehend a thing that they’re reading” (Allington & Pearson, 2011, p. 71). While children need to be taught to decode in order to read, it is not the ultimate goal of reading. The goal of reading is to comprehend a text’s meaning. Thus, comprehension of text is most important, and it is crucial that it is taught beginning in kindergarten (Pardo, 2004).

Comprehension can be linked to both oral comprehension and listening comprehension. Oral refers to what is read, while listening is comprehension of a text read aloud to a student. Orally read comprehension in kindergarten can be assessed in terms of a student’s comprehension of pictures and/or printed words. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), “Comprehension is an active process that requires intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text” (p. 13). Deriving meaning from pictures relates to the cognitive process used when making meaning from printed words (Paris & Paris, 2003). At the beginning of kindergarten, most students cannot read printed words; thus, comprehension must be assessed in regard to the meaning derived from pictures.

**Link Between Oral Language and Comprehension**

In order to teach comprehension in kindergarten, each student’s oral language needs to be examined. As Nurss and Hough (2010) stated, “Oral language fluency and
success in beginning reading have long been linked” (p. 280). Combined with experience, children use oral language when learning to read and write because it helps establish a connection between sound and print (North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction, 2001). Skill development and a foundation in oral language help students become literate learners; however, students often do not come to kindergarten with these necessities in place (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010).

In their study concerning the role of early literacy in predicting improvement for students who had reading difficulties in first grade, Spira et al. (2005) found children who lack oral language skills and an understanding of the structure of language tended to be less able to decode and comprehend written text. Thus, children who did not have a strong base in language were less likely to make progress in reading. Spira et al. (2005) concluded that emergent literacy skills should be taken into consideration when developing programs for both preschool and kindergarten. As they stated, “Emergent literacy curricula should be incorporated into existing early childhood programs to prepare children for formal reading experience by targeting language development” (Spira et al., 2005, p. 233).

**Diversity in Language and Early Literacy**

Most classroom environments are diverse. They include children of different genders and ethnicities, and from different backgrounds. Yet, the expectations set are generally the same for all students.

Socio-economic status can have a substantial effect on academic achievement. According to Mantsios (2007/2013), “Approximately one out of every five children (4.4 million) in the United States under the age of six lives in poverty” (p. 151). Children
living in poverty most likely have parents who need to work more than one job, or need to take jobs at various hours. Thus, they become “latchkey” children who do not have support at home (Collins, Yeskel, & United for a Fair Economy and Class Action, 2013). This lack of parent involvement causes low-income students to lag behind peers when entering school. Hart and Risley (2003) found that “in four years, an average child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family 13 million words” (p. 9). Thus, children with lower Socio-Economic Status are entering school behind in language development; therefore, they are lacking in literacy.

This lack often corresponds with race, as well. The demographics and how schools are zoned result in institutional racism. As Tatum (1997/2013) noted, “There is still a great deal of segregation in our communities” (p. 65). As such, there is still segregation in our schools. At the predominantly African American Title I school where the study took place there is a connection between race and Socio-Economic Status. Due to the oppression against African Americans and the difficulties in securing adequate jobs and housing, they often fall into the lower-income bracket (Lipsitz, 1998/2013). Thus, the word gap that Hart and Risley (2003) referred to for lower-income students can be applied to African American students as well.

Gender differences exist as early as kindergarten. Gender roles concern society’s definition of masculine and feminine (Hackman, 2013). In general, they are created as a result of stereotypes of what society interprets as masculine and feminine behaviors. These categories are linked to the two divisions of sex: males are masculine and females
are feminine. These distinctions in gender, and what it means to be of one gender, are carried through to education. Boys tend to be seen as strong in math and science, while girls are thought to excel in areas of English Language Arts. According to Brozo (2006), “The notion that girls read better than boys do has become embedded in the popular consciousness” (p. 71). While the data are somewhat dated, national tests scores (around 2005) show that “girls have met or exceeded the reading performance of boys at all age levels” (Taylor, 2005, p.292). Taylor (2005) suggested for educators to incorporate more choices in reading: offering material of high interest to students could result in greater learning. Through recognizing the gender gap, “teachers can capitalize on the resources that boys already possess for becoming engaged and competent readers” (Brozo, 2006, p. 74).

**Personalized Learning**

In, *The False Promise of the Paideia* (1983/2013), Nel Noddings argued against the curricular ideas of Mortimer Adler. In Adler’s (1982/2013) *The Paideia Proposal*, he claimed that in order to achieve equal education, schools need to offer the same courses without any other choices (with the exception of which second language to learn). Noddings (1983/2013) challenged Adler and inquired about the students who would be subjected to the set curriculum. After all, one set curriculum cannot meet the needs of all learners.

When children must all study the same material and strive to meet the same standards, it becomes infinitely easier to sort and grade them like so many apples on a conveyor belt. Are we to say, then, that they all had an equal chance? (Noddings, 1983/2013, p. 190).
Teachers need to find a way to give students a true equal chance at education while still ensuring the standards set forth by the state are met. How can teachers ensure each of their kindergarten students meets (or works toward) the reading standards set by the state, while taking into consideration what is developmentally appropriate for their age or for each individual learner?

According to “What Is Competency” (2015), “Competency-Based Education refers to an education system where students are placed in developmentally appropriate levels, and receive instruction on the competencies required to move to the next level.” Due to a Race to the Top Grant from the government, the district that this research is occurred in is participating in this initiative, which we refer to as Personal Mastery, or Personalized Learning. Personal Mastery is defined as an approach to learning where students have ownership over their learning and teachers facilitate learning based on mastery of standards (“What is Competency,” 2015). The target school considers this to be showing 80% mastery of a standard in relation to its level of rigor. Thus, when beginning the school year, the researcher needed to consider what each child needs to know at that point, to assess each child, and to attempt to fill the gaps prior to teaching kindergarten standards. Without having the knowledge of oral language and storytelling to build on, students cannot be expect to master standards that assume they do.

**Key Concepts**

The key terms and definitions related to this study are as follows:

**Action Research:** A four-step process of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting implemented by a researcher directly involved in the environment who seeks to make a change to improve education (Mertler, 2014).
**Cognitive Development:** The process of acquiring intelligence, thought, and problem-solving abilities from infancy to adulthood (Dictionary.com).

**Competency-Based Education:** “Competency-Based Education refers to an education system where students are placed in developmentally appropriate levels, and receive instruction on the competencies required to move to the next level” (“What is Competency,” 2015).

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP):** The learning strategies that are deemed appropriate for a certain age-range based upon their levels of cognitive, social, and emotional development.

**DIBELS:** Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills. A standardized test designed to measure literacy skills including phonemic awareness, alphabetic principles and phonics, accurate and fluent reading, vocabulary, and comprehension (Dynamic Measurement Group, 2015).

**DRA-2:** Developmental Reading Assessment. A standardized test designed to measure the instructional reading level of the person being assessed.

**Emergent Literacy:** Literacy skills prior to conventional forms of reading and writing. The skills that help prepare a child to read and write printed words.

**Functions of Language:** The different purposes for which oral language is used (North Carolina State Dept., 2001).

**Language Learning:** The way in which a person acquires oral language.

**Listening Comprehension:** The ability to make meaning from words one has heard.

**Literacy:** The ability to read and write.

**Oracy Groups:** Oral language intervention groups.
**Oral Comprehension:** The ability to make meaning from words one has read or narrative (pictures) one has seen.

**Oral Language:** Spoken language.

**Personalized Learning:** Refers to schools implementing a personal mastery approach to learning and an overall competency-based education outlook.

**Personal Mastery:** An approach to learning where students have ownership over their own learning and teachers facilitate learning based on the mastery of standards (“What is Competency,” 2015).

**Phonemic Awareness:** The ability to identify and manipulate specific sounds (phonemes) in spoken words.

**Phonics:** A method of teaching reading that relies on letters and letter sounds.

**Pre-operational Stage of Development:** According to Piaget, this is the cognitive stage of development in which children are egocentric, gather information from experience, can focus on one characteristic at a time, and tend to overgeneralize (Mooney, 2000).

**Storytelling:** The act of retelling, or creating, a story using spoken words.

**Conclusion**

Several conclusions can be drawn from this literature review. Kindergarten is becoming more driven by academics, and less by play and experience, due to increased demands on learning (Carlsson-Paige, et al., 2011; Miller & Almon, 2009; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2009). Though this is the case, research and experts in the field have still determined that kindergarten aged students learn best through conversation, experience, and play (Burke, 2010; Carlsson-Paige et al., 2011; Mooney, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).
One way to merge developmentally appropriate practice with the expectations set by standards is through instruction in oral language. Studies have revealed a connection between oral language and reading achievement (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010; North Carolina State Dept. of Public Instruction, 2001; Nurss & Hough, 2010; Spira et al., 2005). This study will look at oral language and how it relates to the comprehension element of reading.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The present Action Research study describes the role of kindergarten students’ oral language skills and their ability to create meaning from wordless picture books and texts read orally by a teacher. Chapter 3 of the dissertation in practice (DiP) delineates the methods applied and the research design used to address the identified problem of practice (PoP) that involves 39 kindergarten students at the researcher’s Title I school.

The review of literature in Chapter 2 of the DiP details the importance of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP’s) for young children’s learning to create meaning from texts. Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) argued over a decade ago for the need for DAP with kindergarten students. Today, the pressure for kindergarten students to meet “inappropriate expectations including academic standards that until recently were reserved for first grade” (Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 3) is high. The building blocks or what the researcher refers to as the “vital components” of reading are being ignored with the push toward academics in kindergarten. Children need to develop oral language, play and experiment with symbols and printed words because they are all important components of later reading (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). At the researcher’s Title I school, which is the focus of the present study, these vital components of reading are being skipped by the school district without the consideration of the negative consequences of skipping the components on students’ learning.
**Problem of Practice**

Expectations derived from the state standards expect students to have a foundation in oral language and reading skills. The systems upon which these standards are developed are meant to target white-middle class students. Thus, students of poverty who are entering school with less experience with language are being looked at in regard to deficit-model, rather than focusing on how to bridge the gap. The reality is that, “two-thirds of America’s kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28).

Currently at Morning Glory Elementary School (MGES) (pseudonym), many students begin the school year without the necessary pre-requisites for reading. From research, we know that a strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Department of Education, 2011). Students who qualify for free and reduced meals determine the socioeconomic class status; the researcher’s school is labeled as high poverty, and qualifies for the status of a Title I. As a result, many of our incoming kindergarteners have not developed the language development skills that are associated with middle and upper class SES students. In order to meet the needs of these low SES students, many teachers start the school year with letters and sight words; however currently there is not a focus on language development. This pedagogical technique has not proven to be effective with our particular kindergarten population. Therefore, MGES has adopted a personalized learning philosophy with a vision to provide kindergarten students with reading comprehension skills that correspond with their individual level.
**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this action research study is to examine the oral language skills of kindergarten students and the relationship of those skills and comprehension of wordless picture books and a text read orally by a teacher. It is the goal of the researcher to determine whether the academic push toward reading at the start of kindergarten is appropriate for her group of students, or if more developmentally appropriate practices at the beginning of the year, such as oral language instruction for those who need it, will help students meet the district reading goals.

In order to help determine what is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten students and to identify how to best help them achieve the high expectations set out for them, the research question that guided this quantitative study was as follows: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?

**Research Design**

Using an action research model, this participant-researcher seeks to determine if there is a relationship between oral language and comprehension of wordless picture books and orally read texts in regard to her kindergarten students. Action research follows a cycle of planning, acting, and reflecting in order to create a change in an area in which the researcher is an active participant (Mertler, 2014). Action research is relevant to this study because the researcher conducted research with her students in order to better inform the researcher’s instruction. To do this, quantitative research was used through conducting a correlation study. The study determines if there is a connection between oral language skills and comprehension for this group of students in order to
inform instruction for the beginning of the year at this Title I school. A strong $r$-value through Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient demonstrates the need to change teaching to address more oral language instruction within the researcher’s school, while a weak value would demonstrate no strong need for a change.

**Participants**

Participants in this study will be based on random selection. The pool consists of students assigned to the researcher and her partner teacher’s kindergarten classes, and the actual participants will be based on parent’s permission for their child to be included in the study. A letter of consent will be sent home to explain the study and request parent approval for participation (Appendix A). After sending home this letter of consent, 39 parents gave permission for their children to participate in the study.

Participants were 4 and 5 years old at the start of the study. Approximately 56% of the students had prior schooling. The diversity of participants was based on the school’s random assignment of students to the kindergarten classes. In regard to gender, 24 students identify as male, and 15 identified as female. Racially, 22 students identify as African-American, 9 identified as White, 5 identified as Hispanic, 2 identified as Asian, and 1 identified as mixed-race. Due to being at a Title I school, the majority of students will came from low-income households; however, there was a possibility of having a few students from higher income households. The diversity, in regard to gender, race, and previous schooling, was considered when analyzing results at the end of the study.
Setting

Research will take place in an elementary (grades CD through 4) school in coastal South Carolina. It is a public, Title I school in an urban area. According to the 2014 South Carolina State Report Card, the school is meeting but not exceeding standards. The school serves approximately 760 students. As of 2014, 81% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch; however, for the 2016-2017 school year, the school is 100% free lunch. The largest ethnic group is African American, which makes up more than half of the student population. In addition, the school is made up of the following ethnicities: Asian, Hispanic, White, and Pacific Islander. Recently, the English as a second language, ESOL, population has been on the rise. While the entire school is not part of the study, these demographics are reflected in individual classrooms. This study focuses on two out of five kindergarten classrooms in the school.

In regard to curriculum, the school allows flexibility. The adopted reading program is Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s *Journeys*; however, the district expects for teachers to use readers and writers workshop, in addition to small groups and centers, to teach students. Therefore, flexibility and curriculum ownership is given to teachers to use the resources provided in order to plan for their students needs. In addition, the school is a personal mastery environment. This instructional ideology is outlined in Chapter 2 of this dissertation in practice.

The school does require standardized testing, as well as pre- and post-tests in kindergarten classrooms. While this testing goes against the theorists who frame this study, the researcher and her colleagues need to work within these constraints. Results from this study may help frame a conversation about returning to what we know are best
practices for kindergarten—how early childhood education should be. Unfortunately, due to 21st century demands, the theorists mentioned in this study are an example of how it should be, not how it is.

**Data Collection Strategies**

In order to answer the research questions and problem statement, the researcher needed to use a quantitative research design. Quantitative research is used to determine relationships among constructs when data can be quantified by a numeral. This study looked at two main variables (a) oral language and (b) comprehension. These variables were measured for each student in order to determine achievement, and if a connection between the two existed for this specific population of students. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between these variables to determine if oral language has an effect on a kindergarten student’s ability to comprehend different types of text: a wordless picture book and a short text read orally by a teacher. Therefore, in regard to specific designs of quantitative studies, in order to assess if there is a connection the researcher needed to use a correlation design.

**Oral language.** The first variable is oral language. An overall view of each student’s oral language was measured through the Test of Language Development-Primary-Fourth Edition (TOLD-P:4). The TOLD-P:4 is a standardized, norm-referenced test. In addition, the assessment was tested for reliability. The spoken language composite, which was used in this study, tested at a .97 value when applying Cronbach’s coefficient alpha method, thus demonstrating very high reliability (Newcomer & Hammill, 2008). The assessment took 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete, and assessed the major dimensions of language using 6 subtests that resulted in a score for overall
language ability. The subtests used in this study were picture vocabulary, relational vocabulary, oral vocabulary, syntactic understanding, sentence imitation, and morphological completion. Descriptions of these core subtests that were given can be reviewed in Appendix B. A letter regarding permission to reprint these pages is in Appendix F. Three additional subtests exist but were not utilized because they did not factor into the score for overall language ability. Through using the 6 subtests mentioned above, a score for each student’s overall spoken language ability was determined.

In order to determine students overall oral language scores, referred to on the test as the Spoken Language score, the raw score from each subtest was entered into the scoring software and reporting system. The raw score was simply the number of correct responses for each section. The TOLD-P:4 scoring software then translated these raw scores into scaled scores according to percentile ranks based on normative scores for students of that age range. These scaled scores were then added together to obtain an index score; it was again based on their percentile rank within the normative sample, which represents their overall spoken language ability. The researcher then translated each student’s index score into a descriptive term for an enhanced understanding of what that score means for oral language ability. An index score of 70 or lower signified very poor, a score of 70-79 signified poor, a score of 80-89 signified below average, a score of 90-110 signified average, 111-120 signified above average, 121-130 signified superior, and greater than 130 signified very superior (Newcomer & Hammill, 2008). The index score was used for determining any correlations; however, the descriptive terms associated with each are used in the discussion of results.
**Listening Comprehension.** The second variable, comprehension, was measured by being divided into two subcategories: listening comprehension and oral comprehension. Listening comprehension was measured by using the Listening Comprehension Assessment from Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment (Richardson & Walther, 2013). This was developed by two master reading teachers, aligned with the Common Core Standards, and was classroom-tested. The fiction passage was chosen because it is the literary genre with which most incoming kindergarten students would have experienced. The test was given in small groups of 3 to 4 students to ensure focus on the task rather than completed as a whole group as the assessment direction dictate. This assessment measured comprehension through asking one question in each of the following areas: vocabulary, key details, character analysis/analyzing relationships, inferring, and main idea (see Appendix C). A letter regarding permission to reprint these pages is in Appendix F. Scoring is based on how many questions students answered correctly out of five.

**Reading Comprehension.** The second variable, comprehension, was also assessed in regard to reading comprehension. Currently, the beginning of the year standardized reading assessment is the DRA-2; however, this assessment does not score comprehension until students reach level 4 books. No participant in this study scored high enough on the DRA-2 for his or her comprehension to be measured. Due to the limits of the district’s chosen assessment, oral reading comprehension was measured by reading a wordless book. Scores are based on a percentage of questions answered correctly about the wordless picture book. This assessment was teacher-created based on the research of Paris and Paris (2003) on assessing the narrative comprehension of young
children. Appendix D shows the Narrative Comprehension (NC) Task that Paris and Paris (2003) developed. Specifically, Appendix D is the prompted comprehension questions along with the scoring guide Paris and Paris (2003) proposed. For the purpose of this study, the prompted comprehension questions wording and page numbers will change as well as the last implicit question (theme) based on the wordless picture book being used: *Cat and Dog* by Shoo Rayner (2005). The researcher switched the book choice because the text Paris and Paris (2003) used in their study was copyrighted in 1979 and may not be relevant to or engaging for today’s students. The updated questions used in this study can be found in Appendix E; however, Paris and Paris’s (2003) original scoring rubric was still applied. Students received a score out of 20 for this assessment.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

The relationship among the variables will be assessed using the Pearson correlation coefficient. Analysis through the Pearson correlation coefficient shows the direction of the relationship (positive or negative) and the strength of the relationship. Stata: Data Analysis and Statistical Software program was used to run Pearson’s correlation coefficient. The researcher analyzed several measures. First, the researcher looked at the relationship between overall oral language skills (TOLD-P:4) and listening comprehension, and then again at the TOLD-P:4 compared to oral reading comprehension. This was done by entering the data from each assessment: index scores for the TOLD-P:4, the score out of 5 points achieved on the listening assessment, and the score out of 20 points for the oral reading assessment. The statistical software program then checked for correlations between each set of variables. While the researcher was not able to determine if there is causation between the two variables, determining if a
relationship exists within this specific population of students allowed the researcher to reach conclusions about her own teaching.

When analyzing the results, the diversity of students is taken into consideration. The areas of focus in regard to diversity differences are gender, race, and if students had previous schooling (child development or preschool). All of these components could influence a child’s oral language ability and therefore could help to further explain the results of the study. The results of the study are analyzed in Chapter 4 with regard to the above diversity areas and levels of achievement to determine if commonalities exist and thus, if conclusions can be drawn.

**Conclusion**

The present study involved 39 kindergarten students at the beginning of the year in a Title I school. Each participant was assessed according to her or his achievements of three variables: oral language (TOLD-P:4), listening comprehension (Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment), and oral reading comprehension (wordless picture book task). Scores from each assessment were entered into Stata: Data Analysis and Statistical Software to determine if a connection existed, for this particular population of students, according to Pearson’s correlation coefficient. Chapter 4 describes the results and implications of the present study.
Chapter 4: Findings and Interpretation of Results

Introduction

**Topic.** Kindergarten has changed from a place of play and discovery where students become adjusted to school to a place focused on creating academics with high expectations for the quality, and quantity, of student’s reading and writing upon completion of the class. Recently, questions have been asked regarding what is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten and what should be expected from early childhood classrooms (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). What used to be expected from our first grade students is now an expectation for our kindergarten students. Clearly, kindergarten has become the new first grade (Miller & Almon, 2009). The latest standards presume students have already had experiences on which language and early reading skills were developed. In reality, though, in the researcher’s Title I school, the majority of kindergarten students enter school with no previous education and are likely to be ill prepared for the presented learning targets.

**Problem of practice.** Currently at Morning Glory Elementary School [pseudonym] many students begin the school year without the necessary pre-requisites for reading. From the research, it is clear that that a strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Department of Education, 2011). With Morning Glory Elementary School being a high poverty, Title I school, our incoming kindergarteners often lack this necessary language development. Standards and curricula are created based upon the needs of white-middle class students, thus causing schools to operate as
deficit-model when their demographics do not meet that target. A lack of language is perceived based upon those norms, but regardless of the perceived need for language development, the high expectations required of kindergarteners pushes our kindergarten team to immediately start reading instruction. Rather than filling in the gap some students have with oral language, we begin phonics instruction during the first week in order to implement reading groups several weeks into the school year.

Morning Glory Elementary School is a personalized learning school. This means that our vision is to provide instruction to students based on their individual needs. By filling gaps in learning, rather than skipping over them, children should experience more success. Pushing students when they are not ready will only end in frustration and less overall academic success. Expectations derived from the state standards expect students to have a foundation in oral language and reading skills. Yet, the reality is that, “two-thirds of America’s kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28).

**Statement of purpose.** The purpose of this action research study is to examine the oral language skills of kindergarten students, and to determine if a relationship exists between those skills and comprehension of a wordless picture book and a text read orally by a teacher.

**Research question.** The research question that guided this quantitative study was as follows: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?
**Overview of methodology.** Action research methodology was used to complete this quantitative research study. Action research is a method used by a researcher who is invested in a situation and looking for a change that will benefit her or his teaching and the learning of students. This method of research is used in order to improve education in a planned way where the researcher is a participant and the questions are relevant to her or him (Mertler, 2014). However, action research does not usually provide a one-time answer. It is a cyclical method that requires constant reflection on the part of the researcher in order to test ideas that may need to be changed and implemented again (Mertler, 2014). There are four specific stages of action research: the planning stage, the acting stage, the developing stage, and the reflection stage (Mertler, 2014). While the reflecting stage is at the end it is important to point out that reflection occurs in all of the stages, just as it occurs consistently as part of effective teaching. Upon reflection, the researcher may need to go through the process again in order to reach his or her goals (Mertler, 2014).

Action research was chosen rather than traditional research due to the researcher’s need to be directly involved in the research process. Research took place in the researcher’s classroom among her students with the goal of finding a way to change her teaching that will benefit student learning. In order to do this the researcher needs to have an active role in instruction and assessment. Action research allows this to happen.

The design focused on comparing achievement in three main areas: oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. Oral language was assessed using the TOLD- P:4 (Test of Oral Language Development-Primary: Fourth Edition). This assessment took 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete, and it assessed the major dimensions
of language using six subtests that result in a score for overall language ability. The core subtests are picture vocabulary, relational vocabulary, oral vocabulary, syntactic understanding, sentence imitation, and morphological completion (see Appendix B). Composite scores from these six subtests were then put together utilizing the TOLD P:4 scoring software and reporting system to determine an index score. Thereafter, the index score then translates into a descriptor for overall oral language ability.

Comprehension was measured in regard to listening comprehension and reading comprehension. Listening comprehension was assessed using the Listening Comprehension Assessment from Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment (see Appendix C). This assessment asks one question in each of the following areas: vocabulary, key detail, character analysis/analyzing relationships, inferring, and main idea. Oral reading comprehension was measured by reading a wordless book due to the limited reading ability of kindergarteners. Scores were calculated using the Narrative Comprehension (NC) task developed by Paris and Paris (2003) (See Appendix D). Questions were modeled based on the NC task and the scoring guide was used to obtain a score out of 20 points. The teacher-researcher created assessment based on the NC task is located in Appendix E. This task was chosen because currently MGES teachers currently use the DRA-2 (Developmental Reading Assessment-2) as the standardized measure of reading, and it only assesses comprehension at a text level of 4 or above. Students at the researcher’s school typically score an A or 1 on the beginning of the year DRA-2; therefore, comprehension is not measured.

The relationship between variables (oral language and reading comprehension; oral language and listening comprehension) was assessed at the beginning of the year.
This was done with Pearson correlation coefficient using the Stata statistics program. Analysis through the Pearson correlation coefficient allowed the researcher to determine the direction of the relationship (positive or negative) and the strength of the relationship in regard to this group specific group of students. The researcher needed to analyze several measures. First, the researcher looked at the connection of overall oral language skills (TOLD-P:4) with regard to listening comprehension; she looked again at the TOLD-P:4 compared to oral reading comprehension. While the researcher was not able to determine if there causation existed between the two variables, determining whether or not there was a connection enabled the researcher to reach conclusions and implications about teaching in her classroom and to determine if there is cause for further study into the effects of oral language.

**Findings of the Study**

In order to answer the research question, (i.e., How does kindergarten students’ oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?), Pearson’s correlation coefficient was used to determine if relationships exist utilizing the Stata statistics program. In addition, data was analyzed in regard to differences concerning gender, race, and prior schooling to see what effect each had on student achievement and if any trends exist. It is important to note that in this sample of 39 students, 4 students received ESOL services with 2 students speaking limited to no English, 3 received Speech services, and 3 received special education services. Table 4.1 shows the participant results for all the assessments.
Table 4.1

Summary of Assessment Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Index score</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Listening comprehension</th>
<th>Reading comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Poor</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>82</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.1

*Summary of Assessment Results (continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Index score</th>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Listening comprehension</th>
<th>Reading comprehension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4 show a breakdown of achievement in each area: oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. Each table shows the number of students scoring in the listed range, as well as the overall percentage of the sample they represent.
Table 4.2

*Oral Language Achievement by Descriptor*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Superior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3

*Reading Comprehension Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement (score 0-5)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 6-10)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 11-15)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient (score 16-20)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 shows that the majority of students had an average score on oral language; however, 69.24% of students scored below average, which illustrated an oral language deficiency within this sample of students. Table 4.3 shows that in regard to reading comprehension, the majority of students scored between 6 and 10, which is a developing score, meaning they have not yet mastered the standard. This is appropriate for the beginning of the year.
Table 4.4

*Listening Comprehension Achievement*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 0-2)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 3)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient (score 4)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced (score 5)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The listening comprehension scores in Table 4.4 show that the majority of students scored between a 0 and 2, which shows they are emerging in their knowledge and are in need of help.

**Pearson’s correlation coefficient.** The following table (Table 4.5) shows the relationship of the three variables researched in this study: oral language (var1), reading comprehension (var2), and listening comprehension (var3). These correlations were determined using the Stata data analysis and statistical software.

Table 4.5

*Results of Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient (r)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Oral Language</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading Comprehension</td>
<td>0.7079</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Listening Comprehension</td>
<td>0.1808</td>
<td>-0.0049</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Oral language and reading comprehension.** As shown in Table 4.5, the calculated correlation (r) equals 0.7079. This is a strong, positive correlation. Thus,
there is a connection between oral language and reading comprehension with regard to
this specific set of data for the researcher’s students.

**Oral language and listening comprehension.** As shown in Table 4.5, \( r = 0.1808 \)
for oral language and listening comprehension. It shows a weak, positive relationship;
however, this value is so close to \( r = 0 \) (no linear relationship) that it cannot be said that a
linear relationship exists with regard to this specific set of data for the researcher’s
students.

**Reading comprehension and listening comprehension.** As shown in Table 4.5,
\( r = -0.0049 \) for reading comprehension and listening comprehension with regard to this
specific set of data for the researcher’s students. This is a very weak relationship, and is
close to nonexistent \( (r=0) \).

**Gender differences.** Out of a sample size of 39, 24 participants identified as
male (61.50%), and 15 participants identified as female (38.46%).

Table 4.6

*Oral Language Achievement by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>( n )</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>20.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.7

*Reading Comprehension Achievement by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td>%</td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement (score 0-5)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 6-10)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 11-15)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.8

*Listening Comprehension Achievement by Gender*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td>%</td>
<td><em>n</em></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 0-2)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58.33</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 3)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient (score 4)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced (score 5)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 4.6, 4.7, and 4.8 show the achievement, by gender, in the areas of oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. It is seen in these figures that females typically outperformed males in all three areas. This confirms assertions from Brozo (2006) and Taylor (2005) that there is a gender gap in English Language Arts achievement.
**Racial differences.** Out of a sample size of 39, 22 participants identified as Black (56.4%), 9 identified as White (23.07%), 5 identified as Hispanic (12.82%), 2 identified as Asian (5.13%), and 1 identified as mixed (2.56%). Tables 4.9, 4.10, and 4.11 show the achievement, by race, in the areas of oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. Due to the inequalities in the percentage of different student races involved in the study, as well as the diverse spread of scores for students with the same racial identification, it is difficult to determine any specific trends associated with the data collected.

**Differences in relation to prior schooling.** Out of a sample size of 39, 22 participants, or 56.4%, had some sort of prior schooling: child development at a public or private school, head start, or daycare attendance that included preschool curriculum. Tables 4.12, 4.13, and 4.14 show the achievement of students with prior schooling. From this data, it does not appear that having prior schooling helped boost achievement scores.

Table 4.9

*Oral Language Achievement by Race*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th></th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th></th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th></th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31.82</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.73</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.10

Reading Comprehension Achievement by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Black n</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>White n</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Hispanic n</th>
<th>Hispanic %</th>
<th>Asian n</th>
<th>Asian %</th>
<th>Mixed n</th>
<th>Mixed %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.73%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 0-5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.09%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>66.67%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 6-10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 11-15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 16-20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.11

Listening Comprehension Achievement by Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Black n</th>
<th>Black %</th>
<th>White n</th>
<th>White %</th>
<th>Hispanic n</th>
<th>Hispanic %</th>
<th>Asian n</th>
<th>Asian %</th>
<th>Mixed n</th>
<th>Mixed %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>54.55%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33.33%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 0-2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55.56%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 4)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.09%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(score 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.12

*Oral Language Achievement of Students with Prior Schooling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Prior Schooling</th>
<th>No Prior Schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$%$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superior</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.13

*Reading Comprehension Achievement of Students with Prior Schooling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Prior Schooling</th>
<th>No Prior Schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$n$</td>
<td>$%$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement (score 0-5)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 6-10)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 11-15)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient (score 16-20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.14

*Listening Comprehension Achievement of Students with Prior Schooling*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptor</th>
<th>Prior Schooling</th>
<th>No Prior Schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging (score 0-2)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing (score 3)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient (score 4)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced (score 5)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interpretation of Results of the Study**

The research question that guided this study was as follows: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them? The findings described above show a strong, positive connection between oral language and reading comprehension. However, a weak, or no-linear, connection existed between oral language and listening comprehension as well as between reading comprehension and listening comprehension. Thus, in regard to the research question, a connection exists between a child’s oral language and her or his ability to comprehend written texts for this sample of students. These results cannot be generalized outside of this particular student population. Data from this study do not support a child’s oral language relating to her or his ability to comprehend orally read texts. While the study cannot show causation between the two variables, the strong value between oral language and reading comprehension does have implications for the researcher’s teaching. It implies the importance in explicit instruction for both areas, oral language and reading comprehension, as well as a need to
engage in developmentally appropriate teaching techniques within these areas as discussed in Chapter 2 for the researcher’s students. This idea of utilizing a developmentally appropriate practice will be expanded upon in Chapter 5.

Oral language. Scores for oral language were determined by using the TOLD-P:4 assessment. Detailed information concerning how scores were calculated is available in Chapter 3 of this DiP. The TOLD-P:4 scoring software analyzed student scores on all the subtests to calculate an overall language score, which is referred to as the index score. An index score of 70 or lower signified very poor, a score of 70-79 signified poor, a score of 80-89 signified below average, a score of 90-110 signified average, 111-120 signified above average, 121-130 signified superior, and greater than 130 signified very superior (Newcomer & Hammill, 2008). The index score was used for determining any correlations; however, descriptive terms associated with each were used in the discussion of the results.

The data collected shows overall low achievement in oral language. No students scored in the superior or very superior descriptor range for oral language (an index score of 121 and above). Only one student scored above average (an index of 111-120), and only 11 students (28.21%) scored average (an index of 90-110). More than half of participants (69.24%) scored below average, poor, or very poor. These findings position oral language as an area of concern for incoming kindergarteners at the researcher’s school, which was the anticipated outcome. On average, females scored higher than males, as seen in Figure 8. Due to the uneven sample size in regard to race, it is difficult to assert strengths or weaknesses associated with race. The results are evenly spread. Prior schooling did not appear to have an impact on scores.
Oral language skills are an important component to setting the foundation for beginning reading (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Department of Education, 2011; North Carolina State Department, 2001). Thus, without strong oral language skills, children lack the knowledge needed become strong readers. In one study, teachers recognized the need for using developmentally appropriate strategies, such as oral language instruction, with kindergarteners; however, the pressure from standards and school requirements caused them to stray away from what they knew was best practice (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). These lower oral language scores exist because even though teachers recognize the importance of oral language development, the demands of the curriculum cause them to not spend enough time cultivating these skills.

Low-income schools, such as the Title I school this study was completed in, find that about half of students have no prior schooling that would allow oral language development. Moreover, lower income students typically do not get introduced to as much language at home. In one study, it was found that the average child from a professional family experiences almost 45 million words, a child from a working-class family experiences about 26 million words, and a child from a low-income family experiences only 13 million words. This word gap for low-income students can also be generalized to African American students, as well (Hart & Risley, 2003). The oral language data found in this study, supports Hart and Risley’s (2003) low-income word gap.

**Reading comprehension.** Overall reading comprehension, as measured by the NC Task using a wordless picture book, was low to average. Scores were calculated out of 20 points determined using the NC Task scoring guide (see Appendix D). In order to
obtain a clearer view of the data, the researcher split scores up into 4 ranges: needs improvement, emerging, developing, and proficient. These ranges were determined based on the researcher’s schools evaluation system. Proficient relates to mastery of a skill (a score of 80%). Point ranges were as follows: needs improvement (scores 0-5), emerging (score 6-10), developing (score 11-15), and proficient (score 16-20). No students scored in the highest range of 16-20 points. The majority of students scored between a 5 and 9, which is a score of less than 50% comprehension. Thus, students are entering kindergarten with low comprehension skills at the researcher’s school. No major differences were seen in regard to gender or race and reading comprehension scores.

The above data is not atypical, though, since the study was completed at the beginning of the school year. While students were only required to read a wordless text, about half had no prior schooling. Additionally, as mentioned in the above section on oral language, being a high-poverty school, many students are part of the “low-income word gap” that Hart and Risley (2003) described; therefore, they may not have experience with using texts or having discussions about texts. The ability to read corresponds with the ability to comprehend (i.e., one cannot be a proficient reader if she or he does not understand what is being read). In order to comprehend texts, students need to utilize prior knowledge and/or previous experience, the text itself, and their view of the text (Pardo, 2004). Comprehension is taught through thinking deeply and engaging in conversations about texts (Calkins, 2001). Thus, students need a strong mastery of language in order to be successful in reading. It makes sense that the students in this study would have low overall oral language scores, in addition to low overall

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reading comprehension scores, because children who lack oral language skills tend to be less likely to comprehend what they read (Spira et al., 2005).

**Listening comprehension.** Overall the listening comprehension scores appear average. The Listening Comprehension Assessment from Scholastic’s Next Step Guided Reading Assessment measures listening comprehension through asking one question in each of the following areas: vocabulary, key detail, character analysis/analyzing relationships, inferring, and main idea (see Appendix C). Scoring was based on how many questions students answered correctly out of five. In order to obtain a clearer view of data, the researcher divided scores up into 4 ranges: emerging, developing, proficient, and advanced. These ranges were determined based on the researcher’s schools evaluation system. Proficient relates to mastery of a skill (a score of 80%). Point ranges were as follows: emerging (scores 0-2), developing (score 3), proficient (score 4), and advanced (score 5). The greatest percentage of students scored a 3 out of 5. However, more scored below a 3 than above it, showing that while the majority of students fall in the average range, there is still a great lack of listening comprehension skills with beginning of the year kindergarten students at the researcher’s school. Females scored higher than males in listening comprehension, but not by much. In regard to race, it is again difficult to assert any major trends based on this data. There was not a significant connection between oral language skill and listening comprehension in this study. As a result, differences existed between reading comprehension and listening comprehension. From this study, participants were stronger in listening comprehension than reading comprehension. This may be due to having more experience with listening in regard to directions given from an adult or general conversations. Reading comprehension utilizes
a different set of skills that requires more of an ability to understand story structure, which needs to be more explicitly taught.

**Correlation coefficients.** One significant connection was determined in this study. There was a strong, positive connection between oral language and reading comprehension for this specific group of students. This means that the two variables are somehow related for participants, but, from this study, causation cannot be determined between variables, nor can why the relationship exists. The fact that a strong connection does exist can have implications for the researcher’s teaching beginning of the year kindergartners, though.

There was a weak, positive connection between oral language and listening comprehension; however the value was very close to \( r = 0 \), which implies there is no linear relationship in regard to this specific sample of students. Thus, the relationship is not strong enough to have implications for the researcher’s teaching. The relationship between reading comprehension and listening comprehension was a negative value very close to zero, so implications cannot be drawn from this value.

Spira et al. (2005) found that students without oral language skills and an understanding of the structure of language were less likely to decode and comprehend written text. This research supports Spira (2005) in that the researcher did find a relationship between these two values. Spira (2005), though, alludes to causation or oral language skills having an effect on reading comprehension. This study cannot confirm that; however, it is a starting point for more research on the two variables. This study also helps to confirm the ideas of Nurss and Hough (2010)- specifically, that there is a link between oral language and beginning reading.
Implications. The researcher was not surprised about the strong connection found between the variables of oral language and reading comprehension for her specific students; however, the lack of a connection between oral language and listening comprehension was puzzling. The review of literature in Chapter 2 showed “Oral language fluency and success in beginning reading have long been linked” (Nurss & Hough, 2010, p. 280). According to SCCCRS, beginning reading skills are referred to as the fundamentals of reading and include employing comprehension strategies (South Carolina, 2015). However, the comprehension standards in kindergarten lump orally read and independently read texts together (South Carolina, 2015). The lack of distinction between types of comprehension in the standards implies similarity. Data from this study, though, show that there is a difference between reading and listening comprehension. The researcher needs to look more into the distinction between the two types of comprehension for future studies to determine what the difference is and how to effectively plan instruction to ensure success in each area.

Initially, the designed study involved an oral language intervention to determine if a small group explicit instruction in oral language would help improve students’ oral language achievement and reading achievement. Due to the time limitation of the researcher’s study, it was decided that this intervention would be better left for a future study. Instead, this study focused on determining if there was a relationship and/or lack of skills to then build upon in later research. This will be discussed more in Chapter 5 with regard to the designed action plan and future research suggestions.
Conclusion

The data collected during this study demonstrated a lack of achievement for participants in all areas: oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension. The only significant value from Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient that could have implications for beginning of the year instruction for the researcher’s classroom is the connection between oral language and reading comprehension. Slight differences in scores based on gender were shown in oral language and listening comprehension with females outscoring males. No significant differences could be noted in regard to race. Moreover, prior schooling did not have a great enough effect to be a large factor, either. In Chapter 5, the results from this study will be reviewed with the researcher’s grade level team to determine the results’ implications for teaching and to address further research that may be needed.
Chapter 5: Summary and Discussion

Introduction

Topic. Kindergarten has changed from a place of play and discovery where students become adjusted to school to a place focused on creating academics with high expectations for the quality, and quantity, of students’ reading and writing upon completion of the class. Recently, questions have been asked regarding what is developmentally appropriate for kindergarten and what should be expected from early childhood classrooms (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015). What used to be expected from our first grade students is now an expectation for our kindergarten students. Clearly, kindergarten has become the new first grade (Miller & Almon, 2009). The latest standards presume students have already had experiences in which language and early reading skills were developed. In reality, though, in the researcher’s Title I school, the majority of kindergarten students enter school with no previous education and are likely to be ill-prepared for the presented learning targets.

Problem of practice. Currently, at Morning Glory Elementary School [pseudonym] many students begin the school year without the necessary pre-requisites for reading. From the research, it is clear that a strong foundation in oral language helps a child learn to read (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Department of Education, 2011; North Carolina State Department, 2001; Nurss & Hough, 2010; Spira et al., 2005). With Morning Glory Elementary School being a high poverty, Title I, school, our incoming kindergarteners often lack this necessary language development. Standards and curricula
are created based upon the needs of white-middle class students, thus causing schools to operate as a deficit-model when their demographics do not meet that target. A lack of language is perceived based upon those norms, but regardless of the perceived need for language development, the high expectations required of kindergarteners pushes our kindergarten team to immediately start reading instruction. Rather than filling in the gap some students have with oral language, we begin phonics instruction during the first week in order to implement reading groups several weeks into the school year.

Morning Glory Elementary School is a personalized learning school. This means that our vision is to provide instruction to students based on their individual needs. By filling gaps in learning rather than skipping over them, children should experience more success. Pushing students when they are not ready will only end in frustration and less overall academic success. Expectations derived from the state standards expect students to have a foundation in oral language and reading skills. Yet, the reality is that, “two-thirds of America’s kindergartener teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28).

**Focus of the Study**

**Statement of purpose.** The purpose of this action research study is to examine the oral language skills of kindergarten students and to determine if a relationship exists between those skills and reading and/or listening comprehension.

**Research question.** The research question that guided this quantitative study was: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language ability relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?
Overview of the Study

Chapter 1 of this Dissertation in Practice provides a brief overview of the proposed and completed research. In Chapter 2, the researcher discusses prior research and literature related to the DiP’s problem of practice. Chapter 3 details the specifics of this study. It includes information about the participants, research setting, research design and instruments, and data analysis strategies. Chapter 4 explains the analyzed data in regard to the research question. To summarize this DiP, the current chapter (Chapter 5) includes a summary of the study. Specifically, it addresses the limitations and provides a review of the results of the study, an interpretation of their implications, and a discussion pertaining to the research. This chapter concludes with ideas for future research.

Summary of the Study

This action research study centered upon the researcher’s identified problem of the practice of kindergarten students entering her school with low abilities and high standards to achieve by the end of the year. Many of these students lack pre-requisites for beginning kindergarten. As part of a personalized learning school, teachers need to adapt to the students’ ability level, regardless of whether or not that level is the beginning of kindergarten. The present study was guided by the question: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language ability relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them?

Once completing the assessments detailed in the research design section of this DiP, data showed that incoming kindergarten students in the researcher’s school lack oral language skills. In addition, the data revealed that reading comprehension and listening comprehension were also low areas of achievement. In utilizing Pearson’s Correlation
Coefficient, a strong, positive correlation was found between scores of oral language and reading comprehension for this particular group of students. In addition, a weak, positive correlation was found between scores of oral language and listening comprehension using this study’s data set. This is only applicable for this particular group of students and is relevant only for the action researcher due to the small sample size.

**Researcher reflection.** Changes were made throughout the process of designing and implementing this study. Initially, the researcher planned to conduct an oral language intervention in order to determine if it would improve their oral language skills, as well as whether their reading comprehension would increase alongside it. This plan was altered for three reasons: (1) more students scored in the very poor and poor achievement level for oral language than expected; (2) the timeline for the study would only allow for eight weeks of intervention, which in the researcher’s experience is not enough time for significant gains; and (3) the first round of testing was very time-consuming, and took away a lot of instructional time from the researcher’s students, and the need to re-assess after only a couple of months had the potential to hurt students in the classroom academically. Instead, this original plan will be discussed in the suggestions for future research section.

When collecting data, it was not always easy to utilize action research as the research method. Action research allows the researcher to be a participant who is invested and involved in the situation (Mertler, 2014). Finding a balance between completing the time-consuming testing and starting the academic year was a challenge.

During the completion of the study and when reviewing the results to help create an action plan, the researcher encountered some hurdles. While some members of the
researcher’s grade level team were supportive, others were less so. Some of our best teachers allow the requirements placed on students to cause them to stray from developmentally appropriate teaching methods. When implementing the action plan next fall this will create a challenge.

**Limitations.** As mentioned throughout the discussion of the results, this study was only able to determine that a relationship may exist between oral language and reading comprehension for this specific group of students. It cannot be determined from the study whether there is any causation between these variables or how they relate, and it is not applicable outside of this study’s sample. In addition, this study included participants from two classes: the researcher’s students and her co-teacher’s students. Due to testing occurring at the beginning of the kindergarten year, the results of the assessments could be skewed due to the lack of a relationship between the researcher and the participants. Completing the testing once trust and a relationship had been built may have affected the accuracy of the assessments.

**Discussion of Major Points of the Study**

A few major findings came out of this study: the overall low oral language skills of incoming kindergarteners in the researcher’s school and a connection between the oral language achievement and reading comprehension of this particular group of students. The following sections discuss each of the major points in this study.

**Overall low oral language skills.** Just under half (46.16%) of participants scored poor or very poor on the Test of Oral Language- Primary: Fourth Edition (TOLD-P: 4). The setting was a Title I, high-poverty school, so this confirms the low-income word gap that Hart and Risley (2003) referred to. According to Hart and Risley (2003), the average
child in a welfare family only experiences 13 million words growing up; in comparison, a child from a professional family experiences 45 million words. Oral language begins with language acquisition at home, and the lack of words low-income students encounter puts them at a disadvantage when starting school. Thus, it is the school, and the teacher’s, job to compensate for that word gap by providing rich language experiences to further develop students’ language. However, while teachers recognize the importance of oral language, they are moving away from effective, developmentally appropriate, practices in order to meet the high expectations set for academic knowledge (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

**Implications.** Due to the overall low achievement in oral language skills that were discovered during this study, the researcher recognizes that incoming kindergarteners have less experience with language than is needed to meet district, and state, requirements. Therefore, it is the researcher’s job to address this gap by providing more experience with language at the beginning of the year to help close the word gap. The action plan created in this chapter will discuss the importance of using developmentally appropriate practices and a personalized learning teaching model. These strategies will be essential in addressing the lack of oral language skills, in case these skills can help with reading comprehension, since much of the literature alludes to oral language being a building block toward beginning to read (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Department of Education, 2011; Mooney, 2000; North Carolina State Department, 2001; Nurss & Hough, 2010).

**Oral language and reading comprehension.** The researcher utilized Pearson’s Correlation coefficient to determine if a connection existed for her sample of students’
oral language and listening comprehension scores. The result was \( r = 0.7079 \). This is a strong, positive value; however, it can only be applied to the data collected for students within this study.

State standards for kindergarten reading are non-specific and call for students to read emergent texts with purpose and understanding (South Carolina, 2015). The specific text level requirement for the district in which this research was completed involves the expectation that students should be able to read a text with a simple story structure. In order to read, a person needs to be able to decode the text and comprehend the language in order to understand it (Hoover & Gough, 1990). Currently, the researcher’s school places considerable emphasis on decoding: phonemic awareness skills, phonics, and fluency. All of these are important for beginning to read; however, the ultimate purpose of reading is to derive meaning from a text either for some sort of enjoyment or for the sake of learning.

Reading comprehension is a cognitive skill. According to Lev Vygotsky, through working on language with a child, one is simultaneously advancing the child’s cognitive abilities (Mooney, 2000). Thus, language development can help increase cognition and enable the achievement of reading comprehension. Lucy Calkins (2001) noted that meaningful conversations are a way to engage children in comprehension. Yet, without a strong basis in language, these conversations cannot exist. In schools like the one in this study, where students are missing that strength in oral language due in part to high levels of poverty - what Hart and Risley (2003) referred to as the low-income word gap - it is challenging to engage students in these meaningful conversations because they do not always have the language tools needed to participate. Unfortunately, standards and
curriculum are generally designed with white-middle class students in mind; thus, schools often operate on a deficit-model when encountering students who do not fit this mold. Teachers must ensure they are valuing home language and dialect, and building upon it in the classroom.

Sections of this chapter pertaining to the action plan and future research suggestions will offer more details about the researcher’s plan to use this relationship to improve her teaching and investigate the link between these two variables in order to better inform beginning of the year instruction for kindergarteners in this particular school. In addition, the action plan will address the importance of valuing each child’s language and removing the deficit mindset, then working toward building language with all students in order to help them reach kindergarten goals.

**Implications.** This study was completed using action research to investigate a problem in the researcher’s own classroom and school in order to inform instruction in this environment (Mertler, 2014). The connection between achievement in oral language and reading comprehension allows the researcher to draw conclusions for her own classroom even though causation cannot be determined. This demonstrates the importance of both variables in beginning of the year instruction, and provides reasoning for explicit teaching if students have difficulty in either area.

**Oral language and listening comprehension.** The researcher utilized Pearson’s Correlation coefficient to determine if a relationship existed for her sample of students’ oral language and listening comprehension scores. The result was $r = 0.0049$. This value is close to $r = 0$, which shows no linear relationship. Therefore, no real connection can be
claimed to exist between a child’s oral language ability and her or his listening comprehension achievement for students in this study.

Currently, in the researcher’s school, listening and reading comprehension are not taught separately from one another. While read aloud time and shared reading are used to teach comprehension, as well as books at students’ independent reading levels, they are all seen as tools to teach overall comprehension. The differences in $r$-values obtained in this study demonstrate a difference between the two types of comprehension for the researcher’s students. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), “Comprehension is an active process that requires intentional and thoughtful interaction between the reader and the text” (p. 13). More consideration needs to be given to how this interaction differs when the text is read aloud to the student versus when the student is able to read the text herself or himself.

**Action Plan: Implications of the Findings**

The following details the researcher’s action plan based on the findings of this study in conjunction with the literature. The purpose of this study was to examine the oral language skills of incoming kindergarten students and determine if there was a relationship between them and comprehension if a wordless picture book and a text was read orally by a teacher. The researcher has taken many literacy classes during graduate school, as well as independently for professional development. All of these courses stressed the importance of play, discovery, and oral language in the kindergarten classroom. However, upon reflection, the researcher observed an absence of these components in her kindergarten classroom as well as the other classrooms in her school.
The results of the study confirm low scores for incoming kindergarteners in all areas (oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension), which in turn show a lack of readiness for the expectations of kindergarten. These kindergarten expectations are often created with white, middle-class students in mind; thus, any student who does not fit that norm appears to be behind. This deficit view of many schools needs to be overcome, and instead, the curriculum needs to fit the needs of students. Unfortunately, “two-thirds of America’s kindergarten teachers believe most young children are academically unprepared for school when they enter kindergarten” (Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012, p. 28). Thus, this gap in knowledge needs to be filled before new learning can occur. In addition, the strong relationship between the student’s oral language skills and reading comprehension achievement in this study alludes to the importance of explicit instruction in these areas and the need for research to better inform instruction. This action plan recognizes the cyclical design of action research due to the researcher understanding the need for more research in order to improve both instruction and her teaching practices (Mertler, 2014).

**Increase oral language instruction.** A major conclusion that can be derived from this study is the lack of oral language skills for incoming kindergarten students in the researcher’s school as shown by the TOLD:P-4. The majority of students are beginning the school year without even an average mastery of oral language skills, yet they are expected to engage in activities and instruction that require a mastery of language. It is expected that students are developing these skills at home, but only slightly more than half of students had prior schooling, and the socio-economic status of the school results in the likelihood of being behind in language development. Expectations are often
developed with middle-class students in mind, and do not take the diversity of students into consideration. Hart and Risley (2003) found that “in four years, an average child in a professional family would accumulate experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family 13 million words” (p. 9). Thus, children of lower Socio-Economic Status are entering school with less language development; therefore, they are lacking in what current standards and curriculum expect for early literacy skills. This has been proven to be true in the present study, which confirms a need for the researcher and colleagues to devote time to developing oral language skills in the classroom, while respecting home language and dialect, in order to help achieve the standards that are set for them.

In addition to small group instruction in oral language, developmentally appropriate practices will be used to help increase student achievement. The study shows a need for oral language instruction, and oral language can be best taught using practices that are appropriate for kindergarten classrooms. Yet, these practices (storytelling activities, play, and discovery) are inconsistently implemented due to time restraints and the emphasis placed on the requirements of reading and writing. Students currently engage in center time where they work independently while the teacher works with reading groups. In most classrooms, these centers are academic seat work. For the next school year, the researcher plans on reorganizing these centers so they are more play- and discovery-based in order to meet the apparent need for oral language acquisition at the school.

Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget felt that learning should be rooted in play for children (Mooney, 2000). Vygotsky’s theory of the Zone of Proximal Development
addresses the need to plan a curriculum that aids students’ emerging abilities (Mooney, 2000). According to Piaget, kindergarten students are in the preoperational stage of development: they are forming knowledge based on experiences (Mooney, 2000). Piaget and Vygotsky agreed that learning is best done through play in which children are involved in cognitive and language development (Mooney, 2000). Piaget and Vygotsky’s ideas of how young children learn best match the origins of kindergarten.

Friedrich Froebel introduced the concept of kindergarten in Germany in 1840 with the idea that it should be a place where children explore their interests and the teacher merely serves as a guide (“Friedrich Froebel,” 2000). The work done in kindergarten “would have been considered play outside of the schoolroom” (Brosterman, 1997, p.12). Froebel prepared kindergarten students for upcoming academic work by allowing them to use play and discovery to aid cognitive development. However, with the change in the purpose of kindergarten came less play and discovery. As Spring noted, “Preparation replaced protection and innocence as even children in kindergarten were educated to be global workers” (p. 353). Currently, these elements of play and discovery are part of the standards, but the academic expectations have not changed.

The aforementioned theorists and scholars have shown the importance of developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten such as play, discovery, and teacher observation as a means of assessment. The problem arises of how to marry these with the requirements and constraints of high standards and testing that we currently have in schools. A shift of mindset needs to occur. These theorists show what should be happening in our classrooms to best aid the development of kindergarten aged students, but as of now, it is not what is occurring in most classrooms.
In order to begin to make this shift, students will be given more choices in terms of how their center work time is spent. While academic tasks will be part of this time, they will be implemented so that students are able to create, play, and discover. They will not complete specific tasks or assignments. This will be done through discovery centers on topics that students are interested in, art and creation centers, and storytelling opportunities with provided, or student made, puppets and scenery. Through being allowed to play with words in storytelling, students are not only developing oral language but are also showing an understanding of stories and structure (Burke, 2010). Thus, this type of play will increase oral language skills as well as comprehension, and it will allow learning to occur in a developmentally appropriate way. Through incorporating storytelling into the curriculum with young children, they can become readers and writers at a younger age than is typical (Bhattacharyya, 2010). Since students are expected to read and write by the end of kindergarten, Bhattacharyya’s (2010) assertion will help teachers meet goals through playful and engaging practices that are appropriate for students.

**Utilize personalized learning.** The location of this study was a personalized learning school. This means the focus of curriculum is on the standards, which students are pre-assessed on in order to determine their needs, and teachers plan instruction to teach students what they need to learn in the way they learn best. Students should be placed in developmentally appropriate levels, and teachers should plan instruction on the competencies required to move each student to her or his next level (“What is Competency,” 2015). According to Vygotsky’s theory concerning the zone of proximal development, teachers need to observe students to discover what they can do to help and
instruct them there until they reach independence with the skill (Mooney, 2000).

Essentially, this is what we do with personalized learning: we tailor the curriculum to student needs and provide scaffolding to help them master what they have learned before moving on to new knowledge. For instance, an algebra lesson would not be planned for first graders unless there was proof they were ready for it (Crain, 2000).

The results of this study demonstrate the importance of using the personalized learning teaching model. While it is currently being implemented, in the beginning of the next school year (2017-2018), more academic components will be taken into consideration. Oral language and comprehension will be observed at the beginning of the school year during play and classroom activities in order to identify students who need assistance in these areas. Those who are will receive small group instruction in their area of need. This will be done through using developmentally appropriate practices, and a reliance on observation more as a form of evaluation rather than testing.

This study demonstrated a lack of knowledge for incoming kindergarteners in oral language and comprehension, and time should be spent developing this since having skills and a foundation in oral language helps students become literate learners (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). An issue that may arise is the stressor of time. Finding time for extra instructional groups in oral language or allowing these to replace beginning of the year phonics groups, which teachers feel under pressure to begin, will be an obstacle to overcome.

**Investigate comprehension.** The low scores in this study reveal the lack of knowledge students have with story structure, or with books in general. Since students are entering school with only minimal exposure to texts, teachers need to provide this
exposure in order to prepare students for reading. However, currently at the researcher’s school the push is to move to phonemic awareness and phonics instruction with valuable small group instruction time. According to David Pearson, the Reading First federal program was meant to increase success for children from low-income families, but it has instead resulted in less time for children to read for meaning as well as less time engaged in class conversations about texts (Allington & Pearson, 2011). In a discussion about DIBELS and early literacy, Richard Allington commented that the DIBELS assessment (focused on phonics and phonemic awareness) does not predict reading achievement and that due to using this as an assessment, a society is being created where “kids can read fast and accurately, but don’t comprehend a thing that they’re reading” (Allington & Pearson, 2011, p. 71).

This study showed a lack of reading and listening comprehension; however, it did not provide specific areas of weakness or potential reasons for such areas. The researcher needs to further investigate the differences between reading and listening comprehension and the implications those differences have for teaching. Only reading comprehension had a strong connection with oral language, so it raises the question of why listening comprehension did not. In addition, teachers need to spend more time with explicit instruction in comprehension. Due to the majority of kindergarten students being unable to read at the beginning of the year, wordless picture books need to be utilized in reading groups to begin introducing students to comprehension strategies and story structure. This is preferred over waiting until halfway through the school year when they get to text levels that have story structure rather than simple repetitive text. While phonics instruction must continue in order for students to read books with a higher text level, it
needs to be balanced with comprehension instruction. The researcher plans to immediately increase comprehension instruction in her classroom reading groups regardless of reading level and to begin the next school year addressing comprehension each week within small group time.

In addition, the frequency of storytelling needs to be increased in order to help develop both language and comprehension for students. Storytelling allows for a fun, engaging way for students to develop language, story structure, and comprehension. This can be done through: oral prompts; retelling favorite stories out loud, with puppets, through drawings; and/or utilizing wordless picture books in small groups and whole class read aloud time.

Advocate for a developmentally appropriate curriculum. The researcher recognizes the need to take the results of her research, in addition to what was learned through the process of doing it, to her principal and the district as a whole. While the majority of teachers disagree with how kindergarten is being taught, no one speaks up. In order to change the mind-set regarding what is appropriate for early childhood education, the researcher needs to get more involved with curriculum and instruction at the district level. Work needs to be done to prove that we are going backwards rather than forwards with regard to our youngest learners. Despite the theorists that teachers are taught to respect and learn from when earning their initial teaching degree, ideas are often ignored in the actual implementation of instruction. Instead, focus is placed on data, testing, and expectations that used to be seen in first grade. In addition, articles and literature support this need to return to developmentally appropriate teaching practices (Carlsson-Paige et al., 2015; Miller & Almon, 2009; Preparing for Kindergarten, 2012). This, and further
research, needs to be shown to begin the conversation of reverting to appropriate practices that will allow students deeper learning and set them up for success, rather than failure, or stress, due to unachievable expectations.

**Continue the process of action research.** The researcher recognizes that not all her questions were answered by this study, and that through the process of implementing this research study more questions arose. While research may not be formally written up as it is in the DiP, the researcher nevertheless recognizes that action research is a cyclical process in which the researcher plans, investigates, acts upon findings, reflects, and begins the process of studying and planning again (Mertler, 2014). This particular study is only the beginning of the investigation into oral language and best practices in kindergarten classrooms at the Title I school in this study. The next section of this chapter, Suggestions for Future Research, outlines areas of further research that the researcher intends to complete within her own classroom. It also outlines studies that could be done on a larger scale to further investigate this problem of practice and how it pertains to educating kindergarten students, and the appropriate curriculum needed, in order to be able to generalize results on a larger scale to inform policy, standards, and curriculum development for kindergarten classrooms.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The present study was able to determine an overall lack of language and comprehension skills for incoming kindergarten students at the researchers’ Title I school as well as a connection between these students oral language and oral reading comprehension. Due to the sample size, these results cannot be generalized outside of the setting of this study. One suggestion for future research would be to conduct this study on
a larger scale to determine if the results would be the same with different groups of students (including non-Title I schools). In addition, a larger sample size may show a different result concerning the relationship between oral language skills and listening comprehension than the one found in this study.

A strong connection was found between oral language skills and reading comprehension for the researcher’s students; however, it cannot be determined if strength in one variable caused success in the other. To further investigate the relationship between these two variables, the researcher plans to provide oral language intervention next year to a group of low-oral language students. No additional testing would be given, but instead, using the ideas of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, students would be observed and instructed in their Zone of Proximal development. Thus, only those with an observed need would be in the oral language intervention groups. From there, only the mandated reading assessments would be used to determine if these oral language groups caused greater growth than seen in previous years.

Due to time restraints, this study was unable to examine specific areas of oral language. An area of interest to the researcher is oral storytelling. Further research could examine the role of storytelling in developing oral language and comprehension skills. In order to orally tell, or create, a story, students need to understand language and story structure. Thus, research is needed on utilizing oral storytelling as an instructional practice to help students develop language and comprehension.

**Conclusion**

The present research study examined the achievement of two classes of kindergarten students, inclusive of a sample size of 39 students, at the researcher’s Title I school in
South Carolina to determine achievement levels in oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension upon entry to kindergarten. Participants were assessed in all three areas with the intent to answer the following research question: How does a kindergarten student’s oral language ability relate to his or her ability to comprehend a wordless picture book and a text read to them? Assessment data were then input into the Stata Data Analysis and Statistical Software program in order to run Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient. This research study found a strong relationship between oral language skills and reading comprehension ($r = 0.7079$) as well as an overall lack of achievement in oral language, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension for incoming kindergarten students at the researcher’s school. While causation between variables cannot be determined, the study still has implications for the researcher’s instruction and allows for reflection on how these variables should be further investigated. An action plan was created that restructured the beginning of the year kindergarten instruction in the researcher’s school, and includes more oral language instruction, a continued personalized approach to instruction that includes explicit instruction in the areas of this study, advocating for a shift back to developmentally appropriate practices for teaching kindergarten students, further investigation into the differences between reading and listening comprehension, and research into the effect of using developmentally appropriate practices, as well as the impact of storytelling on language and comprehension achievement. Future research should investigate if high oral language skills are the cause of higher reading comprehension ability. Studies should also be replicated with a greater sample size in order to generalize results to the overall population.
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Appendix A: Parent Consent Letter

Dear Parents and/or Guardians,

My name is Rebecca Thompson. I am a kindergarten teacher and a doctoral student in the Curriculum & Instruction Program at the University of South Carolina. I am completing a research study on the relationship between kindergarten children’s oral language skills and their ability to comprehend a story.

Your child was selected to be a part of this research study because he or she was assigned to my class or to Ms Pietramala’s class this year. If you allow your child to participate, I will be assessing your child in several areas: her or his oral language skills, listening comprehension, and wordless picture book comprehension. Assessments will take place in late August/early September.

I am asking permission to use your child’s test scores in reading to determine three things: 1. oral language skills; 2. listening comprehension scores; AND 3. wordless picture comprehension skills. Three assessments will be administered in late August/early September. Your child’s test scores, which will be utilized in this study, will be kept completely confidential. Your child will be given a pseudonym [fake name] and his or her identity will be kept completely confidential. All test scores will be safeguarded.

Through completing this action research, the kindergarten teaching team’s goal is to improve the oral language and comprehension of our students. Please sign below if I have permission to utilize your child’s test scores. This study is designed to benefit all kindergarten children at [insert school name], and access to your child’s test score will enable teachers to improve instruction for students’ scholarly improvement in ELA.

The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research. I am completing it in order to obtain my doctorate degree. There is no cost to participate, nor will there be any compensation. There is no penalty for not participating, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Not participating will not affect your child’s grade or standing in our classroom.

I am happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at Rebecca_thompson@charleston.k12.sc.us or 843-764-2218 ext. 25809. I can also place you in contact with my research advisor if you wish. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

With Kindest Regards,

Rebecca K. Thompson
Rebecca_thompson@charleston.k12.sc.us
843-764-2218 Ext. 25809

____ I allow my child to participate in this research study.

____ I do not wish for my child to participate in this research study.

Student’s Name: ________________________________

Parent Signature: ________________________________
Appendix B: TOLD-P:4 Subtest Descriptions

and permits greater efficiency in identifying specific disorders in either of those areas. Each TOLD-P:4 subtest is described in detail in the remainder of this section. Their relationships to the components of the theoretical model are shown in Table 1.1.

Subtest 1: Picture Vocabulary (PV)

This 34-item semantic subtest measures the extent to which a child understands the meanings of spoken English words. Children are not required to respond orally; they need only to point to the picture (out of four) that best represents the meaning of a word spoken by the examiner. For example, if the examiner says the stimulus word baby, the child is to select the picture most closely associated with the word from among pictures of a book, a dog, a ball, and a baby.

Subtest 2: Relational Vocabulary (RV)

This 34-item semantic subtest is an associative task that measures a child's ability to understand and orally express the relationships between two spoken stimulus words. No pictures are involved; the child must understand the meanings of the spoken words, recognize their semantic category, and express the relationship. For example, the examiner asks, "How are a pen and a pencil alike?" to which the child might answer, "They are writing tools."

Subtest 3: Oral Vocabulary (OV)

This 38-item semantic subtest measures a child’s ability to give oral definitions for common English words such as bird or castle that are spoken by the examiner. No picture cues are used. The most succinct, definitive response earns 1 point; however, two, less definitive, descriptors of the word may also earn 1 point. For example, the examiner asks, “What’s an apple?” to which the child might answer, “a fruit” (1 point) or “something that grows on a tree and you get juice from it” (1 point).

Subtest 4: Syntactic Understanding (SU)

This 30-item syntactic subtest assesses the child’s ability to comprehend the meaning of sentences. Although the importance of semantics can never be negated in a task involving sentence understanding, this format places primary emphasis on the syntactic aspects of the sentence. The task requires no speaking; the child must select from three pictures the one that most accurately represents the stimulus sentence supplied by the examiner. The three pictures were selected so as to emphasize syntax, showing, for instance, the same action in the present and past. For example, in response to the stimulus sentence “He had ridden,” the child must select the picture that most closely depicts the sentence from among pictures of a man mounting a horse, a man riding a horse, and a man walking away from a horse. Children who do not understand the syntactic (and morphological implications) of “had ridden” would be unlikely to arrive at the answer through pictured content clues, such as the position of the man in relation to the horse (approaching it, riding it, walking away from it).
Subtest 5: Sentence Imitation (SI)

This 36-item syntactic subtest measures children's ability to imitate English sentences. Success on the subtest reflects their familiarity with appropriate word order and to some extent, morphological markers as well. A principle underlying this subtest is that a child can more easily repeat a sentence verbatim if the sentence employs a grammar structure that he or she is familiar with. The stimulus sentences are in standard English. In trying to repeat the sentence, the child might slip into a nonstandard structure if that structure represents his or her usual way of speaking. In order to avoid biases against dialectic variations, credit is given for responses in which a word's ending is not enunciated (e.g., “boy” for “boys”).

Subtest 6: Morphological Completion (MC)

This 38-item grammatical subtest assesses children's ability to recognize, understand, and use common English morphological forms. It places particular emphasis on their knowledge of affixes. The format, a cloze technique, requires that the examiner read unfinished sentences for which children supply the missing morphological forms. For example, the examiner might say, Carla has a dress. Denise has a dress. They have two ______ (pause). The child volunteers the word dresses.

Supplemental Subtests

Subtest 7: Word Discrimination (WD)

This 28-item phonological subtest assesses the child's ability to recognize the differences in significant speech sounds. The child must judge pairs of words expressed orally by the examiner as being either the same or different. Different pairs consist of words that are equally familiar to the child and that are differentiated by only one phoneme in the initial, medial, or final position. For example, words such as vale and dale vary only in the initial phonemes /v/ and /d/.

Subtest 8: Phonemic Analysis (PA)

This 22-item phonological subtest measures the ability to segment words into smaller phonemic units. Many people believe that this type of phonological awareness has important implications for academic achievement. For example, the examiner says, Say “apartment.” Now say it again, but don’t say “ment.”

Subtest 9: Word Articulation (WA)

This 25-item phonological subtest measures the child's ability to utter important English speech sounds. Stimulus pictures and sentences are used to elicit the spontaneous articulation of various words that contain key speech sounds. For example, the child is shown the picture below, and the examiner says, He sentences the robber to jail. He is the ______ (pause). The child says, “Judge.” If the
Appendix C: Listening Comprehension Assessment

Listening Comprehension Assessment
Kindergarten • Read-Aloud Passage 2

Literary Text: Fiction

Directions
1. Distribute “The Elf and the Toadstool” student recording sheet (see page 29 in the Assessment Forms book). Ask students to write their names on it and then turn it facedown on their desks.
2. Invite students to the place where you usually read aloud (such as the carpet), or read to them while they are sitting in their seats.
3. Tell students:
   Today I am going to read aloud a story. While I’m reading I want you to listen carefully and think about what happens. You might want to close your eyes so that you can make pictures in your mind as you hear the author’s words. After you listen to the text, I’m going to ask you some questions to check your understanding of the text. Do you have any questions before I begin? Get ready to listen!
4. Read the text aloud. Say,
   Now we’re going to listen to the text one more time to make sure we understand.
   Read the text aloud a second time.
5. Have students return to their desks. Ask them to turn over the recording sheet. Read aloud the questions and possible answers, and tell students to circle the best possible answer.
6. Collect the recording sheets and score them by noting correct (√) and incorrect (−) answers in the grid on the bottom right-hand side of the sheet. Then total the number of correct answers and enter in the Total Score column. (See Answer Key below and on page 28 in the Assessment Forms book.) You may record the students’ scores on the Listening Comprehension Class Profile Sheet on page 33 in the Assessment Forms book.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Scoring Grid</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>CA</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>ME</th>
<th>Total Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>√</td>
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<td>√</td>
<td>√</td>
<td>4 (5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Elf and the Toadstool

One day, a little elf was walking through the forest. He was a little man no bigger than your thumb. He wore a pointed hat and a nice new suit. All at once, rain started to fall. It rained hard. The elf did not want to get wet. So he ducked under a toadstool. The toadstool had a thin stem and a round top.

Ooops! A mouse was lying under the toadstool. It was asleep. The elf did not want to wake the mouse. But he also did not want to go out in the rain.

“Aha!” thought the elf. He had an idea. He got a good grip on that toadstool. Then he pulled with all his might. And the toadstool popped right out of the ground. The elf held the toadstool up in the air over his head. Then he hurried away before the mouse woke up.

And that is how the first umbrella was invented!

Answer Key: 1. toadstool 2. mouse 3. happy 4. elf 5. umbrella

Appendix D: NC Task Comprehension Questions and Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. [Book closed, characters]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the characters in this story? (replacement words: people, animals)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. [Book closed, setting]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where does this story happen? (replacement words: setting, take place)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. [p. 10, initiating event]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what happens at this point in the story. Why is this an important part of the story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. [p. 12, problem]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you were telling someone this story, what would you say is going on now? Why did this happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. [p. 18, outcome resolution]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What happened here? Why does this happen?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implicit questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. [p. 6, feelings]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what the people are feeling in this picture. Why do you think so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. [p. 8, causal inference]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did the family get the robot?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. [p. 16, dialogue]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think the people would be saying here? Why would they be saying that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. [p. 18, prediction]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the last picture in the story. What do you think happens next? Why do you think so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. [Book closed, theme]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In thinking about everything that you learned after reading this book, if you knew that your friend’s dad was bringing home a robot for his family, what would you tell the dad to help him so that the same thing that happened in this story doesn’t happen to him? Why would you tell him that? (replacement words: advice, warn)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

NC TASK PROMPTED COMPREHENSION SCORING

The purpose of this Appendix is to provide a clear set of guidelines that describes what we did and what others should do if they use this task.

Rubrics for scoring the prompted comprehension questions

Explicit information

Characters
• 2 points = response indicates that characters are a family and a robot
• 1 point = response contains at least two of the story's characters
• 0 points = response provides only one character, or answer is inappropriate

Setting
• 2 points = response indicates an understanding of multiple settings
• 1 point = response provides only one setting
• 0 points = response is not an appropriate setting

Initiating event
• 2 points = response identifies the initiating event and links it with other relevant story information (e.g., with the problem)
• 1 point = response identifies the story element (e.g., the initiating event)
• 0 points = response fails to identify the initiating event

Problem
• 2 points = response identifies the problem and links it with other relevant story information (e.g., with the initiating action)
• 1 point = response identifies the story element (e.g., the problem)
• 0 points = response fails to identify the problem

Outcome resolution
• 2 points = response identifies the outcome resolution and links it with other relevant story information (e.g., the problem or the initiating action)
• 1 point = response identifies the story element (e.g., the initiating action)
• 0 points = response fails to identify the outcome resolution

Implicit information

Feelings
• 2 points = response indicates the inference of appropriate character feelings and connects the feelings to other pages or events
• 1 point = response indicates the inference of appropriate character feelings
• 0 points = response is not an appropriate inference of character feelings

Causal inference
• 2 points = response is an appropriate inference that is explained by using events from multiple pages
• 1 point = response is an appropriate inference that is derived at the page level
• 0 points = response fails to include an appropriate causal inference

Dialogue
• 2 points = response indicates the inference of appropriate character dialogue and connects the dialogue to other pages or events

(continued)
NC TASK PROMPTED COMPREHENSION SCORING (continued)

* 1 point = response indicates the inference of appropriate character dialogue
* 0 points = response does not concern character dialogue or is not relevant

Prediction
* 2 points = response represents a prediction that used previous action or pages from the story
* 1 point = response indicates a prediction that could be made based only on the last picture of the story
* 0 points = response does not contain an appropriate prediction

Theme
* 2 points = response indicates the incorporation of multiple events in order to create a narrative-level theme
* 1 point = response is a simple theme that uses information from one aspect of the story
* 0 points = response does not indicate an understanding of any theme

Examples
The following are examples of 0-, 1-, and 2-point responses to the initiating event question (A) and the prediction question (B). On the page for which the child is asked to describe the initiating event there is a picture of a girl pulling out the wires of the robot, which leads to the robot's becoming wild and ruining the house—the problem of the story. On the final page, for which the child is asked to infer a prediction, the father is fixing the robot, which suggests that the robot will be able to clean the house as it did when it was new.

0 points: Fails to identify element or make inference
A. “She's cleaning the robot. [This is important] because it's always nice to get cleaned, isn't it?”
B. “It's just the end. [I know this] because I don't see any more pages below it.”

1 point: Picture-level responses
A. “The little girl is undoing all the cords and she's going to tie them into a bow so it looks like a girl. [This is important] maybe because she wants him to look more like a girl.”
B. “It works again. [I know this] because they're fixing it.”

2 points: Narrative-level responses
A. “The girl pulls out all of the wires. [This is important] because if we didn't know this, we wouldn't know why it was acting up.”
B. “Maybe the machine tries to go away, but it gets caught by them. [I know this] because he's getting tired of doing all the chores.”
Appendix E: Wordless Picture Book Comprehension Assessment

Cat and Dog Questions

Explicit:
1. [Book closed, characters]
   Who are the characters in this story?

2. [Book closed, setting]
   Where does this story take place?

3. [p. 3 initiating event]
   Tell me what happens at this point in the story. Why is this an important part of the story?

4. [p. 4 problem]
   If you were telling someone this story, what would you said is going on now? Why did this happen?

5. [p. 11-12, outcome resolution]
   What happened here? Why does this happen?

Implicit
1. [p. 4-5, feelings]
   Tell me what the animals are feeling in this picture. Why do you think so?

2. [p. 12, Casual Inference]
   Why are dog and cat getting along now?

3. [p. 2, dialogue]
   What do you think the animals would be saying here? Why would they be saying that?

4. [p. 14-15, prediction]
   This is the last picture in the story. What do you think happens next? Why do you think so?

5. [Book closed, theme]
   In thinking about everything that you learned after reading this book, if you saw two friends fighting what would you tell them? Why would you tell them that?
Appendix F: Permission to Reprint Letters

Approval of Permission to Reprint PRO-ED Test Material
January 27, 2016
Reference Permission Request #T3466

Ms. Rebecca Thompson
University of South Carolina
1044 Ferry Crossing Circle
Charleston, SC 29414 USA


USAGE: Research for Master’s Thesis or Dissertation

I am writing to request permission to reprint a portion of the TOLD-P:4. Specifically, I would like to include pages 7-9 of the examiner’s manual in my appendix to show the International Review Board (IRB), my committee, and any future readers of my research a sample of what the assessment looks like. This research proposal will be sent to the IRB in the very near future, and implemented beginning in August 2016.

LIMITATIONS:

Permission is granted to reprint pages 7-9 of the TOLD-P:4 Examiner’s Manual in the IRB proposal.

There will be no charge for this usage. Please document the source of the pages in the appendix of said paper.

PAYMENT: N/A
Total Paid: $

APPROVAL:
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(Continued)
Approval of Permission to Reprint PRO-ED Test Material
January 27, 2016

Reference Permission Request #T3466

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Approved by PRO-ED, Inc. Representative

Terri Cooter
Terri Cooter
Tests Permissions Department
PRO-ED, Inc.
January 27, 2016

PRO-ED, Inc. Tax ID: 74-1916673
January 20, 2017

Ms. Rebecca K. Thompson
179 Briarwood Drive
Charleston, SC 29414

Dear Ms. Thompson:

Scholastic is pleased to grant you permission to use the Listening Comprehension Assessment from NEXT STEP GUIDED READING ASSESSMENT by Richardson and Walther in your research for and appendix in your dissertation “The role of oral language in comprehension with kindergarten students” at the University of South Carolina as outlined in your letter.

Kindly give credit to author, title, copyright and Scholastic Inc. as the original publisher of this material.

Sincerely yours,

Ann Sandhorst,
Sr. Permissions Manager 212-343-6863, Fax 212-343-6926, email: asandhorst@scholastic.com
Hi Rebecca,

Your email was forwarded to me at ETS, and I'll be glad to reply. If you are using the NC task only for research, yes, we give permission to use it. If you want to use it for other purposes, please email us with more details about what you want to do with the task. I am cc'ing Alison (Paris) Posner who did the original research with the task on her dissertation at the University of Michigan when we both were there. She may have additional questions and needs to give her permission also.

Good luck with your research, Scott Paris

Scott G. Paris, Ph.D.
Distinguished Presidential Appointee, Research
Educational Testing Service
Rosedale Road MS 02-R
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