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# Using wordless picture books to develop oral language skills with kindergarten students

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**USING WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS TO DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE  
SKILLS WITH KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS**

by

Jennifer M. Natale

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy, and Sociocultural Education  
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In partial fulfillment of the requirement

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at

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Thesis Chair: Dr. Susan Browne

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## **Dedications**

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my parents, Robert and Barbara, as well as the rest of my family. This work would not have been possible without your patience, support and encouragement. I love you!

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank the students, staff and administration at the study site. This study would not be possible without your collaboration and inspiration. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the MA in Reading Program. It has been an honor to work with a group of talented educators, and I will always be grateful for our camaraderie.

## **Abstract**

Jennifer M. Natale

USING WORDLES PICTURE BOOKS TO DEVELOP ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS  
WITH KINDERGARTEN STUDENTS

2017-2018

Dr. Susan Browne

Master of Arts in Reading Education

The purpose of this study is to study the oral language development of the average kindergartner, through the use of wordless picture books, as he or she is provided with practice in which to build oral language. The specific aim is to implore whether the addition of oral language activities using wordless picture books, into the regular kindergarten program, will enable students to better express themselves orally through storytelling, as well as to transfer that skill into orally dictating a written story. This study is significant in that, as academic demands increase in the kindergarten classroom, it appears that students are having a greater difficulty in demonstrating a preparedness for these demands. Oral language development, as well as crucial literacy skills that develop through the use of wordless books are discussed. Implications for educators and future research is also explored through this study.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

One by one, kindergarten students walk into their classroom. Some abandon their parents and run right past me into the room, eager to see all that kindergarten has to offer. Others nervously clutch the hand of their parent/family member that brought them to their new school, one day before the first day of school, to attend the “Meet the Teacher” program. From that first moment, when each child approaches my door and I greet them with “Hi! I’m Miss Natale. What’s your name?”, I am already beginning to learn my students. Who ran past me? Who struggled to make eye contact? Who already knew to place their hand in my outstretched one, tell me their name, and shake my hand?

No matter how each student enters the room, once inside, they all look around the room with the same wide-eyed look on their face, one of both excitement and fear. They take in all of the newness of their situation. Everything about kindergarten is new. The school district had just switched from a half day to a full day program for the previous school year. First grade classrooms were moved to another hall to make room, a new playground was installed outside and new items were purchased to make the room appropriate for kindergarten aged students. Almost every item in the room is relatively new. There are new student chairs and work tables, a new play kitchen, new colorful classroom rug, new block sets, an art center with raised stools, tabletop easels and brand new art supplies, a reading nook with new sunken chairs, new pillows and plenty of appealing picture books, and new cubbies for the students to keep their personal belongings. The room had also been freshly painted, and the ceiling tiles were all

replaced. As kindergarten is also a child's first year of formal schooling, there is a feeling of newness surrounding the entire situation.

Much like my kindergarten students coming to an elementary school for the first time, there was a feeling of newness surrounding my experience as a teacher researcher. Just as that year would be their first in formal schooling, it was also my first experience in bringing action research to life in my classroom. In embarking on this journey, my feelings were one of excitement and fear. A lot of questions ran through my mind. Which topics are important to me, as the researcher? Will my students benefit from my research? What will I do if I pick a topic, and it ends up being a wrong fit? What if this project turns into a "chore" for both myself and my students? How will I motivate my students to participate in this inquiry?

In choosing a topic, I was reminiscent of that first meeting with my students. While some kindergartners come to school with the tools necessary to learn, many do not. The same students who either barreled into the room without acknowledging their surroundings, as well as those who had difficulty letting go of a parent's hand and properly greeting their new teacher, were about to enter a world of many expectations, in which a strong arsenal of language skills will be required to meet them. Not only were they expected to comprehend and follow multi-step directions in addition to vocalizing wants, needs and thoughts, they were also expected to apply experience to new context as they learn to read, and transfer those thoughts to paper as they learn to write. Many of these students appeared overwhelmed with the variety of tasks that await them in formal

schooling, practically from the first day. This struggle did not discriminate, as students of all academic abilities and backgrounds seemed to struggle with it.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to study the oral language development of the average kindergartner, through the use of wordless picture books, as he or she is provided with practice in which to build oral language. The specific aim is to implore whether the addition of oral language activities using wordless picture books, into the regular kindergarten program, will enable students to better express themselves orally through storytelling, as well as to transfer that skill into orally dictating a written story. This study is significant in that, as academic demands increase in the kindergarten classroom, it appears that students are having a greater difficulty in demonstrating a preparedness for these demands.

In establishing this purpose for my study, I was reminiscent of the practices within my own district. Our curriculum and expectations for our students had grown to be more rigorous to meet demands from the state, however the students were still coming to school with the same experiences and background as before. The district's transition from a half day to a full day program to meet these increasing curricular demands had made an additional need for oral language development even more glaringly obvious. The time to integrate such a practice into our daily routine was no longer an issue. There was a daily allotted time for every aspect of a balanced literacy program, whereas certain skills (such as guided reading and writing) were only taught for two to three days per week during the half day program. Hence, students were given more exposure and practice with every

literacy skill. However, their difficulties remained the same, which lead me to reflect on the development of their literacy skills.

We began our writing curriculum by the end of September, which required children to draw a picture and orally tell about what has been drawn. Within a month, we began to introduce writing words to support the picture. Further, we generally began to teach guided reading by the end of October, which expects students to begin to decode text. I reviewed my students' beginning, midyear and end of the year benchmark assessments. Based on their growth throughout the year, it appeared that many, regardless of whether they received academic intervention or not, took time to acquire the skills (i.e. writing, print concepts, etc.) that required a strong foundation in oral language. I felt that these tasks proved to be difficult in the beginning of the school year and tended to take time to build with children. The majority of the students demonstrated greater academic gains during the second half of the year. By the end of the year, our students were able to produce a product based upon expectations. However, I was left wondering if that is enough. I agreed that children need intervention with academics, but they also need to understand the meaning behind what they are doing. I also wondered if those students that did not qualify for intervention understood what they were doing, or if they just had enough academic knowledge to meet expectations quicker than those that struggled.

I continued to be concerned that the children were simply churning out products based on their academic knowledge, and these experiences were not meaningful in any way towards their learning. If these experiences were not meaningful, were the children carrying over and applying what they were learning into their everyday life? In school,

students should be learning skills that will enable them to make sense of their world, both in and out of school contexts (Serafini, 2014). This coincided with my district's own mission to teach our students to be civic minded citizens in the twenty-first century. With all of this in mind, I am left with the question: What could be integrated into our district's curriculum, that catered to the development of a child's literate skills, in order to make literacy learning more meaningful for our kindergarten students?

With that, oral language struck me as a potential answer and I began to research the topic. A strong foundation in oral language skills leads to future literate success. Research has shown that a child's oral language skills develop through interactions with peers and adults (Richgels 2013). Further, a child's early literacy development is dependent on those oral language skills. Strong oral language skills lend themselves to oral narrative (telling a story) skills. Those oral narrative skills are crucial to early literacy development, as they assist children in making the transition between oral narrative to written text (Garner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

One such way to build a child's oral language skills is through the use of picture books (Sipe 2002). Illustrations can provide children with visual cues in which to imagine story events, and infer what may happen next. When students read picture books with adults and peers, they are provided with the opportunity to acquire vocabulary and build oral language through story telling (Collins & Glover, 2015).

Wordless picture books have been found to be an exceptional way to accomplish these skills (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, & Zhang, 2002). Children rely on their oral language ability to tell a story when they are not burdened with the task of decoding text



(Collins & Glover, 2015, p. 11). Further, they establish pre-requisite literacy skills that are necessary to success as an emergent reader, such as how to hold a book, how to read from left to right, how speech and print are related and how to get meaning from letters and words instead of pictures (Hu & Commeyras, 2008).

All of the research that I had read seemed to point to the use of story books to promote oral language skills. An exceptional emphasis was placed on wordless picture books, as the absence of text makes them accessible and enjoyable to students of all ages and abilities. There are a multitude of benefits to a strong foundation in oral language. These skills coincide with many emergent literacy skills that are necessary for ensuring future success in literate activities (Jalongo et al., 2002).

Despite all of the praise that the use of wordless picture books received, much of the research that had been done seemed to focus on readers who come to school with some sort of learning “deficit”, such as those who did not speak English as their primary language (Hu & Commeyras, 2008) (Jalongo et al., 2002) , were considered low-SES (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010) (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015) or were just struggling emergent readers (Wiseman, 2012). As I have indicated above, there are many more students than just those who fall into those categories who come to kindergarten needing further practice with oral language skills. A strong foundation in oral language will lead to success with many other emergent literacy skills, providing students with the tools to succeed in kindergarten and in the years to follow (Hu & Commeyras, 2008). There is a need for more research to support that the use of wordless picture books benefits all students, not just the select few with urgent needs (Serafini 2014). I began to feel that if it

can be proven that wordless picture books benefit everyone, they may begin to be used more frequently within the context of the entire kindergarten classroom. More students will have the opportunity to experience literacy learning as a meaningful experience, and possess the tools necessary to carry their literacy skills with them throughout the context of their lives.

### **Statement of Research Problem and Question**

The problem that will be addressed in this study is to explore the development of kindergarten students' oral language skills using wordless picture books. As noted above, I had noticed the following in my own classroom; once a student enters kindergarten, oral language skills take a backseat to those that are related to decoding print during reading activities (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015). These students need something additional to help express themselves orally, so that they could build a foundation with which to build off of as they acquire reading and writing skills. The specific aim of this study is to utilize wordless picture books to develop oral language skills in kindergarten students. How will students' oral language skills develop through the use of wordless books? How will wordless books impact students' concept of story? How will the use of wordless books affect students' ability to orally dictate a written story?

### **Story of the Question**

In choosing a research topic, the following quote from Shagoury and Power (2012) helped to guide my question "Think of your question as a grow light. When shined upon your students, you should see them flourish" (p.33). With this in mind, I

began to reflect on my current and former students. What trends had I noticed throughout these past seven years? Which topic would enable my students to flourish during their kindergarten year, and set them up for success in all the years afterward?

As I reflected on this, oral language development seemed to be the one glaringly obvious need that stuck out more so than others. As indicated above, kindergarten students come to school with a variety of experiences. While some appear to have a decent grasp on expressing themselves orally, many seem to struggle in this area. Some do not know how to properly greet a peer or adult, express wants and needs or describe a particular event in detail. Despite this, kindergarten students are expected to do so many things that requires a strong background in this area.

Incorporating oral language into my classroom would simply enhance the daily activities that would already taking place. I, along with other kindergarten teachers, had already read a plethora of story books with my students throughout the school year. However, as indicated by Lysaker and Hopper (2015) above, most of the skills and conversations that take place during those reading activities revolved around decoding print. It was time to make oral language development a priority during literacy activities.

Unconsciously, the desire to explore wordless picture books in order to develop oral language had been there for quite some time. Thankfully, the pieces came together just in time for me to embark on my journey as a teacher researcher. About 3 years prior, before I even knew that I would be researching a topic in pursuit of a higher educational degree and a Reading Specialist certification, I began to experiment with an additional use for them. I was inspired by the leveled text reading series provided by my district.

The recommended level of readers to use at the beginning of the year with those that are ready are Level A books, which already contained one sentence per page of repetitive text, heavy with high frequency words. However, Level AA books were also provided for those children who are not ready to read text. The Level AA texts were wordless picture books, which reinforced the concept that wordless picture books are for struggling readers (Serafini 2014). During that particular school year, I had a group of students who were very high readers, and I was looking for a new way to challenge their thinking during guided reading. At the suggestion of my Reading Specialist, I copied pages of the Level AA books, and asked my students to write their own stories to match the illustrations. Not only did my students really enjoy the activity, it provided me with insight into their concepts of story. Even my advanced students needed additional support to move past labeling the pictures and narrating events. However, with assistance, those particular students thrived. By the end of the school year, they were adding dialogue to their stories and inferring what would happen next. From that moment, I began to see that wordless picture books were not just for struggling readers.

Fast forwarding to last school year, my district had just switched to full day kindergarten and I had just moved to a new elementary school, as a result of kindergarten doubling in size and experienced teachers being needed at each site. During that year, my new supervisor had scheduled basic skills assistants to push in to each kindergarten classroom for twenty minutes per day. During that time, the assistants were to read picture books with students who struggled with language. That was their only task during their scheduled time.

I happened to have a student in my class that year who struggled with language development. She came from a family of Middle Eastern background, and spoke Arabic at home. Her academic skills were not low enough to qualify her for basic skills support, and she did not qualify for ESL services either. However, she still struggled to comprehend and follow directions, contribute to classroom discussions, orally express her wants and needs and to coherently dictate a written story. Left with no other options as to how I would help her, I recommended her to the basic skills assistant to read picture books to see if it would help with her language deficits. Although I expected her to make some progress with the assistant, I was floored by how far she had come at the end of the school year. She would not only follow directions correctly the first time given, she also began talking up a storm. She exited kindergarten reading on level with her peers. Once she gained the ability to transfer her oral language skills to written text, she was able to write coherent stories in which the picture and writing matched.

Seeing the remarkable progress that this student made simply by being exposed to picture books being read aloud really emphasized the need for oral language development in my mind. If listening to story books being read aloud made such a positive impact on the oral language development, in addition to the reading and writing skills, of a student who came into kindergarten significantly behind her peers, what kind of impact would it make on those students who enter kindergarten with an average skill set? At the end of the year, around the same time that I remarked on the incredible gains that my student had made, my supervisor also purchased a set of 10 wordless picture books for each kindergarten classroom. My colleagues and I were not given specific directions for the

books, just that we should incorporate them into our classroom. It was at that very moment that I knew exactly what to do with my books.

From that moment, I decided that I would pursue the use of wordless picture books to build oral language skills. I would choose students who demonstrated an average set of academic skills. I would read wordless picture books with them, and document their use of oral language to tell the story. I would also keep field notes of other observational behaviors. While the time frame, as well as the time of year, of the study, would be too short to document how the books affected those students' reading levels, I would still be able to use writing samples to see if my students were transferring their oral language skills into orally dictating a written story as well. As reflection is important to any practice, I would also keep my own teacher response journal in order to reflect and adjust my practice throughout the study in order to gauge the success of the activities.

### **Organization of the Paper**

The remainder of this paper is a qualitative study of my research question. Chapter Two discusses historical and current theory relevant to oral language and literacy development in emerging readers, as well review current research to support the use of wordless picture books. Chapter Three will provide an understanding of the context of the study and methodology, as well as some background data on the kindergarten students who participated. Chapter Four will review and analyze the data sources. Chapter Five, the final chapter, will summarize the conclusions, limitations and implications for the field.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Picture books have long been associated with teaching children to read. Many children interact with picture books before they enter school. The first feature of a storybook that resonates with children is the pictures (Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad, & Zhang, 2002). These pictures not only teach children to tell the story through their own words, they also promote oral language as the pictures introduce or provide another example of real world concepts. Through these books, children begin to develop a sense of story. The pictures enable the child to imagine the events taking place, and interpret the details of the story that they are reading, both of which are essential comprehension skills. In reading favorite books repeatedly, children begin to recall the plot by “reading” the pictures. In telling the story, children begin to take ownership and make the story theirs. Picture books are very beneficial to children as they begin their journey in reading acquisition.

However, all of the skills gained through interaction with picture books becomes lost when children enter kindergarten, and are introduced to print. Suddenly, skills related to decoding the text takes precedence while other storytelling skills become lost. With this, children lose the critical interpretation skills that become necessary for comprehension of the text (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015).

What if the task of interpreting the text was taken away? How would this affect a kindergarten student’s understanding of the concept of story? Research on the use of wordless picture books indicate that when text is removed, children are able to

demonstrate a greater understanding of the concept of story, as well as making inferences about the events taking place, creating dialogue and following narrative action (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015).

As a kindergarten teacher, I am also guilty of focusing on text decoding skills as opposed to introducing them in tandem with reinforcing the plethora of skills that picture books, especially those that are wordless, have to offer. As I began my research, I found theory to support establishing reading and writing as a meaningful experience, rather than one that simply focuses on decoding and writing words. Further, I found that continuing a focus on reading story books in my classroom reinforces pre and emergent literacy skills that are essential for future success in literacy. These crucial skills include oral language development, storytelling, and emergent skills such as book handling and parts of a book. While it may seem that wordless picture books are only intended for those children who arrive at school without previous experience with these essential literacy skills, this assumption could not be further from the truth. Every child, regardless of background and ability, can benefit from rich experience with wordless picture books.

### **Theory/Framework**

When any reader reads a book, a transactional relationship always occurs between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt (1988) theorizes that this transaction either occurs consciously, or subconsciously. Furthermore, readers read text to either gain an informational stance (efferent), or a meaningful stance (aesthetic) from the text. While taking an efferent stance involves scanning material to seek information to “take away” from the text, an aesthetic stance forces readers to analyze the text and “write” his/her own meaning from what has been provided. Rosenblatt stresses that adopting one stance,



or falling somewhere in the middle of both, is essential to every reader in every reading task. In doing so, the reader has established his/her purpose for the reading exercise (Rosenblatt, 1988). Lately, with the above mentioned emphasis on decoding and sight word recognition, it seems that most readers tend to take an efferent stance to reading text. While this stance may be occasionally important, educators also need to work to bring back reading from an aesthetic stance. Doing so will foster a future of life-long reading for our students.

Rosenblatt (1988) also discusses how the transactional theory affects students' ability to write. Writing also involves a necessary transaction with the text. While reading provides the reader with text in which the reader will analyze and "write" his/her own meaning, in writing the writer is given a blank piece of paper in which to create his/her own meaningful text. Both reading and writing activities derive from an individual's set of language skills (Rosenblatt, 1988). Therefore, in order to read and write meaningful text, one must possess strong language skills.

Reader Response Theory insinuates that there is not one-single meaning to any given text. Each reader brings with him/her their own experiences, cultural and psychological filters, and stances. The result is a rich diversity in responses to text (Sipe, 2000). With multiple meanings and contributions to discussions about a text, the conversation and language surrounding the text becomes rich and meaningful. A collaborative approach to literacy as children read, write and talk about the world is a very important aspect to language development, as well as students' construction of knowledge (Wiseman, 2012).

## **Oral Language Development**

Lawrence Sipe (2002) discusses the use of picture books for students to develop oral language skills. When actively participating with a story being read aloud, they take a stance that Sipe describes as expressive and performative engagement. This stance manifests in five different ways: dramatizing, talking back, critiquing/controlling, inserting and taking over. In participating in this manner, storybooks begin to be seen as an invitation for children to participate and make the story their own (Sipe, 2002).

Early literacy development is contingent on a child's development of oral language (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). The emergence of a child's oral language skills is fostered by interactions with peers, as well as adults (Richgels, 2013). Prior to decoding text, when reading picture books with a group of peers or an adult, there is also an opportunity for children to acquire vocabulary and build their oral language (Collins & Glover, 2015). Oral language skills lend itself to telling an oral narrative. According to Schick and Melzi (2010), oral narrative consists of a form of discourse in which real or imagined events are communicated. This enables children to practice using language outside of an immediate context, just as it is presented in written text (as cited in Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). These oral narrative skills also play a role in early literacy development, as these skills assist children with the transition from oral language to written text. They assist children in learning about the structure of a written narrative, which is beneficial as the children learn to decipher and understand written text (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). Further, when children are not faced with the task of decoding words, or are having difficulty in doing so, they can rely on their oral language ability to retrieve words and phrases in telling the story (Collins & Glover, 2015).

While it is simple for students to use simple narration when discussing a book, proper scaffolding can lead to complete sentences and usage of adjectives. Therefore, rich talk begins with discussion about a wordless book, which can then be transferred into student writing and reading ability (Richgels, 2013). Oral language skills are important for the literacy outcomes of children (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). Literacy language, expressions and vocabulary that derives from texts being read transfers into a student's own oral and written language (Collins & Glover, 2015). This is especially true with those students who have limited language skills, such as Socioeconomic Status and English as a Second Language students. Oral language skills lead to improved reading comprehension skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

### **The Concept of Story**

An important aspect of an effective reading program, for both emergent and struggling readers, includes interactive read-alouds in which students contribute to the learning with support from teacher scaffolding. Encouraged expressions and responses to reading activities are an essential element in fostering this skill, despite their decline due to increased standardized testing and curriculum standards. These structured conversations about literacy in the classroom transfer to both in-school and out-of-school contexts. As a result, there needs to be opportunities for students to practice contributing and exploring meanings in an open-ended format, in addition to providing guidance and scaffolding for students to develop literacy strategies. When all of these components are combined with the literacy program, it leads to literacy development in young learners (Wiseman, 2012)

Picture books can be utilized to assist young learners in practicing these skills. When text proves too difficult to decode, the reader relies on the pictures to assist them in figuring out what is going on. The illustrations provide visual cues in which to interpret story events, and infer what may be happening. Further, when viewing an illustration of a story character with an open mouth, speech bubble, emotional facial expressions or other talking features, a child can imagine what the character might be saying (Collins & Glover, 2015).

Wiseman(2003) discusses the ways in which student concepts of story-telling emerge during the kindergarten year, and the strategies that one kindergarten teacher put into place to assist her students with their development in that area. The teacher implemented journal writing to follow her daily read-alouds. She also provided a collaborative environment in her classroom in which students build oral language and story-telling skills with one another, in addition to the teacher. The end result was a classroom in which students constructed their own knowledge as they learned from each other, as well as the teacher (Wiseman 2003).

### **Wordless Picture Books to Teach Emergent Literacy Skills**

Reading and writing skills both derive from the child's early literacy development. According to Justice and Kaderavek (2002), children first interact with books during the early stage of their literacy development by observing others participating in literate activities (as cited in Hu & Commeyras, 2008). Through this, children learn how to hold a book, how to read from left to right, how speech and print are related and how to get meaning from letters and words instead of pictures. These interactions provide children with essential prerequisites before developing further

literacy skills (Hu & Commeyras, 2008). Not all children come to school with a rich background in these beneficial skills. However, rich classroom reading experiences and an early literacy intervention can close academic gaps among gender and language-learners by grade 1 (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010). Wordless picture books prove to be exceptionally helpful in establishing these prerequisite literacy skills. Long before mastering print, children are able to recognize, interpret and express themselves through pictures. Further, the absence of print in wordless picture books makes them accessible and enjoyable to children at all stages of emergent reading, and varying levels of familiarity with the English language (Jalongo et al., 2002).

Collins and Glover (2015) define reading as “an interaction with a text during which the reader uses a variety of resources within the text (i.e., words, pictures, graphic elements, etc.) and within themselves (schema, skills, strategies) to make meaning (p.10). Children are able to read pictures before they are able to read words (Serafini, 2014). With this in mind, reading a wordless picture book does constitute reading. The use of the pictures assists them in anchoring themselves to the story. Further, the pictures are used to make meaning by assisting with a wide variety of comprehension skills (inferencing, predicting, etc.). These pre-conventional reading experiences play an active role in developing a child’s reading strengths, reading identities and reading attitudes (Collins & Glover, 2015).

Picture books are utilized to teach children many of these pre-reading skills, such as the parts of a book, book handling skills, and the concept of a story. Comprehension of the form and content of illustrations are an important aspect in the literary understanding of picture books (Sipe, 2000). Further, the cues provided in the illustrations are utilized

to support a child's comprehension of the events taking place in the story (Collins & Glover, 2015).

The purest form of a picture book in which to teach these skills are wordless picture books. Wordless picture books provide children with an outlet in which to recognize, interpret and express themselves through the use of pictures, before they are able to decode the printed word. When not faced with the task of decoding, these books also differ in complexity, making them not only useful with emergent readers, but with older struggling readers and readers with learning disabilities. The lack of text also makes them interpretable by children who speak English as a second language, or have limited English capabilities (Jalongo et al., 2002).

### **Who Benefits From Wordless Picture Books?**

The use of wordless picture books is not just limited to emergent and struggling readers. They provide an excellent platform for introducing many narrative conventions, reading processes and visual strategies. Readers of all ages and abilities can benefit from these skills (Serafini, 2014). These books also provide enrichment for gifted readers. The lack of text eliminates the story to being limited to one interpretation. Rather, the reader needs to apply his/her knowledge of the concept of story to analyze the pictures and "read" the illustrations (Lukehart, 2011).

While the lack of text may be seen as beneficial in some instances, it also categorizes wordless picture books and makes them seem only beneficial to a certain category of struggling emergent reader. Wordless picture books need to be defined as what they do contain, as opposed to what they do not. Wordless picture books are visually rendered narratives. In order to make sense of the world, one needs practice with

making sense of visual information. This skill proves to be beneficial to all students, both in and out of school. Therefore, all children, regardless of reading ability, should be exposed to wordless books (Serafini, 2014).

Lysaker and Hopper (2015) conducted a case study on a typically developing kindergartner who utilizes strategies during wordless picture book reading. The researchers found that when concepts of print are introduced, emergent readers become burdened with the task of reading and lose focus on making meaning from what they are reading. When the task of decoding print was taken away by utilizing a wordless picture book, the kindergarten student was able to focus on making meaning from a story. (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015).

In their article, *Using Wordless Picture Books to Support Emergent Literacy*, Jalongo, Dragich, Conrad and Zhang (2002) discuss utilizing wordless picture books to support emergent literacy skills with young children. They outline the benefits to the practice, which have been supported by research, such as developing book handling behaviors, being well suited to contemporary children's strengths, being adaptable for students with special needs, inspiring storytelling and supporting curricular integration. They go on to explain how wordless books differ greatly, and follow a developmental sequence. Developmentally, children first learn book handling skills with wordless books, followed by labeling the picture by describing the items in it, asking questions about the picture and labeling items correctly, interpreting the plot after an adult interprets the picture, emulating interpretations of pictures and plot and finally using oral language to create a story to accompany the illustrations (Jalongo et al., 2002).

## **Conclusion**

While the benefits of wordless picture books for all are touted, many of the studies that I found focused on students with some sort of literacy “deficit”, such as those who did not speak English as their primary language (Hu & Commeyras, 2008) (Jalongo et al., 2002) , were considered low-SES (MacDonald & Figueredo, 2010) (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015) or were just struggling emergent readers (Wiseman, 2012). I agree with Serafini (2014) in that if there were more studies done on the use of wordless picture books to develop oral language with average students, then wordless picture books may begin to lose the stigma of being categorized as being intended only for struggling readers. When I consider the benefits that have been outlined by the use wordless picture books, I feel that all emergent readers should be exposed to them. It is my hope that my literature review, combined with my questions for study, will initiate further action towards the use of wordless picture books to develop oral language skills with all emergent readers.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Context**

#### **Community**

The study site is one of six elementary schools in a large suburban public school district, that services students in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade. The school was built in 1980 to accommodate the township's growing population. As of the 2010 United States Census, the township is home to 48,559 residents, with 17,287 households. Of those 48,559 residents, 87.7% are White, 5.8% are Black, 0.1% are American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3.8% are Asian and 0% are Hawaiian/Pacific Islander alone. 0.9% are considered to be another race, and 1.7% are considered to be of two or more races. The median household income in the township is \$85,892. 3.7% of individuals and 2.6% of families are considered to be below the poverty line.

#### **School**

The total enrollment at the study site is 437 students, in grades kindergarten through fifth. Of those 437 students, 214 are female and 223 are male. Of the total student population, 98.9% primarily speak English at home. 0.5% of students primarily speak Gujarati, while Konkani, Arabic and Spanish are each primarily spoken by 0.2% of students. Ethnically, the student population at the school is comprised of students who are 71.8% White, 16.1% Black, 5.35% Hispanic, 4.4% Asian and 2.5% Two or More Races. Out of the total student population, 36% of the total student population are considered to be economically disadvantaged, 23% of students have a disability and 0% are limited in

English proficiency. The student to teacher ratio is 9:1. There are 41 full-time teachers employed at the school.

The mission of the district is to provide a safe, positive and progressive environment for students to obtain the necessary knowledge and skills in which to become responsible, self-directed and civic-minded citizens. The school's vision mirrors this mission by establishing goals to provide students with a sound environment in which to obtain necessary skills for future success, to instill positive self-worth in students and to encourage students to become responsible, civil-minded members of the community. The school achieves these goals by implementing programs, such as curriculum that fits into a workshop model, additional programs before, during and after school to assist struggling students, additional after-school clubs to appeal to a variety of interests, 1:1 laptops for every student in grades 3-5, iPads to be used by students in grades K-2, Positive Character programs, and a variety of related arts classes, such as Computers, Art, Gym, Music and Library.

### **Classroom**

This study will be conducted in a regular education kindergarten classroom in the elementary school. The physical space is situated in a standard classroom within the school. It is in the same hallway as the other kindergarten classrooms. The kindergarten program in the district is a full day program. Students attend school for 6 hours and 15 minutes. All regular instruction takes place within the classroom setting by the classroom teacher, and push-in support for struggling students is provided by a basic skills teacher and basic skills assistant during a one-hour literacy block. For students in need of more

direct and intensified academic assistance, additional pull out instruction is provided during an additional 20-minute intervention block by the interventionist. Students also eat lunch in the classroom. They leave the classroom twice per day, one time for a 20-minute recess and the other for a 40-minute related arts class (Library, Music, Physical Education, Art and Computers).

The room is equipped with an interactive whiteboard projector, and two iPad carts are available to be shared between 8 kindergarten classrooms. As full day kindergarten was just implemented last school year, the room has been recently furnished with brand new furniture. There are new student work tables and chairs, as well as a storage easel with a whiteboard and a brand new classroom meeting rug. There is a new dry erase topped kidney table for small group instruction. There is also an area of the room in which each student is given a storage locker to keep his/her belongings. As the district has implemented a play-based curriculum, there are also designated areas of the room for play centers such as dramatic play, blocks, table toys, literacy, art and science/sensory. One such center, Literacy, also doubles as a quiet reading area for a “Read to Self” literacy center.

There are multiple opportunities to read in the classroom, as the daily schedule has time slots for Whole Group Reading activities, Small Group Reading instruction, Individualized Daily Reading time. Reading is also encouraged at home. After meeting in small groups for reading instruction, the students are permitted to bring their leveled text from the lesson home for additional reading practice. The school has also implemented a new “Read to Me” program this year. There are 10 bins of quality picture books in the

school. The bins each contain enough books for one entire class, and are rotated among the classrooms on a monthly basis. Each morning, the students are permitted to choose one book to take home that night to have read to them by an adult. They can bring that book back the following day to choose a new book from the bin. There is also a multitude of books available to the students for classroom bins. There are thematic book bins as well as baskets of additional leveled readers, which are rotated monthly/seasonally, in the classroom library. There is also a display shelf of seasonal/holiday books which are swapped every month. Students are provided with their own book bin in which they can “shop” for books on designated days, and then read from the bin during Individualized Daily Reading.

## **Students**

As kindergarten is the first grade level to enter the school and district, not much is known about the students’ abilities upon entrance to the school. All entering kindergarten students in the district are encouraged to visit his/her assigned school during a two-week period of time during the summer before kindergarten, to be administered a “snapshot” assessment. Skills such as letter and sound recognition, sight word recognition and print concepts are assessed during that time. Students are then placed into groupings of either “high”, “average” or “low”. With that data, every attempt is made to ensure that every regular education classroom is composed of a heterogeneous mixture of high, average and low students. The students in this classroom were randomly assigned to this particular classroom based on data and groupings from the kindergarten snapshot.

As there is limited time in which to complete the study, and I knew that my study would require in-depth discussion and observation of student responses and behaviors, I chose to focus on a group of 5 students. The group of students selected consists of two girls: Tina\* and Maria\*, and three boys: Nathan\*, Cody\* and David\*. These students were chosen based on observed behaviors in the classroom. Most notable times for observed behaviors was during the sharing portion of Morning Meeting, and in orally dictating a written story during Writer's Workshop. The students that were selected either demonstrated a narrating/labeling stage of storytelling, or inability to maintain the topic (rambling, etc) during storytelling. The parents of students demonstrating these behaviors were called, and provided with the phone recruitment script. If the parent verbally consented, he/she was then sent the parental consent slip. Once the consent slips were signed and returned, the students were able to begin the study.

During the first week of the study, each student was administered a pre-assessment questionnaire. They were asked to describe their favorite story, and why they liked it. The questionnaire provided me with insight into each student's current concept of story, as well as some of their reading interests.

Tina is a 5-year-old girl, who enjoys stories about princesses. She was unable to provide the name of a particular princess story. However, she did say that one of her favorite princesses was Snow White. She enjoys princess stories because "I just like dresses, pink, dancing around with the prince and that's it".

Maria is a 5-year-old girl, whose favorite story is Hop on Pop. When asked to tell about it, she was able to provide a very brief, two sentence summary of "It's when there's

boys that play all day and all night. The boys jump on their Pop”. She states that she likes this story because “It’s colorful”.

Nathan is a 5-year-old boy, who enjoys stories about dinosaurs. He was also unable to name a particular dinosaur story, however when asked to tell about a dinosaur story he said “They growl. They stomp too. They eat. Sometimes they eat people. I think that’s it”. He enjoys stories about dinosaurs because “They look cool”.

Cody is a 5-year-old boy, who enjoys stories about Thomas the Tank Engine. He was unable to provide the title of the book, however he summarized on particular Thomas story by saying “Thomas, he tries to carry a box and he falls into a deep, deep hole. And then, he can’t get out with his wheels and so he found a track on the edge and then he got out. That’s it”. He likes Thomas because “He says “chugga, chugga, choo-choo with his wheels”.

David is a 5-year-old boy, who enjoys stories about the movie Rio. When asked to tell about the story he says “In the #2, there’s ‘baddies’ in it. They chop down the trees in the forest where the birds live”. When prompted to say more about the story, he told of two other stories that he enjoyed, A sea turtle book and the story Planes. When asked why he liked the stories, he shared that he likes to color in one of the books.

The responses to the pre-assessment questionnaire further confirmed my belief that all five children appear to be in the labeling stage of storytelling. Learning to inference and predict may enable them in getting to the next level of storytelling. Additionally, identifying expression and incorporating speech will also assist with this.

David also struggled to stay on topic of telling just one story, and instead told three different stories together. Although he did not do so during the questionnaire, I have also observed this behavior from Cody during Writer's Workshop and Morning Meeting. I feel that using transitional words will assist them with staying on the topic of just one story when storytelling.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

Shagoury and Power (2012) describe research as a "mold with a shifting form", that is shaped by the social relationships in the classroom (p. 58). In that regard, this study has been shaped by teacher observation as to the abilities and needs of kindergarten students. As the study progresses, it will be adjusted as needed, based on the abilities and understanding of the study's concepts by the students involved. A research design frames the study, and provides the researcher with a reference that should be checked throughout the entire project (Shagoury and Power, 2012, p.53).

### **Procedures**

The qualitative research that will be completed for this project will consist of the shared features for practitioner inquiry, as outlined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). The authors indicate that practitioner inquiry should have The Practitioner as the Researcher. As I am the classroom teacher, as well as the researcher, this will be true of my study. Another feature is Community and Collaboration. I am completing my study in response to a new initiative put forth by my principal and supervisor. I have gleaned some insight into the concept surrounding this study from my supervisor's previous experience in this

area, and am delving deeper into an area in which we both feel would benefit the school and district. The third feature, as outlined by the authors, is Knowledge, Knowers and Knowing, in which all participants in the inquiry community are regarded as knowers, learners and researchers. As this is my seventh year teaching kindergarten students, and I am the sole researcher in this project, I would consider myself knowledgeable in the area of study, with room to research and expand on my current knowledge. The fourth feature is Professional Context as an Inquiry Site. As this study will be completing in my classroom, this feature is also being met through my project. The fifth feature is Blurred Boundaries Between Inquiry and Practice. As my inquiry explores an aspect of daily instruction that is already being met, and takes it one step further, it also meets the requirements of this feature. Validity and Generalizability is another important feature of practitioner inquiry. I will be using valid research methods, and forms of assessment to ensure validity in my project. Systematicity is another key feature of practitioner research, in which the researcher systematically documents his/her own questions from an inside perspective. As I will be maintaining a teacher's reflection journal, in addition to other data sources, this feature will also be met within my project. Finally, the last feature is Publicity, Public Knowledge and Critique. I will be publishing my research, upon completing, in the Rowan University Library system to be available for public access and critique. (pp. 41-45).

### **Data Collection**

As I complete my research project, my methods for data collection will be varied. I will begin and end with a pre/post questionnaire in which I ask my participating



students to share about their favorite stories, in which to document growth in their concept of orally dictating a story. During each session, one wordless picture book was read collaboratively in a small group setting, with the teacher providing scaffolded support as needed. The following wordless picture books were used; *Chalk*, by Bill Thomson, *Wave*, by Suzy Lee, *Jack and the Night Visitors*, by Pat Schories, *Goodnight Gorilla*, by Peggy Rathmann, *Pancakes for Breakfast*, by Tomie DePaola, *The Lion and The Mouse*, by Jerry Pinkney, *Frog Goes to Dinner*, by Mercer Mayer, and *Frog on His Own*, by Mercer Mayer. As we read each wordless picture book, I utilized Post-It notes to document student dictations, wonderings, inferences and predictions. I also took audio samples of student responses to record any student responses that I missed during the session. Writing samples were collected as well, to demonstrate the students' ability to transfer the skills and orally dictate a written story. Throughout the project, I also took field notes to record my observations of student behaviors. Finally, I kept a teacher's reflection journal to document my own internal reflections and questions. I utilized the field notes and reflection journal to identify successes, as well as parts of my study that needed to be adjusted.

### **Data Analysis**

This project analyzed the effect that reading wordless picture books has on the development of a kindergarten student's oral language development, as well as his/her concept of story. The pre/post questionnaire was given to provide insight as to each student's concept of story before and after the study. As recommended in the Hu and Cammeryas (2008) study, the Post-It notes were utilized to document student responses.

Each student was assigned a different colored Post-It notes. Each Post-It note from each student was counted, to record the number of words used during storytelling. Each student's word count from each page were averaged to find an average word count for each story. The averages were used to chart the progress of that student's oral story telling for each book, as well as to demonstrate growth in oral story telling across the study. The student responses were also compared to the UnFamiliar Book Language Charts in *I Am Reading* (Collins & Glover, 2015, pp 68-71), to determine where each student's language level fell, as well as to note each student's progression across the levels during the study. Writing samples were also used to analyze the progression of each student's concept of story throughout the study. Concepts such as the total amount of words, details, and telling across the pages through oral dictation were all analyzed to determine if a transfer of skills had occurred. Finally, field notes and a teacher reflection journal were used to analyze students' understanding of concepts, and growth through the study.

\*Student names have been changed to maintain confidentiality of the involved participants.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis and Findings

How often do educators view literacy instruction as feeding students the information? Are many educators even aware of this? Reflecting upon my own practice, it seems that much of my whole and small group literacy instruction has been led by me. As teachers, we always have the best of intentions. However, we so badly want our students to succeed that we tend to lead them to the answers that we wish for them to find. Collins and Glover (2015) refer to this as “rushed readiness” (p. 146). How would that change if I set the stage, and allowed my students to take the lead for a change? Collins and Glover (2015) state, “When we stand beside children at their own individual starting points-instead of teaching from the finish line and expecting them to race there-we must observe often and differentiate constantly. In this way, we prioritize teaching children over teaching stuff” (p.146).

I saw this revelation come to life during the study. My focus question for this study was “How does the use of wordless picture books affect oral language development in kindergarten students?”. When I set out to begin the study, I began in earnest, with an end goal in mind that consisted of using wordless picture books to develop my students’ oral language skills. I knew that I wanted my students to learn to tell stories across pages using transitional words, storytelling language and dialogue, in response to wordless picture books. I went through the collection of wordless picture books that I had in my classroom, and mapped out which books I would use, and when I would use them in my study.

When choosing which wordless picture books to use, I chose to begin with those that had vibrant illustrations and a lot of action on the page to engage my students. Since my students were only 5-6 years old, and new to inferencing, I also wanted the plot of the story to be easy to decipher. I planned to begin the first session of the study with *Chalk*, by Bill Thomson. For my second session, I chose *Wave*, by Suzy Lee. From there, I planned to use *Jack and the Night Visitors*, by Pat Schories, and *Goodnight Gorilla*, by Peggy Rathmann, during the second week of the study. *Pancakes for Breakfast*, by Tomie DePaola, and *The Lion and the Mouse* by Jerry Pinckney were planned for the third week. I had felt that by that point, my students should be ready to delve into series' books and be able to connect characters and plot across books, so I planned to use two books from Mercer Mayer's Frog series; *Frog Goes to Dinner*, and *Frog on His Own* for the fourth and final week of the study. I was able to uphold this part of my plan, and adhered to every book and session date as scheduled (field notes dated November 7, 2017, November 8, 2017, November 14, 2017, November 15, 2017, November 20, 2017, November 21, 2017, November 27, 2017, December 1, 2017).

It was also part of my plan to focus on one concept per session, much like a shared reading lesson. I had hoped that by instructing my students on one new concept per session, they would develop their oral language and my focus question, along with my sub-questions, would be met. However, things did not go according to plan. I soon became stuck in progressing my students' oral language development, as it took longer than one session to master one of the concepts that I was teaching (journal entry, November 21, 2017). It was then that I decided to model my sessions after a guided

reading lesson instead. I would begin by frontloading the book through a picture walk. Later in the day, I would present the students with the book again, and allow them to “read” it. During that time, I would guide them by encouraging elaboration, providing praise, etc, however, I would not focus on one particular “skill” for the students to master during that session. What I saw during the following session astounded me. My students storytelling ability soared when they were given the freedom to develop at their own pace. In learning to let go and trust my students during this study, I have learned that not only did they construct their own meaning and learning, they took it to levels that I had never dreamed possible (journal entry, November 27, 2017). A further analysis of the data demonstrated the specific ways in which my students socially constructed meaning and learning through the use of wordless picture books.

According to Shagoury and Power (2012), data analysis consists of “viewing each bit of information as part of a larger puzzle you must put together.” (p.136). In doing so, the researcher notes which pieces fit together to glean insight into patterns and trends (Shagoury & Power, 2012, p. 136). As I sat down, and began to analyze the data that had been compiled throughout this study, I began to feel as if I was doing just that.

Just as one begins to assemble a puzzle by emptying the box, spreading all of the pieces out and studying the box to note what the finished piece should look like, I began my data analysis by doing the same. Shagoury and Power (2012) state that “Research still seems like a linear process to most of us- finding a research question, collecting data, and then analyzing what is found” (p. 145). In the same fashion that I began my study as a linear process, and moved towards an organic process, I also began looking at my data

through a linear lens and gradually began to analyze my data organically. I gathered all of my pieces of data, spread them out, and began to take note as to what had emerged.

My first impression of what I had observed, as well as what was clearly in front of me, had indicated that my students had made progress throughout our sessions with wordless picture books. However, I was still left wondering how my students, and I, got to this point. My general observations did not address my sub-questions for this study: How will students' oral language skills develop through the use of wordless picture books? How will wordless picture books impact students' concept of story? How will the use of wordless picture books affect students' ability to orally dictate a written story?

While my first impressions were helpful in assisting me to begin to cook my data, it did not tell the whole story of how my students got there. I needed a closer look at my data to really glean insight as to how, exactly, the wordless picture books had helped my students to develop these oral language skills (Shagoury & Power, 2015, p.136). Once I began to further analyze the data, I found that my questions had been answered, but there was much more to the story than just that. By triangulating my data, I gleaned surprising insight as to how this study had benefited my kindergarten students (Shagoury & Power, 2015, p. 135).

While looking at my data through a linear perspective did not yield the results that I had expected, viewing the data organically led to a finding of common themes spread throughout. I noticed patterns of oral language development through building background knowledge, developing vocabulary concepts, improving the concept of story and building oral language skills through performative and expressive engagement. Further analysis of

these themes provided greater insight as to the ways in which my students oral language developed throughout the study.

It was through these themes that I began to see how the data answered all of my sub-questions. With my first sub-question being “How will oral language skills develop through the use of wordless picture books?”, I could see this question being addressed through all four of the emerging themes; building background knowledge, developing vocabulary concepts, building oral language skills through performative and expressive engagement and improving the concept of story. My second sub-question, “How will wordless picture books impact students’ concept of story?” was directly answered, as one of the emerging themes turned out to be improving the concept of story. I also felt that the answer to this question was further emphasized through the additional theme of building oral language skills through performative and expressive engagement. My final sub-question, “How will the use of wordless picture books affect students’ ability to orally dictate a written story?”, was also addressed through the themes of improving the concept of story and building oral language skills through performative and expressive engagement. A closer analysis of each of these emerging themes reveals how these questions, and more, were answered.

### **Building Background Knowledge**

**The Lion and the Mouse.** “Oh yeah, this is cool!” exclaimed David, during our reading of *The Lion and The Mouse* (Pinkney, 2009). Over the course of this study, I had observed other instances in which my students were able to apply their individual background knowledge to what they had observed on the page of the book. Together,

they were able to construct a larger story based upon what they had built together through their discussion. During this particular session, a picture of an owl hooting at night had led to a discussion amongst my students regarding nocturnal animals. It began with Cody, stating “The owl is going ‘whooh, whooh whooh’. Owls do that.” That seemed to resonate with Nate, who added with a bit of hesitation “Do you know what owls do? They, they, they, they, uh, they sleep at the... morning [sic].” All I had to do was encourage him with a simple “You’re right!”, and the conversation took off. With that, he added, “And they wake up at the night [sic]!”. It took me a moment to process what was going on. I was trying to guide my students towards identifying the setting (in hindsight, I now cringe at that thought) by saying “You’re right! So that’s how we know that it’s...what?”. I am now grateful that my students disregarded that question and continued with their conversation. “I know what bats do,” was Maria’s response (or blatant disregard) to that question. “I don’t know which one that’s called [sic]!”, exclaims Nate, which led to David’s proclamation that whatever it is, is in fact cool. Finally, I catch on. “Are you thinking of that word that begins with *n*? Nocturnal?”. Nate knowingly responded to the new tidbit of information with “Ooooooh”. David appeared to process the term as he slowly stated, “Noc...turnal. Nocturnal”. (transcript dated November 21, 2017). As indicated by the data, my students had worked collaboratively, with minimal prompting from me, to construct their background knowledge of nocturnal animals during this session. Together, my students had merged their experiences and knowledge to connect prior knowledge to present learning opportunities (Wiseman, 2003). It was through this construction of knowledge, that my students began to add more meaning to



the story that they were telling, thus further developing their oral language skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

During that same reading, viewing the pictures of the book had also led to discussions about additional terms to build my students background knowledge further. One such term was the word “cage”. Up until that point, my students had been referring to a “cage” as “animal jail”. While some may agree with my students’ terminology, I corrected them by making sure they knew the technical term for what they had observed (field notes, dated November 21, 2017). This data provides another instance in which my students were able to practice using language outside of an immediate context that is similar to the language that would be presented in written text (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

Another discussion piece was the word “safari”. Maria, who had just been to Disney World and stayed at the Animal Kingdom resort, was familiar with the concept but lacked the correct terminology to explain what was on the page. The other students had no clue what a safari was, and the picture in the book was their first glimpse of the concept (field notes, dated November 21, 2017). This time, it was Maria’s turn to share her understanding of the world, with some scaffolding from me, in order to assist her peers in constructing their own meaning of the concept (Wiseman, 2003).

It had amazed me that my students did not know the word “cage”, and many of them did not know what a “safari” was either. I had at least expected them to know the word “cage”. This data shows that student knowledge about concepts can never be assumed, however wordless picture books create many opportunities for that knowledge

to be built upon. This affords children practice with decontextualized language through their own oral storytelling, which will later prove to be useful as they learn to decipher and understand text (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

**Frog Goes to Dinner.** The words that students use, as well as the way in which they construct their story, shows their understanding of the world (Hu & Commeyras, 2008). Kindergarten students have a limited understanding of the world, and thus have difficulty making meaning from concepts that are not familiar. However, each student has a certain understanding that can be shared with peers, thus building upon one another's understanding and knowledge of the world (Wiseman, 2003).

The reading of *Frog Goes to Dinner* (Mayer, 1974), proved to be another book in which insight into my students' current background knowledge was gleaned, as well as further opportunities for all of them to construct further knowledge as a group. In viewing the illustration of the family approaching a fancy restaurant, Tina contributed the following "The boy, sister, mom and dad went to the restaurant and said 'Four people'" (student response, dated November 27, 2017). This led to a discussion as to why patrons of a restaurant need to indicate how many people in their party. During this discussion, Nate was also able to share that he had once gone to a restaurant with a large party, and the restaurant had to push a few tables together to make a table that was big enough for the group (transcript, dated November 27, 2017). As exemplified through this data, Tina had a concept of the outside world, going to a sit down restaurant, which was mirrored through the illustrations. Once she shared what she knew, Nate had a different concept regarding the topic. In sharing what they both knew regarding this concept, not only did

Tina and Nate both add to the other's concept of the world, the other students in the group were able to construct some knowledge of the concept and connect it to the text as well (Wiseman 2003).

This data indicates that each of my students came to the group with a limited understanding of the world. However, each student brought with them knowledge of a different experience (i.e. Maria was the only student with knowledge of what a safari was. Tina knew the proper procedure for walking into a restaurant). However, with some scaffolding from me (i.e., leading them to identifying the term nocturnal), they were able to build off of one another's knowledge of the world in order to make more meaning from the text. Through our discussions, my other students built knowledge of concepts, such as dining in a sit down restaurant. Each collaborative discussion leads to further building on students' knowledge and understanding of the world, thus increasing their ability to read a text for meaning (Hu & Commeryras, 2008).

### **Developing Vocabulary**

The vocabulary development of kindergarten-aged children never ceases to amuse me. Kindergarteners can surprise me with the extensive vocabulary that they may possess. On the other hand, I am also astounded at their seemingly lack of correct vocabulary terms during certain occasions. Further analysis of my data provided me further insight into this phenomenon.

**Goodnight Gorilla.** My field notes glean insight into the vocabulary development that occurred during a reading of *Goodnight Gorilla* (Rathmann, 1994).

*Students assisted each other in constructing vocabulary knowledge when we read the story **Goodnight Gorilla**. When we were viewing the cover and predicting the story, Maria identified the zookeeper because he had the keys. The other students did not know what a zookeeper was, and Maria explained that the zookeeper takes care of the animals. She also told them that zookeepers usually wear big hats. Later in the story, Cody identified an armadillo on one of the pages. The other students asked him what an armadillo looked like. He described it as a small animal.* (field notes, dated November 15, 2017).

This data is another example of social construction of knowledge (Wiseman, 2003). Both Cody and Maria had knowledge of different concepts depicted in the illustrations. This time, their knowledge included vocabulary. By sharing these terms with their peers, they not only built upon the other's vocabulary development, they also contributed to the vocabulary development of the other members of the group. The students in the group worked together to increase their competence with language, which in turn would benefit their ability to orally dictate a story (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

**Pancakes for Breakfast.** Reading *Pancakes for Breakfast* (DePaola, 1978), provided another opportunity for my students to develop further vocabulary. Tina had a general idea of what a cookbook was, but did not know the correct terminology. On the same page she identified it as a "recipe book". Further discussion provided her with the

correct terminology, which she translated to “cooking book” (student response dated November 20, 2017). In addition to differentiating between a recipe and cookbook, my students also lacked the correct terminology for the words *ingredients*, *udders* and *jug* (journal entry dated November 20, 2017). While I was not overly surprised that my students did not know the word *udders*, the lack of terminology for the words *ingredients* and *jug* were more surprising to me. I had previously assumed that kindergarten-aged students would know those terms. According to the data, I was wrong to assume! This data provides another example as to why children need opportunities to practice with decontextualized language before learning to decipher the written word (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

**Frog Goes to Dinner.** Another opportunity for vocabulary development arose during a reading of *Frog Goes to Dinner*. David identified the frog in the story jumping into the tuba (student response, dated November 27, 2017). Further discussion determined that Nate did not know what a tuba was, so David paused in his storytelling to show Nate where the tuba was in the illustration (transcript, dated November 27, 2017). At another point during the reading, the difference between a waiter and a waitress was also discussed (field notes, dated November 27, 2017). Thus, this data provides another example in which the students in my group were able to build upon their knowledge of the world, and further construct a story (Hu & Commeyras, 2008)

While they may enter school with an adequate amount of social language, thus not sounding the alarm for literacy support, many students have a considerable lack of instructional language that will serve in a variety of places. Students need experiences

with this language in which to develop their instructional language (MacDonald & Figuerdo, 2010). As evidenced by the data, my students lacked either the term itself (i.e., not knowing the word “zookeeper”), or the correct terms (ie, calling a cookbook, “recipe book”). However, it seemed that through various instances, each of my students had a vague sense of terminology. Through the experience of experimenting with language, they were able to build upon their previous knowledge by socially constructing knowledge of further terminology together. In the instances in which none of my students had knowledge of correct terminology, I was also able to scaffold this learning. During our short time together using wordless picture books, my students were afforded many opportunities for developing oral language skills regarding these concepts, that will also lead to the emergence of reading and writing skills (Richgels, 2013).

### **Building Oral Language Skills**

Lawrence Sipe determined that students build oral language skills while reading picture books, by assuming a stance of expressive and performative engagement. This stance is demonstrated in a multitude of ways: dramatizing, talking back, critiquing/controlling, inserting and taking over (2002). Throughout the short time span of the study, I certainly saw evidence of my students developing oral language skills in all five of Sipe’s categories.

## Critiquing and Controlling

**Jack and the Night Visitors.** One of Sipe's categories that presented itself in my study was critiquing and controlling. In critiquing and controlling, students suggest alternatives to the plot, characters, or settings (2002). During the reading of *Jack and the Night Visitors* (Schories, 2006), Cody contributed the following response: "Maybe Jack is saying 'Settle down and don't come in my room'. He's going to shut the door" (student response, dated November 14, 2017). Here, Cody assumed the dialogue between Jack and the robot, and also inferred what action Jack may take next.

**Frog Goes to Dinner.** On a separate occasion, David also provided the following critique/control of the plot while reading *Frog Goes to Dinner*:

David: So, they're looking at the menus and the waiter...

Investigator: Good word! They were looking at the menu!

David: ::pause:: And the waiter is saying ::pause:: "What would you like for dinner?"

Investigator: I love that! "What would you like for dinner?"

David: And the little boy said "cheeseburger". (transcript dated November 27, 2017).

Just as Cody had assumed the dialogue between characters during *Jack and the Night Visitors*, David had done the exact same thing during *Frog Goes to Dinner*. He took what was depicted in the illustration, and inferred dialogue based on what he observed (Sipe, 2002).

## **Dramatization**

**Goodnight Gorilla.** Kindergarten students love drama. So, it should come as no surprise that dramatizing also presented itself throughout the study. When reading *Goodnight Gorilla*, Nate exclaimed “She popped up and saw the animals. She was so scared!” (student response, dated November 15, 2017). In doing so, he inserted action into the story through expressive language by using terms such as “popped up” and “scared”, and thus building his ability to tell an oral narrative (Sipe, 2002).

**Frog Goes to Dinner.** During *Frog Goes to Dinner*, the frog jumps out of the boy’s pocket and chaos ensues. Naturally, all five of my students found this hysterical, and the following chaos ensued in our classroom during that story as well:

Nate: He jumped on his face!

Investigator: Who jumped on whose face?

Nate: The frog!

Cody: He’s landing on the drums! I mean, the trashcan.

Nate: And on the next page the....

Investigator: Oh wait, we’re on this page... Then the frog jumped on his face.

Alright...

Nate: I want to do the next one again!

Investigator: Then the frog jumped on his face, and what happened next, Cody?

Cody: He fell to the trashcan!

Investigator: Is that a trashcan? Or what?

Cody: Yes, it is!



David: No, it's a drum...

Nate: Can I...

Investigator: Hold on, he fell into the...

Cody: Trashcan!

David: No, it's a drum!

Investigator: It's actually a drum. It looks like a trashcan, but it's a drum, remember? Ok he fell into the tuba.

Cody: Yeah but the drum's like "Squoosh, squoosh". (transcript, dated November 27, 2017).

During that exact moment, I had felt that my students were losing control, and no longer focusing on the text. The sight of the frog jumping in the lady's face, and causing the band member to fall back into a drum had really excited the boys. I typically did not face this problem with these particular students in the classroom. Naturally, I felt annoyed that they had ignored my pleas to pause for a second so that I could catch up to their story telling. I was fortunate to also be audio recording this particular segment of the session. Not only was I able to go back and capture their responses, I was also able to go back and reassess the situation. My students had, very eagerly, taken what was depicted on the page and translated it into their own expressive, spoken language. They also used physical gestures and sound effects to further dramatize the text and bring it to life (Sipe, 2002). This data provides another example of the ways in which my students developed their oral language skills. What had, in the moment, appeared to be a loss of control of my group of students, turned out to be a manifestation of dramatization of the text!

## **Manipulation of the Text**

When readers take over the text, they manipulate it for their own purposes (Sipe, 2002). While this category typically did not manifest itself during our sessions together, I happened to observe Nate one day, taking initiative on his own to manipulate text. During Independent Reading Time, he offered to show another student in class (who was not participating in the study), how to read *Pancakes for Breakfast*. On the page in which the main character follows a scent to her neighbor's house, Nate stated "She smelled something good, pancakes! I love pancakes!" (field notes, dated November 29, 2017). Here, Nate not only inferred details based on what was depicted in the illustration and translated it into expressive language, he had also inserted himself into the story, and connected himself to the text (Sipe, 2002).

## **Inserting**

Another category of performative and expressive engagement is Inserting. When readers insert, they either place themselves, or their classmates, into the story (Sipe, 2002). Tina and Nate both provided me with evidence of inserting during the reading of *The Lion and the Mouse*. While previewing the cover, Tina requested to name the lion after herself. Following that, Nate asked to name the mouse after David (student responses, dated November 21, 2017). Later on, after a butterfly appeared in the story, Maria decided to name it Cody (student response, dated November 21, 2017). Through this, my students had all either assumed the roles of the characters themselves, or shoved their classmates into the story. In doing so, they became one with the story and thus made the experience with the text a meaningful one (Sipe, 2002).

## **Talking Back**

**The Lion and the Mouse.** The last category of expressive and performative engagement is talking back. This category also presented itself during the reading of *The Lion and the Mouse*. While reading the page in which the lion wakes up and catches the mouse in his paw, Nate exclaimed “The lion’s awake and the mouse is... RUNNING AWAY, RUNNING AWAY [sic]!!!” (student response, dated November 21, 2017). Later on in the story, Cody read a page depicting a picture in which the lion is trapped in a net, and looks distressed. On that page, Cody exclaimed “He’s going to help because ‘mouses’ [sic] don’t give up!” (student response, dated November 21, 2017). In both of these instances, my students had taken what they observed in the illustrations and talked back to the characters in an attempt to include themselves and participate in the plot (Sipe, 2002).

In reviewing the data that spanned the five categories of expressive and performative engagement, it appears that my students successfully developed their oral language skills through expressive and performative engagement (Sipe, 2002) with the wordless picture books that we read, which will in turn lead to stronger emergent literacy skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015)

## **Improving the Concept of Story**

Another theme that emerged from my data, one that I was hoping to accomplish as I established my sub questions, was the use of wordless picture books to improve my students’ concept of story and ability to retell. I found this theme to manifest itself in a

variety of ways throughout the course of the study. The most noticeable change happened upon my own reflection of my practice. I was holding myself to the exact wording of my sub-questions so much that I was gearing my sessions as shared reading lessons, in which one specific skill was the focus of each session. While I was noticing my students doing things, such as inserting more details into their story telling, I was not seeing the results that I originally wanted as quickly as I expected to see them, I naturally became frustrated and decided to revamp the structure of my lesson (journal entry, dated November 20, 2017). Once I structured my lessons as a guided reading lesson, in which the text was previewed as a picture walk before reading the text, I noticed an immense change in my students' concept of storytelling as a whole. When my students read the text, they were way more animated in their storytelling. The story also had more of a flow, as opposed to the listing and labeling feel as it had before. I had also noticed that the session was also shorter time-wise than previous sessions since I had chunked previewing the text and storytelling, as opposed to cramming both into one experience with the book (journal entry, November 27, 2017). In doing so, my students were exposed to the text one time prior to reading it. The repeated readings helped my students to further develop their oral language skills as they became familiar with a story and retold it a second time (Richgels, 2013).

During the first reading, we were able to discuss many of the background knowledge and vocabulary concepts depicted in the illustrations. It became apparent, during the second reading, that the first reading had provided my students with enough knowledge to begin to connect the pages and create a story line. Johnston (1998) has

found that reading and rereading picture books helps students in making connections between speech and print (as cited in: Richgels, 2013).

Rich talk surrounding wordless picture books transfers to improved reading and writing ability in students (Richgels, 2013). While I noticed improvements to all of my students writing, such as an increased word count, using transition words to tell the story, or beginning to tell the story across pages instead of just on one page, I saw the most dramatic improvement with Nate. I had noticed throughout the study that he would begin to story tell on the correct page, but then would keep going to the point in which his story was no longer relevant to what was being depicted on the page (field notes, November 15, 2017). Right around the same time as I had noticed his difficulty in that area, I also began to notice an immense change to his oral dictation of the stories that he was writing. During the first week of the study, he wrote a narrative story that was limited to one page, in which he dictated “Me and David, we were looking at a tree. The end” (student work sample, dated November 7, 2017). During the second week of the study, he created a two-page booklet, and I could see his concept of telling across pages start to emerge. On the first page, he dictated “I went to a party. I stayed for five minutes”. On the second page, he dictated “Then, I went home. The end.” (student work sample, dated November 14, 2017) By the third week, I noticed a dramatic change in his sense of story. Now, he had produced a three-page booklet in which he dictated a different (but relevant to the story) thought on each page. On the first page, he dictated “I was eating turkey on Thanksgiving in my secret hideout.” On the second page, he dictated “Then, David letted [sic] me come over his house”. On the third page, he dictated “And then, I went home. The end.” (student work sample, dated November 21, 2017). His writing samples

indicated a clear development of the concept of story. Practice with telling oral narratives helps students to gain knowledge about the structure of a narrative (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). While he originally told the entire story on one page, and demonstrated a blurring of events, he began to chunk events by breaking the events in half over the span of two pages on the second sample. By the third sample, he clearly segmented ideas by sharing a different detail on each page, and telling his story across pages to give it “flow”. Given the short timeframe of the study, I was impressed at how drastic the improvement was!

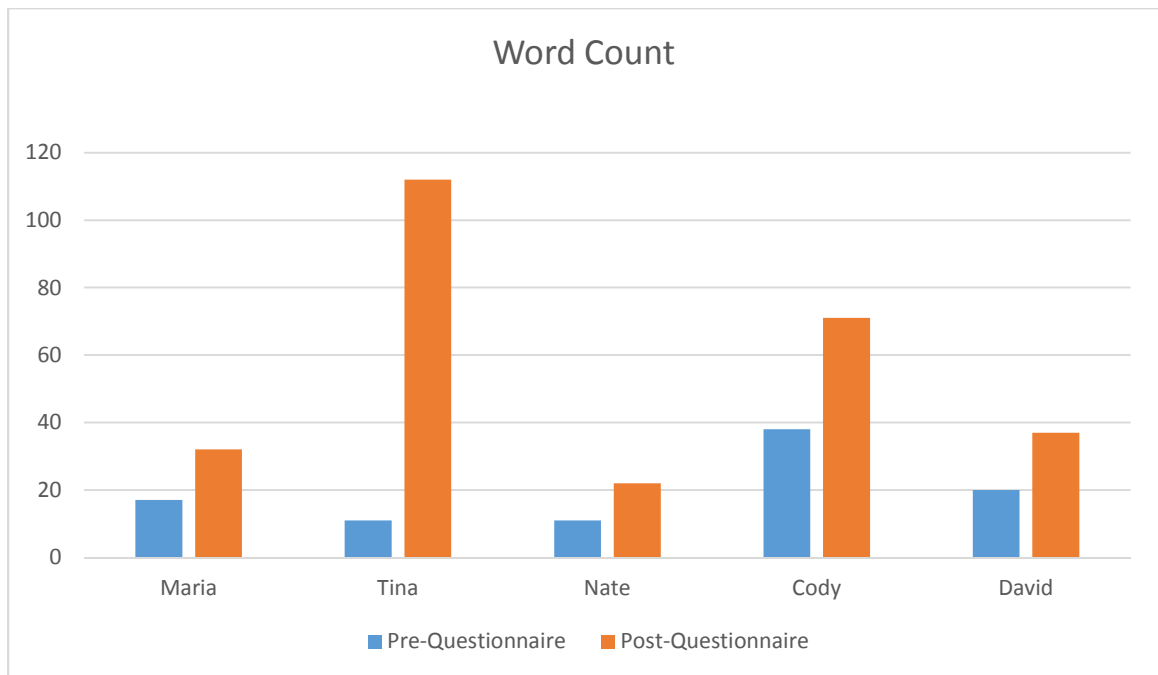
In addition to storytelling in general, my students began to pick up on details within the story, that were also used to enhance storytelling and lead to improved comprehension of story events (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015). I first noticed an increase in detail awareness during a reading of *Pancakes for Breakfast*. During that session, a discussion about thought bubbles emerged during the reading. Cody first took notice, and incorporated it into his reading “She’s thinking about pancakes. Poppy (main character) wishes that she had pancakes” (student response, dated November 20, 2017). During a reading of *The Lion and the Mouse*, Cody initiated another conversation about utilizing the illustration to infer speech and action. He had noticed that the mouse was stuck in his tunnel, because he was attempting to bring a rope knot, that was bigger than the width of the tunnel, though to his nest (field notes, dated November 21, 2017). On a separate page, in which a lion is caught in the net with his mouth open, he inferred what the lion could be saying by stating “They caught him and he’s going, ‘HELP!’” (student response, dated November 21, 2017). This data indicates that my students utilized the wordless picture

books to foster comprehension strategies, such as making inferences based on the illustrations (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015).

Through the use of wordless picture books, my students were able to build upon many emergent reading, and comprehension, strategies without being burdened by decoding text (Lysaker & Hopper, 2015). While the overall data showed a gradual improvement towards developing oral language skills through my original method of structuring the session like a shared reading lesson with one skill as the focus, it is evident that structuring the session as a guided reading lesson combined many skills, such as inferring, developing vocabulary and building background knowledge, that contribute to stronger oral language development, and led to quicker, and richer, results. This structure also provided an environment that was more conducive to students collaborating together to socially construct knowledge, which is also leads to construction of literacy development (Wiseman 2003). In one particular reading, my students were able to demonstrate building background knowledge (through discussion of sharing the number of people in a party at a restaurant), developed vocabulary (through discussion of the difference between “waiter” and “waitress”, as well as defining “tuba”), improved concept of story (by inferring dialogue throughout, as well as connecting events across the pages when the frog jumped from the tuba, to the woman’s glass, to the man’s face). (field notes, dated November 27, 2017). My students, who had begun this study by simply listing and labeling during storytelling in addition to telling an entire story on one page of writing, had developed their oral language skills, and subsequently skills that are crucial to their literacy development, in leaps and bounds by engaging with wordless picture books.

## Overall Student Growth

In order to assess overall student growth throughout the course of the study, I administered a Pre and Post Assessment Questionnaire to my participating students, which consisted of them orally retelling their favorite story. I utilized this data as my first comparison piece to see whether my students had made growth over the course of the study. In comparing the pre questionnaire to the post questionnaire, I could already see that my students' oral language had developed throughout the course of the study. This was evident simply by counting the words that each student used to tell their favorite story (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Word Count



As evidenced by this data, the amount of words that my students used to retell a familiar story had increased throughout the course of the study. While Tina's progress was the most astounding, going from 11 words to 112 words (a 101-word difference), every student made significant progress in this area. Maria's word count increased from 17 words to 32 words. Nate's word count doubled from 11 words to 22 words. Cody also made a significant jump, from 38 words to 71 words. Finally, David's word count increased from 20 words to 37 words.

Another way in which I examined the data from the beginning of the study to the end result to determine growth was to assess my students' levels of language. I took snippets of each student's responses, that I had scribed onto Post-It notes and stuck to the corresponding page of the book that was being read, from different points in the study (beginning, middle and end). I compared those snippets of data to the Key Descriptors for Unfamiliar Language Levels, since each wordless picture book was new to the group of students (Collins & Glover, 2015, p.170). I determined a student's present language level based on if he/she met at least half of the descriptors featured on the chart, since I had viewed this exercise similarly to instructional reading levels. If a student began to demonstrate one descriptor of the level, but did not demonstrate any additional descriptors, I considered him/her to be between levels. Although each student moved at his/her own pace, it was evident that everyone began this study on Unfamiliar Language Level 1, and ended on Unfamiliar Language Level 3 (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Unfamiliar Language Level Progression and Descriptors*

	Responses to <i>Chalk</i> , dated <b>November 7, 2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Goodnight Gorilla</i> , dated <b>November 15,</b> <b>2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Frog Goes to</i> <i>Dinner</i> , dated <b>November</b> <b>27, 2017.</b>
Maria	<p>ULL 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended to illustrations.</li> <li>• Named and labeled characters and actions.</li> <li>• No connection between pages.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 1/2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began to use more detail when naming objects and actions.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagined dialogue.</li> <li>• Elaborated for each page, and sounded more like sentences instead of phrases.</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

	Responses to Chalk, dated <b>November 7, 2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Goodnight Gorilla</i> , dated <b>November 15, 2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Frog Goes to Dinner</i> , dated <b>November 27, 2017.</b>
Tina	<p>ULL 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended to illustrations.</li> <li>• Named and labeled characters and actions.</li> <li>• No connection between pages.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used more detail when naming objects and actions.</li> <li>• Inferred events that are not represented in the illustrations.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagined dialogue.</li> <li>• Elaborated for each page and sounded more like sentences instead of phrases.</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

	Responses to Chalk, dated <b>November 7, 2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Goodnight Gorilla</i> , dated <b>November 15, 2017.</b>	Responses to <i>Frog Goes to Dinner</i> , dated <b>November 27, 2017.</b>
Nate	<p>ULL 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended to illustrations.</li> <li>• Named and labeled characters and actions.</li> <li>• No connection between pages.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used more detail when naming objects and actions.</li> <li>• Inferred events that are not represented in the illustrations.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagined dialogue.</li> <li>• Elaborated for each page and sounded more like sentences instead of phrases.</li> <li>• Used sense of text and literacy language to connect pages.</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

	Responses to <i>Chalk</i> , dated <b>November 7, 2017</b> .	Responses to <i>Goodnight Gorilla</i> , dated <b>November 15, 2017</b> .	Responses to <i>Frog Goes to Dinner</i> , dated <b>November 27, 2017</b> .
Cody	<p>ULL 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended to illustrations.</li> <li>• Named and labeled characters and actions.</li> <li>• No connection between pages.</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Began to use some details when naming objects and actions.</li> <li>• Began to infer events that are not represented in the illustrations</li> </ul>	<p>ULL 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagined dialogue.</li> <li>• Elaborated for each page and sounded more like sentences instead of phrases.</li> <li>• Used sense of text and literacy language to connect pages.</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

	Responses to <i>Chalk</i> , dated <b>November 7, 2017</b> .	Responses to <i>Goodnight Gorilla</i> , dated <b>November 15, 2017</b>	Responses to <i>Frog Goes to Dinner</i> , dated <b>November 27, 2017</b> .
David	ULL 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attended to illustrations.</li> <li>• Named and labeled characters and actions.</li> <li>• No connection between pages.</li> </ul>	ULL 1/2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Still named and labeled objects and actions.</li> <li>• Began to use more detail when naming objects and actions.</li> </ul>	ULL 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagined dialogue.</li> <li>• Elaborated each page and sounded more like sentences instead of phrases.</li> <li>• Used sense of text and literacy language to connect pages.</li> </ul>

A child’s literacy development is grounded in his/her competence with spoken language (Richgels, 2013). The table indicates which descriptors of Collins and Glover (2015)’s Unfamiliar Language Level Chart throughout snippets of student responses throughout the course of the study. As indicated by this table, my students all began the study on Level 1 of Unfamiliar Language by simply naming characters and actions in the

illustration, with no connection between pages. Midway through the study, some students were still listing and labeling characters and actions, but they also began to use more details when doing so, thus began to emerge into Level 2. The other students were firmly in Level 2 of Unfamiliar Language, by using more detail to label actions and words, as well as beginning to infer story events that were not clearly depicted in the illustrations. By the end of the study, all of my students had abandoned listing and labeling, in favor of “reading” in sentences, as well as imagining the dialogue between characters and utilizing their concept of literacy and text to connect the pages of the book. Each student’s spoken language competence had improved by two language levels.

My focus question for this study was “How does the use of wordless picture books affect oral language development in kindergarten students?”. Strong language skills are associated with both stronger oral narrative skills, and greater emergent literacy skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). As evidenced by the chart and table, my students had all developed oral language skills throughout the course of the study. The graph indicates how many words each student used, both before and after the study, to tell a familiar story. By the end of the study, as evidenced by Figure 1, every student improved by using more words and details in their storytelling of a familiar story.

All of the data collected indicates that using wordless picture books improved my students’ oral language development. Every child progressed by two levels of the Unfamiliar Language Level Chart and improved their word count levels in telling a familiar story. Further analysis of the data indicated that my students developed oral language skills, thus improving their concept of story and ability to orally dictate a

written story, by developing their vocabulary, building background knowledge, participating with the books through performative and expressive engagement and obtaining skills (such as inferring, inserting dialogue, etc) to foster a growing concept of story. My students' concepts of oral language, storytelling, as well as precursors to emergent literacy had all grown as a result of their scaffolded engagement with wordless picture books.



## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

#### Conclusions

“When you become a teacher researcher, you become your most important tool”

(Shagoury & Power, 2015, p. 118)

When I set out to begin this study, my primary goal was to improve my average students’ oral language development through the use of wordless picture books in the classroom. In doing so, I also wanted to determine if average students would also benefit from oral language development activities. The data suggests that my students (with average abilities) improved their oral language in a multitude of ways. In reading picture books that were void of words, it freed my students up to determine the plot, as well as details of the characters featured in the story themselves. By doing so, my students engaged in conversations that discussed new vocabulary terms, in addition to building upon their background knowledge. Their concept of story improved, and they experimented with different types of performative and expressive engagement. All four of the above methods contribute to an overall development of oral language, which lends itself to strong reading and writing skills (Gardner-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

While I now strongly believe in the use of wordless picture books to promote oral language development in emergent readers, that does not mean that I also believe that kindergarten teachers should completely abandon picture books that contain text. I feel that contextual picture books provide wonderful exemplars as to language concepts and storytelling. However, wordless picture books can serve as a complement to the skills

that picture books that contain text provide. The lack of text in wordless picture books allows students to try their hand at oral storytelling and inferring events and speech based on the illustrations, as well as provides them with opportunities to practice using language outside of the immediate context that is presented in written texts (Gardener-Neblett & Iruka, 2015).

Throughout this study, I gleaned a great deal of important insight about emergent literacy in the kindergarten classroom. I learned about how to help my students develop critical literacy skills that will better serve them, not just during their year in my classroom but in the years to follow as well. However, the biggest conclusion that I was able to draw from this study was based on my own practice. Throughout this process, I gave up some control and allowed the children to take more ownership of their literacy learning, while I served as a “guide from the side” instead of a leader in front of them. In doing so, I am meeting my students where they are and guiding them to the finish line, as opposed to standing at the finish line and expecting them to race there (Collins & Glover, 2008, p. 146). As indicated by the data, once I did so, their development in all oral language concepts soared. The gains that my students made would not have been possible if I had continued to structure my lessons as a shared reading lesson in which one concept was covered per session. My students developed a multitude of oral language and storytelling skills, and they did so at their own pace.

Another factor that I believe to have contributed to my students’ success with oral language development was through the social construction of knowledge that took place during our sessions together. Social construction of knowledge creates a space where

ideas are integrated, manipulated and envisioned (Wiseman, 2003). As evident by the data, my students worked together to learn vocabulary terms, build background knowledge, develop a concept of story and engage in constructing a story through various types of engagement. Angela Wiseman states that “The collaborative nature of literacy learning and the sociocultural influences as children read, write, and talk about the world is an important aspect of their learning experience.” (2003).

### **Limitations**

As with any study, the research completed during this project also contained limitations. My study was completed in a school, and classroom, that was primarily composed of Caucasian descent. As my study was intended for students with an average skill set, once I had eliminated my students that were considered to have either an advanced, or low, skill set, I was left with one student who was not Caucasian. While that student was considered for the study, I was unable to gain parental permission to use this student in my study. Therefore, all of the students who participated in my study were Caucasian. While those students found success during my study, I would also like to see the progress of average students with diverse backgrounds.

Another limitation that was considered was the short time span in which to complete the study. The entire study was completed during a four-week period. As I was a classroom teacher who was unable to devote all of my instruction time solely with the children participating in the group, we were only able to have two half hour sessions per week, totaling 8 sessions across the study. While the students still made remarkable

progress, it would have been interesting to see how much they would have improved if there were more sessions or a longer timeframe in which to complete the study.

Finally, there were interruptions to the school weeks, and therefore the weekly structure of the study sessions, during the month in which this study took place. This created a disruption into maintaining a weekly routine with which to pace the sessions. During two different weeks, the school had a 3-day school week. The first week of the study was a 3-day school week to provide two days for teachers to attend a state-wide teacher's convention. The third week of the study was also a 3-day school week, to provide for Thanksgiving Break. In addition to two 3 day weeks, there was also a week in which one of my students was absent for two days, due to having oral surgery. I did not want to complete the study without one of my students present, so I had to rearrange the days in which I conducted that week's sessions as well. I am curious to see how my students progress would be affected if the sessions were conducted habitually on the same days every week throughout the study.

### **Implications for Educators**

The largest implication for teachers of emergent readers, that was gained from this study is the necessity for weaving wordless picture books into already existing literacy curriculum, in order to promote oral language development in all of the learners in my classroom. Every student stands to gain oral language skills from the use of these books. The skills gained will benefit students for years to come (Gardnett-Neblett & Iruka, 2015). Since structuring sessions with wordless picture books as guided reading lessons, in which students had more control over their learning, incorporating some

wordless picture book reading during small group instruction time seems to be the most effective method in which to do so. After seeing my students take their own initiative to choose a wordless picture book during independent reading time, I will also encourage teachers to include a basket of wordless picture books in their classroom library, so that students can independently hone their oral language skills. However, I am still left wondering if there is a successful way in which to incorporate wordless picture in a whole group setting. I feel that students have more to gain in terms of expanding vocabulary and building background knowledge, in addition to improving their concept of story, when they are engaging with more peers. Further research may assist in gleaning insight as to how to approach this method.

When it comes to creating regular opportunities for students to socially construct literacy knowledge in a collaborative manner, it should begin from the beginning of a child's school experience (Wiseman 2003). Beginning with the kindergarten year, I see the benefits to this practice. Students with limited understanding of the world need to foster, and build upon their knowledge, so that greater meaning can be made during future literacy activities. I would encourage educators to structure both whole and small group literacy activities so that both activities allow for social construction of knowledge among peers with the teacher as the "guide on the side". Affording students with the opportunity to demonstrate the skills that they already possess, as well as allowing the teacher to meet them where they are and guide them to the finish line will allow children to build skills when they are ready to do so, rather than forcing them to race there (Collins & Glover, 2015, p.146).

In addition to the implications listed above, I will admit that I personally would not have found half of the success that I found during this study if it was not for my teacher reflection journal. As an educator of seven years, writing my reflections onto paper was never my strong suit. Sure, I would mentally reflect after each lesson that I taught, but then those thoughts would become lost as I moved forward with my day. The act of physically writing those reflections down did not consume that much of my time, and led to further reflection in which to improve my practice. I would encourage educators to do the same in their classrooms. Just as the Shagoury and Power (2015) quote at the beginning of this chapter indicates that teacher-researchers become their best tool, educators in general can also serve as their own best tool. This tool is geared towards better serving students. Self-reflection proves to be the key in accomplishing this mission.

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## Appendix

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