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Yoghurts for fruit-time : a narrative study of language learning in the kindergarten

Denise Lindsay
Edith Cowan University

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**'YOGHURTS FOR FRUIT-TIME': A NARRATIVE STUDY OF
LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE KINDERGARTEN**

By

Denise Lindsay (TC. B.Ed)

**A Thesis Submitted for Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for
the Award of
Master of Education**

**At the Faculty of Regional Professional Studies,
Edith Cowan University
Western Australia**

Date of submission: November, 2002

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on how a group of seven Kindergarten teachers perceive their practices to support the language learning of young children. From a socio-cultural perspective, developing language competency at Kindergarten is a priority because of its pivotal role across all learning areas and the opportunity it creates for all children to add to their linguistic capital in an informal setting prior to formal schooling.

This study is based on a collaborative, participatory model built on a mutually beneficial relationship between researcher and participants. It uses a narrative methodology to foreground the teacher's voice. Teacher participants in the study contribute their own stories and their reflective interpretations on language events in their Kindergartens. Data from these 'teacher stories' and 'narratives of experience' based on semi-structured interviews provide a base for analysis and interpretation.

Partnerships and finding balance through diversity emerge as themes linking the perceptions of this group of teachers. Findings indicate that social partnerships between teacher and children are foundational to language learning at the Kindergarten and that in constructing effective curricula for language learning teachers find a balance between teacher and child-initiated language events, large and small group/individual contexts for learning, acceptance of diversity and intervention practices and finally, balance opportunistic teaching with systematic planning.

Significantly, this study provides a space for teachers' voices to be heard through the telling of their own stories. The final outcome is a map of the landscape showing what language learning looks like in seven Kindergartens in regional Western Australia at a time when teachers are adjusting to change and reflecting on their role supporting children learning language on entry to the school system.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;**
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or**
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.**

Signed

Date: 21st March 2003

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Denise Lindsay

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CHAPTER ONE

SETTING THE SCENE : INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with a story:

A little while ago, in a Kindy not very far from here, there was a group of busy little 4-year-olds and a teacher who cared about them a lot. She wanted them to play, to explore, to discover and find out about the world and enjoy learning all sorts of new things and the language for these things. One day, when fruit-time came there were loquats on the plate to be shared among the children. They talked about them and tasted - both the fruit and the word, 'loquats'.

The very next day there were more loquats on the plate at fruit-time and one child, remembering the lesson of the previous day, exclaimed, "We've got yoghurts for fruit-time!"

This introductory chapter begins with a story told by one teacher about language learning in a Kindergarten setting in order to set the scene for this study and highlight the central role of teachers' stories in its methodology. It continues by indicating the personal journey that has brought me to this study, and outlines the content of subsequent chapters.

We humans are storytelling creatures. Story, as narrative, allows us to process information and make sense of our experience. Used by humans since pre-literate times, story continues to be a powerful way of representing our humanity. The story above encapsulates some of what this study seeks to discover concerning children's experiences learning language at Kindergarten from the perspective of the seven teachers who were the participants.

It gives a glimpse of one moment in one Kindergarten where teacher and children at fruit-time share a world of socially constructed learning. Teachers have stories to tell of their classroom worlds and the children in them. Ayers (1992, p. 35) stated:

"Our stories occur in cultural contexts and we not only tell our stories, but in a powerful way our stories tell us. Interrogating our stories then -

questioning and probing our collective and personal myths – is an important pathway into exploring the meaning of teaching.”

In this narrative study the stories teachers tell are central to gaining an inside perspective on the Kindergarten worlds of teachers and the children they teach.

Yoghurts for fruit-time gives us a glimpse of children actively learning language, practising new words for new things in a shared experience. In Kindergarten 3 to 5-year-olds are acquiring the vocabulary, grammar and discourse of school language, language that may be different to that of their homes. The stories teachers tell about children learning language at Kindergarten reflect the beliefs and the intentionality of their practice. In this study teachers' stories are central to gaining an insight into their interpretation of language learning in the Kindergarten setting.

The story of the loquats also gives an indication of the teacher's role as curriculum agent. Conceptualised by Connolly and Clandinin (1988, p. 3) as a “narrative of experience”, curriculum brings together the *past* as experience or personal knowledge acting on the *present* situation with a view to *future* directionality. Teachers have stories to tell of their role as curriculum planners. Their personal practical knowledge is seen to be influential in their decision-making, giving meaning to their practice as they reflect and act on it. Stories from the inside give an insight into what happens and why.

This study sets out to uncover the personal theories and assumptions driving teachers' practice concerning language learning at Kindergarten. It views the teachers in the context of the primary school environment in which they are now situated, recognising that contextual factors such as school-based policies and personal experience can impact on the decisions and actions they take as they go about their work. It seeks to analyse the strategies used by the seven participant teachers to support language learning. The purpose, reflected in the research questions, is to discover what these teachers do and why they act in certain ways to support children's language learning.

A personal journey

I have been closely involved with the Kindergarten education of 4-year-old children in one regional area of Western Australia since 1994, although my association with language and literacy teaching in schools pre-dates that by many years. Working on action research projects in 1998-99 increased my awareness of the complexities of language learning for young children in this context. I began to question whether enough was being done to meet their diverse needs. Speaking with Kindergarten teachers at this time, and in this regional area of Western Australia, suggested that they relied heavily on the accumulated wisdom of their personal practical knowledge. I wanted to learn how their knowledge was translated into support for children's language learning. What did other teachers do? How did they act? Why did they choose certain strategies over others? These questions became the focus of my ongoing inquiry.

It was at this time that Kindergartens moved into the forefront of the local education debate as they transferred from community-managed groups to the primary school context. Teachers in community-based Kindergartens in my local district were challenged to confront change and in doing so drew support from their peers through a network group set up by Kindergarten teachers themselves. I was active in the foundation of this group in 1997 and through it I was able to access participants for this study.

Policy statements during the 1990's reflected a belief that changes to the Kindergarten year could lead to better quality early education (Scott, 1993; Burns, 1999). The impact of early years' experience has been reported to affect the continuing education of children (Sylva, 1994) but what is the reality for children learning language in Kindergarten classrooms? This study seeks to identify language-learning practices at seven Kindergartens as teachers adjust to changes in the education system that impact on the context of their work.

In terms of young children's development of oral language a number of studies come from the area of developmental psychology (Lundberg, 1991; Blachman, 1991; Bradley & Bryant, 1991). Other studies focus on phonological processing (Yopp, 1992; Rohl, 2000), stories and storytelling, (Mallan, 1993; Talty, 1995) or on

language and literacy practices in the transition from home to school (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Burns, Griffin & Snow, 1999; Hill, Comber, Louden, Rivalland & Reid, 1998; Reid, 1998; Renshaw, 1994). Among these, the Dickinson and Tabors home-school study in America stands out as one of few studies focusing on oral language to include the perspective of teachers working with groups of children of this age.

Oral language cannot easily be separated from literacy but is described by Kavanagh (1991) as part of a continuum that begins at birth and continues through adulthood. It is known that a strong oral foundation leads to success in literacy, (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991). In this study the primary focus is on oral language, ie, speaking and listening, but in the data the definition between 'oral language' and 'literacy' is often blurred as teachers are seen to lead children towards school-based literacy through oral language.

A qualitative map of the landscape

In writing of qualitative research Van Maanen (1979, p. 10) used metaphor to remind us that "the territory is not the map" because the latter is a reflexive product of the map-maker's invention. For this study I have become the map-maker seated in a socio-cultural position to map language learning at Kindergarten from the perspective of teachers themselves. Research that encourages active teacher participation in adding to knowledge of the reality of Kindergarten worlds has the potential to be mutually beneficial to the teachers involved and to the wider academic community. It addresses my interest in understanding what, how and why teachers act in certain ways in relation to language interactions with children at Kindergarten.

It has been important to me that the picture of language learning constructed in this study reflects the inside view rather than an interpretation placed on the actions and interactions of teachers and children from an outsider's perspective. As I have indicated, there is a wealth of documentation, both theoretical and practical, concerning children learning language at home and at school. My intention has been to hear what one group of seven teachers say about supporting children's language learning at Kindergarten and in so doing acknowledge their expertise in the practical task of planning and implementing curricula in the context of their local situations.

Through a methodological process using biographic narrative, I have placed teachers' stories in the central role, supported by narratives of their classroom lives based on video-recorded observation and interview data. Through the inclusion of a focus group as a forum for shared discussion I have endeavoured to make the study mutually beneficial to both myself as the researcher and the seven teacher participants.

I take a socio-cultural perspective of learning in which language pervades all curriculum areas because of its pivotal position in cognitive growth (Vygotsky, 1986). I see it as an appropriate focus for teachers' personal reflective practice linking their internalised thinking and planning for action with their interactions with children in the Kindergarten setting. Tapping into teachers' reflective journaling satisfies my aim to uncover the inside perspective while meeting criteria for a relational ethical framework.

In Chapter Two I define the meaning and scope of oral language in relation to this study and consider the relationship between language and literacy. I seek an interpretation of the meaning of the terms 'quality' and 'developmentally appropriate practice' as used in these early childhood education settings, terms which seemed to be used with culturally mediated meaning by the participant teachers but contested in the literature. I review the historical background that has placed the Kindergarten in the school context. In Chapter Three I engage in a dialogue with the theory to select a methodological design based on narrative that is consistent with a socio-cultural perspective and guided by relational ethics.

In Chapter Four I define the study, introduce the seven participants and detail the methods used for data collection, interpretation and evaluation. This study gives Kindergarten teachers a space in which to be heard. It is significant because it foregrounds teachers' stories about their work, using narrative as the principal medium for inquiry. In the process it creates a social network through which teachers have the opportunity to share their experiences concerning the teaching of language to children two years prior to formal schooling.

In Chapter Five the stories told by the participant teachers and a jointly constructed interpretation of their meaning are introduced. These are developed further in Chapters Six and Seven. In these chapters the focus is first on the strategies used to support language learning and then the personal beliefs that inform teachers' practice. I follow this in Chapter Eight with an appraisal of the educational value of language teaching/learning in Kindergartens in which I re-visit the literature for a closer examination of specific strategies and beliefs in relation to theoretical discourse.

In Chapter Nine I bring together the findings that emerge from the data. These have relevance to all Kindergarten teachers because they shed light on language teaching practices in the first year of school-based pre-compulsory education. I put forward issues concerning partnerships and balance, themes that emerge from the study but move beyond its boundaries, leaving the reader with questions worthy of further investigation. I conclude with one last story that may leave the reader thinking further about the complexities of teaching and learning language in the Kindergarten.

Setting the boundaries

In this study I planned that it should be the teachers' voices that were heard, not mine. However, as the study progressed it became apparent that as the map-maker I have been active in constructing the final product and I acknowledge my voice in its projected form. I have asked the questions and critiqued the data against current research literature concerning young children learning language in school settings; I have selected the themes that I believe have emerged most strongly from the data; I have concluded with issues that arise from these themes each of which I believe has wider significance for the education of young children in Kindergartens beyond the local context.

Eisner (1991, p. 6) described the "connoisseur" as one with heightened awareness, able to appreciate, discern and be perceptive. I would aspire to becoming this connoisseur in probing the stories to illuminate aspects of the tacit knowledge of teachers that informs their practice. The limitations have come from my inexperience as a researcher, and from the particular context of the study, bound as it is by people, place and time.

Whilst my familiarity with the participants, teaching experience in the Kindergarten, and reading of current literature relevant to the study has prepared me to some extent for the role of connoisseur, the questions asked are limited by my perception of the issues, by the parameters of the research and the time-frame in which it happens. The stories are selective; what is not written or told may also be significant, but unheard.

The language of the text also imposes its own linguistic limitations, leaving the reader to interpret meaning beyond that constructed by the teachers and myself. What is understood clearly by us may alter as others process it in accordance with their own experiences.

A different group of teachers in a different place and time may produce a different map, but qualitative discourse allows for divergence and richness in capturing the particular in context bound studies. The themes that emerge should be recognisable by other Kindergarten teachers. Ultimately, the readers will make their own judgment, and in judging reflect on their own experience with new insight. Thus is new knowledge constructed.

CHAPTER TWO

SCANNING THE HORIZON: DEFINITION, PARAMETERS AND CONTEXT

Recognising that qualitative research is best understood within particular contextual boundaries (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), I firstly define the meaning and scope of language within the parameters of this study and then examine the socio-cultural perspective of language in the curriculum. I briefly review the relationship between language and literacy relevant to teachers of children at Kindergarten and seek clarification of the terms 'quality' and 'developmentally appropriate practice' that are used by teachers in this study in relation to their work. Finally I outline the historical background that has created the present context for Kindergarten teachers in the Western Australian education system.

Defining 'language'

It is important to clarify the scope of the term 'language' as used in this study. Language is subject to multiple interpretations and may in fact be used to describe any system of communication or self-expression – from 'body language' to the 100 languages of children's self-expression (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1993). The Macquarie Dictionary (Bernard, 1989, p. 586) narrows the definition to "communication by voice in which the arrangement of sounds produced by a speaker has meaning for a listener". My focus in this study is primarily oral language, the symbolic representation of thoughts using words for speaking and listening. This definition implies the discursive nature of speaker and listener roles to which are added the pragmatics of social conventions according to culture and context. In this study, it is assumed that the language of common usage is English, although I hasten to state that a range of variant dialects may be used by children in these local Kindergartens, the most recognisable being Aboriginal English.

Dickinson and McCabe (1991) describe the braiding of multiple strands of language in a process that begins at birth and continues through childhood to adulthood. Oral language, the focus of this study, comprises strands of phonology, semantics, syntax, discourse and pragmatics woven together in expressive and receptive speech; speaking and listening. Oral language is characterised by its purpose and function.

Bruner (1983) believes it is this functionality that drives language development, always in a socio-cultural context.

First Steps Oral Language Resource Book (Department of Education of WA, 1997) classifies three categories of oral language by function: language for social communication, language for literacy and language for cognition. For convenience I will use these categories to describe the scope of oral language used by children at Kindergarten. In First Steps language for social communication includes activity-based sharing, informal discussion and the use of social conventions for speaking and listening in a range of contexts; language for literacy focuses on newstelling as oral recount, oral narrative and description of objects and events, all of which link directly to written genres while language for cognition is used to refer to activities where higher order thinking skills are evident such as classification and inquiry or problem-solving activities and partner/ group work. This cognitive function of language makes demands on speakers and listeners to use language to plan, negotiate roles, monitor the task and reflect on outcomes.

Language in the curriculum – a socio-cultural perspective

From the socio-cultural perspective that is the base of this study, language is the pre-eminent, socially constructed tool for communication and cognition (Vygotsky, 1986). Through classroom discourse teachers interact with children to support their acquisition and development of vocabulary and meaning of language for social communication and thought (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Vygotsky, 1986; Bruner, 1983). Vygotskian thought shifted the focus from teacher to the child, from teaching to learning, stressing the importance of supportive partnerships in learning that were always embedded in a socio-cultural context.

Bourdieu gives us an understanding of the powerful nature of language as cultural capital wherein “ a word is a socio-cultural time-capsule packed with socially derived meaning” (Grenfell, 1998, p. 78). In his economic metaphor cultural capital is traded in various fields, including education, for social capital. In the context of the classroom, language, as symbolic capital, is traded for knowledge and social prestige.

Using Bourdieu's metaphor, Rice (cited by Hewitt, 23rd August, 2000) stated, "4-year-olds ask for what they want and take it like capitalists". Rice continued by explaining that children with the greatest language capital generally gain more through classroom communication than those with less well-developed language skills who have difficulty communicating in the classroom.

However, it may sometimes be more a question of cultural difference than development that determines the child's ability to take up the discourse of school. Hill, (1998, p. 25) outlines Bourdieu's argument that schools take the 'habitus' of the dominant group as natural and proper, implying that children from dominated groups can only acquire with great effort something which is given to children of the dominant group. 'Habitus', the term used by Bourdieu to embody a world view subconsciously acquired through one's enculturation, divides the structure of groups into the dominant and dominated. In this way the dominant *habitus* becomes the form of cultural capital that is assumed within schools.

In the classroom the teacher holds the authority to legitimise certain language over others; to value language identified as socially correct over other forms (Bourdieu, 1991). Children enter Kindergarten having already acquired considerable knowledge and mastery of oral language related to home/cultural experience (Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid, 1998) but this may not be valued as linguistic capital. In what they named as the mediation phase of their study, researchers and teachers in the study referred to above visited children's homes in order to develop understanding of their cultural experiences. This approach was based on the work of Moll (1992) who took the view that households of poor and language minority families are rich with funds of knowledge which often go unrecognised and untapped in schools. Children acquire the *habitus* of their culture from birth. However, where there is a mismatch between home and school language the child is disadvantaged in accessing the skills expected of them in formal, mainstream schooling, as well as limiting the range of social behaviour in and out of the classroom

Language and literacy

Although my focus lies with oral language the data of this study indicated that the participant teachers did not necessarily separate oral language from literacy in a socially-constructed learning environment. My belief is that language learning at Kindergarten is interconnected with literacy as children are introduced to the 'habitus' of the literate school community, and develop oral language competencies that seem to be linked to success in literacy. For this reason I investigate links between oral language and literacy.

The term 'emergent literacy' is frequently used to span the prior-to-school and early formal years of literacy learning. In the prior-to-school years "literacy concepts and strategies are learned within a broader context of functionality, purpose and meaning" within home and pre-school environments (Hill, 1998, p. 5). Emergent literacy within a socio-cultural perspective becomes culturally bounded by the environment and involves both oral language and written text in literate practices. Home, community and school offer three contexts wherein differing language/literacy learning may occur. This study is concerned with the language experiences of children during the earlier phase of emergent literacy in the school environment. Teachers' perceptions of the relationship between the two emerge through the process of this research study. The relationship becomes important when it is considered that universal accessibility to Kindergarten with longer hours spent in the Kindergarten setting effectively shifts some opportunities for language learning in this period from home to school in addition to providing a new context for language use for children.

The lifeworlds of children are diverse prior to school entry; learning language in the school setting may be a matter of formal learning for some children rather than an extension of acquisition as it is for others (Reid, 1998). Learning how to 'do' school makes more demands on some children than others. With access to a pre-compulsory Kindergarten year for all children at or about age 4 in Western Australia, there is the potential for teachers to capitalise on the opportunities offered within an informal educational setting to lead language development forward; to act to build the linguistic capital of children prior to entry to formal schooling. When language

and literacy are viewed as being on the same continuum, supporting children to become more competent language users in the school context can also be interpreted as helping them develop literacy skills.

Barratt-Pugh (2000) describes literacy learning in a socio-cultural context, recognising the diversity of home experiences that provides the child's background experience on entry to school, knowledge which reflects the findings of Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid (1998) in researching connections and disconnections of young children's literacy practices on entry to school in Australia.

Making connections is a theme repeated in Dickinson and Tabors' (2001) findings of an American home-school study of language and literacy development. In her forward to this work, Bredekamp (2001) reminds us of the reciprocal relationship between language development and early literacy. She makes it clear that research has shown how early literacy skills are acquired from birth, prior to formal schooling. Bredekamp states that while it was once considered that the task of pre-school children was exclusively language development, there is now the potential for an over-emphasis on literacy. The work of Dickinson and Tabors and their colleagues demonstrates the connections and complexities of language development and early literacy at home and in pre-school classrooms.

While Dickinson and Tabors (2001) focus on targeted events: book reading, play interactions and meal-times, as contexts for literacy related language, there is no intention to limit the types of language interaction that connect to literacy achievement. Snow (cited in Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid, 1998) suggested that parents may best support their children's literacy development through talk rather than print related activity. Various forms of talk including exchange of information, expression of feelings and enforcement of socialisation skills directly support children as they learn to use language. It could be implied that teachers at Kindergarten may similarly support children's early literacy through oral language interaction. Dickinson (2001) states that decontextualised, representational or nonpresent talk has important links to literacy; Anderson (Anderson, et al., 1985, cited in Blachman, 1991) claims book-reading as the highest priority while the role of rhymes and word play that develops phonological awareness is known to assist

children in the early stages of reading and writing (Rohl, 2000). There is no single comprehensive list of language skills to assist children with early literacy but research clearly demonstrates that children engaged in a range of social language experiences are also becoming literate. This study aims to consider the broad scope of oral language in the Kindergarten including its relationship to emergent literacy practices where this emerges in the data.

'Quality' early learning

There is considerable documentation indicating that the quality of early years' education does have a long-term impact on children's lives (Reynolds & Temple, 1998; Sylva, 1994; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). What teachers of young children do does matter (Ball, 1994), but they face a dilemma: how best to address aspects of learning language in a programme that answers to the increasing demands of curriculum, accountability and literacy standards in a whole school context on one hand and the diversity of experience children bring with them on entry to school (Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid, 1998) on the other. How teachers think about their work is important for understanding early childhood practice and what contributes to quality education. Burns (6th April, 1999), speaking as the early childhood representative of the (then) Education Department of Western Australia, expressed her belief in the significance of early childhood education when she stated, "We will influence the outcomes for today's young children in terms of their here and now performance, and we may also significantly shape their performance in adult life." Teachers in this study indicated their intention to provide what they perceived as 'quality' language learning programmes following guidelines for 'developmentally appropriate practice'. However, these terms can be contested (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2001). In order to arrive at a mutually agreed interpretation of meaning within the parameters of this study, I first explored the literature.

The problem with 'quality' lies in its interpretation. Quality can be viewed from a diversity of perspectives reflecting particular social and cultural contexts and is not universally applicable. For many years it was defined in objective, positivistic terms as a way of measuring the structure or organisational worth of early childhood institutions or programs (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2001). More recently, however,

there has been a demand to recognise its contextual nature. According to Press and Hayes (2000, p. 28), “an understanding of the contextual nature of quality is a call for informed and reflective practice by early childhood practitioners”. The need for space in which to negotiate contextualised meaning has been further highlighted by Moss (2001) and Pence (2001) particularly with respect for diverse cultural groups. Dahlberg asks if quality can be “reconceptualized to accommodate diversity, subjectivity, multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial context” (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2001, p. 103). Teachers may find themselves facing a dilemma: to provide programmes consistent with their own beliefs about quality learning in the context of public schooling while accepting that in culturally diverse communities there may well be a divergence of opinion as to what is considered best quality.

In 1998 Kindergarten teachers in Western Australia received two documents. The first asked the question, “What is good early childhood education?” (Tayler, 1998) and provided an interpretation of how the Department of Education interpreted quality in early childhood education. The second was the first mandated curriculum framework inclusive of the Kindergarten year, indicative of the new status given to 3 and 4-year-old children in the education system.

In the first document, Tayler (1998) described some theories and principles of early childhood teaching and curriculum design, assessment and accountability practices and placed early childhood within the whole school context. With this came a new climate for questioning established practice and a need for teachers to articulate their theories and beliefs to Principals and parents. For teachers it offered a tangible statement of early childhood philosophy that could explain their play-based approach to Principals and support those who felt the need to question the appropriateness of programs that embodied primary school pedagogy.

The document authorised by Tayler appeared in schools at about the same time as the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998) in which a new order of accountability and documentation confronted Kindergarten teachers. The Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998) in fact supported a child-centred philosophy that was compatible with the play and exploration that Tayler described as “central to effective early learning” (Tayler, 1998, p. 12). Its principles of inclusivity,

flexibility, collaboration and integration, together with its acknowledgement of core values, a developmental approach and an encompassing view of a dynamic curriculum were consistent with early childhood philosophy. But it also challenged teachers to reconceptualise early education and their role as educators; challenges that Cannella stated, “are not simply objective and professional, [but] personal” (Cannella, 1997, p. 157). A call went out for teachers to become critical reflective practitioners who needed space to question, re-think and speak up with a unified voice (Corrie, 1998). The need for teachers to articulate their beliefs is significant for the methodology of this study.

‘Developmentally appropriate practice’

‘Developmentally appropriate practice’ is another term that remains synonymous with ‘good’ early childhood education, but like ‘quality’ is open to debate. Since 1987 when the term was put forward by the NAEYC it has been widely used to describe guidelines for practice based on Piagetian developmental theory. However, Cuthill, Reid and Hill (1998) describe the questioning of certainties that underpin developmentally appropriate practice that has come with both the Vygotskian view of learning and post-modernist thinking.

The challenge from the Vygotskian socio-cultural approach has been in placing development in a cultural context whereby the teacher’s role is to scaffold learning that makes links between everyday knowledge and school knowledge. In post-modern discourse the term is problematised, especially for cultural groups that lie outside white middle class cultures. Cuthill, Reid & Hill, (1998) cite Alloway (1997) who suggests that universal truths about stages of development are being rigorously contested in relation to understanding the social construction of identity. The theoretical debate has contributed to the uncertainty that teachers hold for their own position. When the NAEYC (cited in Cuthill, et al., 1998) reissued their statement in 1996 they acknowledged the criticisms but retained their commitment to developmentally appropriate practice claiming the need for appropriate coherency and effectiveness in curriculum that must develop from the teacher’s own knowledge base. According to the NAEYC statement the effective pre-school teacher will devise curriculum on the basis of:

- What is known about child development and learning knowledge of age-related human characteristics that permits general predictions within an age range about what activities, materials, interactions or experiences will be safe, healthy, interesting, achievable and also challenging to children.
- What is known about the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child in the group to be able to adapt for and be responsive to inevitable individual variation.
- Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families.

(Cuthill, et al., 1998, p. 53)

When the teachers in this study speak of quality language learning based on developmentally appropriate practice the principles outlined above guide our mutual conceptualisation of meaning.

Historical context – a backwards glance

Before concluding this review I believe a brief overview of the history of 3 and 4-year-old children in the education system will help to place teachers in the context of the education system of which they are part.

That 3 and 4-year-old children today are able to attend sessional Kindergarten within the authority of the Department of Education of Western Australia reflects the political decision to fund public education over child-care provision as a way of meeting the needs of families. The shift from community-based provision to government control was documented by Smart & Alderson (1980) who outlined the political struggle to retain community independence and choice through the 1970's when the federal government first took an interest in control and administration of these services and began funding child-care programs in response to demands from the workforce. Changes to state policies followed the Commonwealth lead in order to fit funding guidelines.

For the next twenty years 4-year-old children were served by a multiplicity of systems. In some cases funding provided places in community-based pre-schools with qualified teachers paid by the (then) Education Department. Other programmes were managed by the Playgroup Association and funded through the Department of Family and Children's Services. In other situations parents found private day care to meet their needs. The historical dichotomy between education and care continued to be reflected in the public debate.

When it was announced in 1996 the 'Good Start' programme, based on the recommendations of the Scott Report (Govt of WA, 1993), met with some public resistance from parents. Its introduction was delayed but it is currently being implemented in Kindergartens across the state. This 'good start' for children was intended to improve the quality of early learning and make provision of educational programmes universally accessible to 4-year-old children. With its intention of bringing the school entry age of children more in line with other states, and of increasing sessional hours, the State government funded public education as a priority over child-care. Teachers in the study group stated that education and care are both necessary components of holistic child development. A duty-of-care drives teachers' work as much as educational expectations. Like the funnelling process that creates the epistemological dilemmas for teachers described by Clandinin & Connelly (1995), Kindergarten teachers in Western Australia received the policies fed into the system with a limited voice in the debate but now work to meet the consequences of change in their planning.

In Western Australia the Kindergarten year now lies within the school system, 2001-2002 being the first years of a raised entry age (3.7yrs) for children, and increased sessional hours (11 hrs per week). Teachers are in the process of familiarisation with and implementation of the Curriculum Framework for WA Schools (Curriculum Council, 1998) and demands for accountability in a whole school context. The stories teachers tell have a significant contribution to make in understanding the reality of their classroom worlds as they re-think their position and deal with practical challenges in the context of their work. In this study these challenges are inherent in the teachers' stories of children's language learning.

Summary

In this review I first sought to define the meaning and scope of language as used in this study and to consider its relationship with literacy. I briefly considered the question of quality and developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education before moving on to outline some contextual issues that impact on the present situation for Kindergarten teachers in the school system in Western Australia.

My intention has been to provide an overview of the area of study. In Chapter Eight I will revisit literature at greater depth as themes begin to emerge. From the readings it is apparent that regardless of the volume of literature, the voices of teachers have rarely been fore-grounded despite their central position between the school system and the child in the process of schooling. Dewey placed the teacher in the centre of efforts to understand educational practice and develop educational theory (Ross, Cornett & McCutcheon, 1992). In 1943 he wrote:

The obvious fact is that our social life has undergone a thorough and radical change. If our education is to have any meaning for life, it must pass through an equally complete transformation. This transformation is not something to appear suddenly, to be executed in a day by conscious purpose. It is already in progress. (Dewey, 1943, p. 28)

In 2002 we are again viewing a changing educational landscape. My intention is to place teachers in a central position. Through their narratives of experience I intend to construct a map of the language learning landscape of the Kindergarten in the current climate of change.

In the following chapter I engage in a dialogue with the theory as I explain the methodological framework and ethical considerations of this study.

CHAPTER THREE

TAKING BEARINGS: BRINGING THEORY AND PRACTICE TOGETHER

In this chapter I outline the theoretical framework through a discussion which addresses the complexities of selecting a methodology appropriate to this study. I explain the process that led me to select a narrative methodology and identify difficulties and advantages associated with this method. I outline the ethical framework that guided the research.

In carrying out this research I am working on the assumption that teaching is practical work carried out by teachers in the socially constructed, institutionalised world of schooling, guided by personal theories about their professional practice. In crafting a methodology consistent with a socio-constructivist epistemology, I searched for ways to interpret, explain and question the meaning of teachers' practical actions and interactions as they supported children learning language at Kindergarten. While the discourse of qualitative research allowed for emphasis on the particular in context bound studies and acknowledged the value-laden nature of knowledge, it did not prescribe a given set of criteria that constituted qualitative methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Following reading and reflection I began to build a set of criteria that were of concern to me and sought a methodology that suited the particular nature of this study while meeting the rigorous demands of qualitative research. I looked to address:

- Interpretation of meaning
- Teachers' personal theorising
- The researcher in the research
- Research as praxis
- Narrative methodology – teachers' stories
- Validity
- Ethical considerations

Throughout the process I continually asked, how is this research purposeful and useful? Does it show care and concern for teachers and children in the context of Kindergarten schooling?

Interpretation of meaning

Interpretation of the meaning of teachers' language teaching practices in the context of their Kindergarten settings is central to unlocking the knowledge which informs their actions. Crotty (1998) describes the effort to look for culturally derived interpretations of the social world from the perspective of those in the situation, an idea primary to the participant observer style of ethnography most characteristic of studies in early childhood education since the 1970's (King, 1978; Yonemura, 1986). Ethnographic studies are naturalistic, contextual and inductive (Hammersley, 1994; Aubrey, David, Godfrey & Thompson, 2000). These three conditions matched my theoretical assumptions except that I questioned whose perspective would be reflected in the interpretation -- the researcher looking from the outside, or the inside view of the teacher. Stake (2000) stated that even when empathic and respectful of each person's realities, the ethnographer decides what the story is or at least what will be included in the report. I recognised that as the researcher I would direct the research, but my intention was to have a minimal voice in the interpretation of data. I wanted to see what the teachers saw and hear their interpretation of events so I sought ways of more effectively revealing the teachers' perspective.

Teachers' personal theories

Connelly and Clandinin (1988, p. 24) tell us that after the students the teacher is the most important agent in a curriculum situation from the point of view of its planning and development. "The curricular whole is a situation with a past, present and future and the person in the situation is central." Teachers' personal practical knowledge drawn from experience in and beyond the classroom brings the processes of experience, their knowing, from their personal history to act on decisions in the present classroom situation, with an ongoing view to future goals, or outcomes.

The term 'personal practical knowledge' was used by Connolly and Clandinin (1988, p. 25)) to highlight the teacher's "knowing" of a classroom. They emphasized that knowledge is affective, dependant on subjective relationships in the context of a

particular situation. This interpretation recognises that knowledge is laden with human qualities of emotion, value and aesthetics; it acknowledges tensions and differences that are changing and changeable. The personal practical knowledge of the teacher is subjective. Much remains tacit, unnamed and difficult to make explicit but teachers are knowledgeable persons whose knowing of a classroom lies in the impact their past experiences have on their present response to a situation. "When we watch a classroom we watch a set of minds and bodies at work" (Connolly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 25) in a dynamic relationship but to understand the meaning of the activity requires interpretation.

Several studies highlight the role of the teacher in constructing the classroom world. Yonemura (1986, p. 11) sought an inside look at one teacher at work and found that individual values and beliefs were "not easily separated from the matrix in which they are embedded." Narratives or stories of daily classroom incidents project an image of the curriculum as it unfolds helping to make it better understood. Telling and re-telling stories helps to make sense, to make educational meaning of lives (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). The teacher is the person who is centrally situated within the Kindergarten most able to explain what language learning looks like, how it happens and why certain language events occur in Kindergarten classrooms.

The introductory vignette, Yoghurts for fruit-time illustrated the teacher's viewpoint. The story had significance for the teacher; it was considered worthy of recording and re-telling; it had meaning for her. Through the story we came to know the teacher a little, to glimpse curriculum in action in her classroom. King (1978, p. 15) noted: "The child-centred ideology ... not only defined the child, but also the teacher." I began to investigate the possibility of using teachers' stories as a way to gain insight and understanding about language learning at Kindergarten; as a means of probing the inner knowledge of teachers. I believed that the stories they told and the narratives of their lives in classrooms could provide the window into language learning at Kindergarten from the perspective of those who were active and influential participants in constructing this learning environment for children.

Practical theories of teaching are the conceptual structures and visions that provide teachers with reasons for acting as they do, and choosing the teaching activities and

curriculum materials they choose (Sanders & McCutcheon, cited in Ross, Cornett & McCutcheon, 1992). Central to using teachers' stories as a methodological approach to educational research was its practical nature, its ability to identify the practical effectiveness of the theories that teachers employ in conceptualising their practice (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Goodson, 1992; Ross, et al., 1992). The key was to access the critical self-reflection process of individual communities either through networking or focus groups engaged in collaborative professional development. Among the members of the local network group were teachers who had a wealth of experience and who frequently shared stories of incidents in their classroom worlds. I sought their involvement as participants in the research.

According to Ross, Cornett & McCutcheon, (1992) teachers' personal theorising operates on a collaborative research model and consists of making problematic the situation under investigation. The focus is on understanding teaching as activity influenced by personal experiences and interactions among individuals and contexts. Allowing teachers to tell their own stories brings the personal to the forefront of the study but requires a close relationship of trust between teacher participants and researcher. The participation of the teachers in the process of interpretation was vital to the integrity of the study and ensured a close representation of the inside view. Ultimately the teacher participants had control over what stories were told and left untold, what was disclosed and how their stories were used. (Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992).

The researcher in the research

A theoretical approach centred on teachers' stories sat comfortably with my desire to balance academic research interests with practical applications of language teaching/learning in Kindergarten. I still had to resolve where my position would be in relation to the group of participants. As researcher I wanted to listen and learn from the teachers with minimal interpretive comments of my own but they looked to me to set the guidelines in what demanded new skills of reflective journaling in a collaborative focus group. My task was to find a balance between researcher and the "critical friend" described by Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 161).

I looked for ethical guidance to the principle of reciprocity, the mutual negotiation of meaning and power, long recognised according to Lather (1986) as a valuable condition of research fieldwork for its ability to generate rich data. Lather suggested that researchers become closely involved with the participants in order to consciously help them understand their situations. This was consistent with my intention of listening to the teacher participants, not as subjects to be studied but as those from whom I could learn (Spradley, cited in Yonemura, 1986). The relationship would be built on respect for the knowledge of teachers enacted through their pedagogical practice (Yonemura, 1986).

By voicing their stories teachers had the opportunity to develop new levels of consciousness concerning the meaning of their actions (Ayers, 1992; Ross, 1992; Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The collaborative and participatory nature of the model offered collegiate support for teachers developing a personal reflective practice and hence opportunity for professional development (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Yonemura, 1986). However, I recognised that the extent to which this could happen lay within the individual teacher; it was neither within the control of the researcher or constitutive of the research. What it did mean was that elements of theory and practice so inextricably linked in teachers' work would be brought together in the research with deeper insights into teachers' actions.

Research as praxis

Consciously or tacitly, teachers are guided by their personal and professional theories. This is praxis, a coming together of theory and practice. But research as praxis has another dimension which gives it purpose. Described by Lather (1986, p. 258) "research that is implicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society – that is research as praxis." In this theory I found purpose for educational research that fitted my intention to find a methodology consistent with a socio-cultural perspective on educational research that was also empowering to the participants. It suggested a design that expressed concern for "interaction between individuals and their particular institutional culture or community ... and with developing critical reflective communities of teachers" (Stone, 1992, p. 31).

Narrative methodology

In listening to teachers' stories there is praxis of another kind, identified by Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, (1992, p. 61) as "autobiographical praxis". Here it refers to the congruence of reflection, thought and actions expressed through stories or narratives of experience.

Autobiographical praxeology, the term used by Butt and his colleagues to refer to the process of studying teachers' work through their autobiographical stories is perhaps more clearly and simply understood as one of a number of related narrative methodologies. Connolly (1988, p. 20) considers the term "biographic narrative" to be possibly the best to describe the coming together of the personal and the process of developing ideas that grow in classroom practice. He states that biographic narrative brings together the personal (biography) and the processes of experience (narrative) that allow teachers' voices to be heard and valued in the discourse of research. It is particularly suited to educational research that probes the hidden knowledge that informs teachers' actions. Ayers (1992) believed that probing the meaning of teachers' stories offered an important pathway into the meaning of teaching.

Jalongo (1992) asserted that by sharing stories about their classroom experience teachers not only gain insight into their own practice, but they also contribute to the storehouse of knowledge about teaching. Goodson (1992, p. 234) stressed the need for studies that "re-assert the importance of the teacher" and Jalongo & Isenberg (1995) pointed out how narrative could lead to professional insight. They spoke of the power of narrative to present paradoxes, while Wildy (1999) found that narrative accounts revealed the struggles to deal with dilemmas. Story, or narrative, is a basic way of processing information. Narratives enable the telling of stories by which a culture "comes to know itself and by which it is able to make itself known to others" (Ingram, 1998, p. 17). "Stories about teaching enable us to organise, articulate, and communicate what we believe about teaching and to reveal, in narrative style, what we have become as educators" (Jalongo & Isenberg, 1992, p. 69).

Making life experiences textual can be problematic: "A life as told, as life history, is a narrative influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience and by

the social context” (Goodson, 1992, p. 236). Stories intersect life experiences and the textual interpretation of them always, states Denzin (1994, p. 12) “filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity.” However:

The notion of teacher's voice is important in that it carries the tone, the language, the quality, the feelings that are conveyed by the way a teacher speaks or writes. In a political sense the notion of the teacher's voice addresses the right to speak and be represented. It can represent both the unique individual and the collective voice; one that is characteristic of teachers as compared to other groups.

(Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992, p. 57)

Butt, et al. (1992) continued this discussion by stating that the use of narrative addresses a gap in educational research which can provide fundamental understanding of the teacher perspective and new insights into teachers' work. It is problematical, in that the processes for generating and interpreting data are unclear and multi-voiced. Biographical stories are influenced by the cultural conventions of storytelling, the audience and the social context.

The reality of the classroom is largely constructed by the teacher. Sharing stories and analysing the narratives of classroom life does help communicate to others the view that teachers themselves perceive from their inside position. Connelly and Clandinin (1988, p. xv) state that they understand how spirited teachers may in fact “revolutionise” their practice through the reflective process acting on their own experience and transforming new ideas into powerful curriculum programs. As Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagishi (1992) stated this methodology emphasises the biographic nature of teachers' knowledge and highlights their personal intentionality.

Narrative data requires sound interpretive tools to meet expectations of rigorous research. Wildy (1999) used narrative to support interview and field notes from observation. My decision has been to use ‘teachers' stories' with their reflective comments supported by ‘narratives of experience' constructed from semi-structured interviews about language interactions recorded on video-tape during observation in each Kindergarten. I will further explain these two forms of narrative data in Chapter 4 when I detail the methods to be used in this study. This multi-method approach

produced data from my perspective as well as that of the participants to be used for comparative analysis and interpretation of emerging themes, through a process of categorisation and coding.

Validity

In asking, "What is legitimate data in qualitative research?" Garman (1994) identified criteria against which quality may be measured: verite, integrity, rigor, utility, vitality, aesthetics, ethics and verisimilitude. Narrative can be placed against each of these as a means of claiming authenticity, soundness of structure, depth, relevance, meaning, insight and careful and honest representation of human experience.

These claims cannot be made lightly, nor are they unproblematical. Questions arise concerning what stories are told, how they are selected, how the data is analysed and interpreted. I will address these questions in the following chapter. Teachers' knowledge must be respected in giving them the opportunity to explain what they consider to be significant, especially if it is assumed as Butt, Raymond, McCue and Yamagishi (1992, p. 94) state: "the effect of any aberration in the way teachers see their own knowledge is less important if one recalls that teachers think and behave as if it were true." What the teachers record and see as significant is and remains a valid record of how they perceive language learning in their Kindergarten classroom.

Eisner (1991) gave more specific guidelines for questioning and appraisal of transactive accounts where there can be no defined 'truth' tests. These criteria were:

- coherence – the tightness of the argument, the 'rightness of fit'. Does the story make sense and how have the conclusions been supported?
- structural corroboration- the confluence of multiple types of data to support or contradict the interpretation and evaluation;
- consensual validation- agreement among competent others that the structural dimensions of the description 'ring true', it does not imply 'truth';

- instrumental utility- the usefulness located in descriptions and interpretations that provide understanding or direction, a guide that goes beyond the particular study.

By collecting narrative data through a range of methods the criteria above could be addressed. The teachers' stories of incidents illustrating language learning together with the narratives of experience based on transcripts of interviews concerning what, how and why of language learning provided the principal data for interpretation. Together these two types of narrative data offered two approaches to viewing the teachers' perspective. They were validated firstly on an individual level by each teacher and also through discussion and feedback in the focus group meetings. I was able to compare and support their statements with my observations also based on the video-recordings and participant observation while visiting their Kindergartens. From the stories and narratives I identified emergent themes that I presented at a focus meeting for consideration and response from the teachers. The usefulness of ideas located in the themes met Eisner's (1991) demand for instrumental utility. The participation of the teachers in the process of interpretation and textualisation was designed to ensure valid representation of their perspective.

Garman (1994, p. 10) reminds us that qualitative research is for portraying deeper understanding not for verification of the phenomenon under study. Validity lies in the degree to which the study has succeeded in illuminating, explaining and interpreting language learning in the context of teachers' Kindergarten worlds.

Telling lives and hearing lives can enrich our history and make possible our future. It is perhaps particularly important in discussing something as complex, holistic and immediate as teaching [Autobiography is] personal, connected, alive, struggling and unfinished. It is the foundation upon which we can build what we will. (Ayers, 1992, p. 49)

Using a methodology framed around narrative gave me the opportunity to gain insight into the teachers' own perceptions of their practices supporting the development of children's language.

Ethical considerations

Within the specific contextual boundaries of this study are the close working relationships built between the participants and myself. The trust and respect on which these reciprocal relations are founded is central to an ethical framework based on caring concern for those who stand to be affected by the process and product of the research.

Early childhood education is much concerned with the balanced growth of the whole child. That the field is dominated by women may be related to the perception that caring is more natural to women's experience as was suggested by Noddings (1986) to whom I looked for guidance. Certainly, the emergence of an ethic of caring has its origins in feminist scholarship. From this perspective the rules and obligations of moral behaviour are contained within a relational framework. However, they are derivative. What is primary is fidelity to persons rather than principles in building trust in the relations between researcher and researched.

Honesty, fairness and trust are embedded in the interaction in direct relation to the mutual respect sustaining the partnership. An ethic of caring dictates styles of interaction akin to the caring relationship between friends. It follows that research founded on this base will be subjective, directing efforts to "the maintenance of community, the growth of individuals and the enhancement of subjective aspects of [the] relationship" (Noddings, 1986 p. 510). With the need to work in close partnership with participants comes the need for collaborative effort in striving towards ethical ideals. This can be problematic for the researcher whose control over the direction and outcomes of the research may be diminished as an outcome of the relationship in much the same way as a teacher may relinquish some measure of control of curriculum in a student-centred pedagogy.

Along with collaboration comes the question of avoidance of imposition, linked to the power relations inherent in the research partnership. Cassell (1982) suggests that collaboration actually brings about a degree of symmetry with the balance of power maintained by the participants' control over their contribution. The researcher must be willing to accept the reality of participants' diverse experiences and perspectives, guided by the evolving character of the relationship in the process of research. When

I give teachers the right to tell their own stories, to contribute to the interpretation and the textualisation of their narratives I give them a measure of control over the outcomes of this research.

The third tenet of relational ethics after collaboration and avoidance of imposition is that of fairness, identified by Noddings (1986) as confirmation of ethical ideals. In common with the avoidance of imposition, fairness demands a non-judgmental response from the researcher. It does not prevent researchers from making informed judgments but asks an open mind when considering participants' contributions. Confirmation depends upon and interacts with dialogue and practice as each partner begins to perceive the ethical ideals of the other. Then we are in a position to confirm, "to help the other actualise that best image" (Noddings, 1986, p. 505). This is not about compromise but of seeking the best outcome for a specific set of circumstances and people. It has been important to this study that participant teachers had the opportunity to be pro-active in the construction of the report through the inclusion of stories written and selected by them solely on the basis of their judgment of the significance of the story to a representation of language learning in their centre, and of the opportunity for review and response to the personal narratives and all parts of the report prior to the final copy.

This ethic of caring informs a praxis-oriented research design consistent with the methodology. It allows recognition of equality and diversity of human experience and celebrates the possibilities for empowerment of the persons involved. It is emancipatory for the researcher seeking to satisfy the demands of value-laden social research (Sieber, 1982). It is consistent with the Code of Ethics set down by the Australian Association for Research in Education (1993) based on four principles: that the consequences of research must enhance the general welfare, develop the human good, show no risk of harm to an individual and respect the dignity and worth of persons above the self-interest of the researcher or other parties, (Bibby, 1997).

Relational ethics, expressed as an ethic of caring, may not preclude the emergence of problems during the process of research but it does guide the route of those who journey through the territory. As the participants and I select, analyse, interpret and

critique the features of significance to them, the map will truly represent the teachers' projection of the Kindergarten world that is their professional territory.

Summary

This chapter has offered a comprehensive discussion on the theoretical framework of this study. In describing the process of selecting a narrative methodology I addressed interpretation of meaning, the importance of teachers' personal theorising to their practice and my position as the researcher in a praxis-oriented collaborative model. I justified the validity of using narrative data comprising 'teachers' stories' and 'narratives of experience' to gain insight into language learning practices from the perspective of teachers and outlined the ethical framework that guides the research.

In Chapter 4 I will detail the research questions that directed the study, explain the methods used to collect, analyse, interpret, and evaluate the data and introduce the participants. Some questions arising from this theoretical discussion will be answered as I translate the methodology of this chapter into an explanation of the practical methods to be used.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLOTTING THE COURSE: QUESTIONS, PARTICIPANTS AND METHOD

In this chapter I will detail the research questions guiding the direction of the study; introduce the participants and outline the method that directed the process of inquiry.

The study

My initial interest in the field of language learning at Kindergarten stemmed from my observations of the diverse needs of children entering the school environment that was for them a new context for language use. Children on entry to Kindergarten demonstrated a wide range of language competency. However, I questioned how teachers acted to address diversity in supporting children's language learning.

I had seen for myself how language permeated every interaction between the child, the teacher and other children, in informal conversations, structured activities and play. I had personally worked with Speech Pathologists to develop intervention strategies to support language development. What I neither knew nor was able to discover from reading, was what and how other teachers acted to support language learning by all children in their groups. What did language learning really look like at Kindergarten? How did changes to the age groups, more contact time with children and the implementation of a Curriculum Framework at the Kindergarten level impact on their daily work? How did teachers act to capitalise on the opportunity offered in the informal Kindergarten environment to build the linguistic capital of children prior to formal schooling?

There were many questions crowding my thinking so I began to clarify my thoughts and find a specific focus for study. As I saw it, my first task was to find a perspective from which to view language learning and then to begin to map the landscape. Having decided to take the teachers' perspective I then framed the questions that would direct my study and help construct a map that could lead to further exploration arising from emergent issues.

Research Questions

The questions that provide the foci for this study form a contoured projection of teachers' worlds in Kindergarten. The over-arching question is:

- How do Kindergarten teachers perceive their practices to support children's language learning?

Alongside this are the derivative questions:

- What activities to support children's language learning do teachers identify?
- How do teachers support children's language learning?
- Why do teachers select certain strategies to support children's language learning?

I recognise that these questions are wide-ranging but they reflect the broad landscape of language experience in the learning environment of Kindergarten. I began with an open field with little previous local research to describe the actuality of language learning in Kindergartens. Therefore, the questions that guided the investigation were focused on events, strategies and beliefs that explained the what, how and why of language learning at Kindergarten in a way that reflected the personal practical theories directing teachers' thinking. I kept a focus on these questions in order to maintain a clear referential framework for interviews and analysis and interpretation of the data. I anticipated that the outcome would map a broad landscape and possibly direct further questions concerning aspects of language learning at this stage of beginning schooling.

The Participants

Negotiating entry and establishing the group

Midway through 2001, I began to establish the group of teachers that was to become the nucleus of the focus group of participants for this study. Initially I invited members of the local Kindergarten (K) Network group who were interested in developing reflective journaling to consider joining a focus group with the intention of sharing stories for reflection and discussion. I explained my purpose for research, outlined the proposed study and answered questions. At this stage there was no

formal commitment to the study. It was made clear that participation was and would remain voluntary.

I was mindful of the extra imposition of time and energy that would be demanded of the participants. From the beginning I was concerned that they should feel benefit from their participation and I felt a responsibility towards them. I hoped that this preliminary establishment phase would give time to build trust and confidence and develop reflective journaling as a way of recording stories of language learning incidents, so that I would be better able to step back when the formal collection of data began. Finding entry to the group as the researcher became an extension of an established relationship, not to be assumed, but eased by familiarity. From the outset I sought an open dialogue that kept them fully informed of my agenda, and incorporated feedback from the members as part of the research design.

Early in 2002 I checked contact details and distributed letters of information and consent (Appendix I). I formally sought the consent of group members to participate in the study. I contacted the Principals concerned to obtain their permission for access to their school and for the use of video in the Kindergartens. Parental approval for the latter was also obtained before children were recorded. One of the teachers originally in the group had left the district and others were invited to join in order to widen the representation to include one non-Government school and the one school in the area established to meet the particular needs of the local Indigenous population. The group was then made up of seven women, representative of the local population of Kindergarten teachers.

The participant teachers were given the option of using their real names or a pseudonym. I was conscious of the issue of confidentiality and explained the possibility of their identity being recognised, especially the difficulty of retaining anonymity in the local context. However, I also believed that their contribution warranted recognition of ownership and the right to use their name if they chose to do so. In the final report all but one have been identified by their real name. However, pseudonyms are used for all children in the stories.

Introducing the participants

Carol and Joy had trained in other Australian states in the seventies. Carol's early experience was in inner city schools with a high migrant intake. She was teaching some children with no English in what was a very structured pre-school programme. After moving to Western Australia she converted her qualification to an Early Childhood Diploma and followed this with experience as an itinerant teacher based in the north-west region of the state. In the last three years she has felt discontinuity in her practice. In this time she has held temporary positions at four different schools and has taught Kindergarten and Pre-primary classes. She began this year teaching one group of Kindergarten children in a classroom without direct access to either toilets or the outside play area. Much time was spent moving children between these locations. Since then she has moved into a purpose-built demountable on site. Her children come for two full days. The school is new, drawing its students from a recently developed residential area.

Joy has extensive experience as an early childhood teacher. Over the years she has taught in community-based playgroups and Kindergartens as well as in Pre-Primary centres. Her present situation is within the Catholic Education System. She is one of two Kindergarten teachers who each teach part-time and share one room. Sharing facilities has meant that collaborative planning around themes has been desirable for practical reasons. Parents have a strong voice in the management of this school.

Rosemary, Julie, Denise and Leah trained within a few years of each other here in Western Australia in the eighties. Rosemary begins her story:

My teaching began at a country centre where I was fortunate to share house with another Pre-School teacher who gave me the benefit of her support and experience. I taught in this town for 6 ½ years sometimes 5-yr-olds, sometimes 4-yr-olds or multi-age groups. During this time I was invited to participate in a course at the exceptional children's unit of the child study centre at UWA, invaluable experience for working with atypical children.

In the years that followed I taught in a large regional centre with time out for maternity leave and a variety of relief positions from K to Yr 3. I became convinced that too much emphasis was being placed on formal learning. My

daughter was in the first intake of all day Pre-primary students, much to my concern. I have experienced setting up a new centre and tandem teaching. Since 1997 I have taught Kindergarten in an off-site centre attached to a primary school in an established suburb. The change in entry age and sessional hours for 4-yr-olds has added to my experience of change in the early childhood education system over 20 years.

Change, as mentioned by Rosemary, is a theme common to the narratives of teachers' experience, both their personal biographies and their professional lives. Julie describes changes she has perceived in the transfer from community-based Pre-schools to the primary school system while Denise identifies becoming a parent as a factor bringing change to her professional life.

Julie identifies a strong sense of the Kindergarten as a community that developed from her teacher training and early experience in community based Pre-schools. With the changes that have placed Kindergarten in the primary school she has noticed an apparent distancing between families and the school system. This has saddened her even though she acknowledges certain professional benefits arising from this whole school organisation. Julie spoke of Kindergarten as a functioning community of learners and of her willingness to be assertive in encouraging parent involvement in building learning partnerships with children. Julie is in a full time position in the same school as Carol. They are able to meet together for planning but run independent programmes.

Denise explains how becoming a parent has changed aspects of her professional life:

I taught Pre-primary for seven years before taking five years maternity leave. I resumed teaching in 1998 and have held the same position in the same school since then. Being a parent has made me aware of the importance that language plays in the development of the young child. Personal experience as a mother with one very articulate child and one who has had speech and language difficulties has helped me relate to, understand and help parents of children in my Kindy and as a teacher to make my Kindy programme language focused and based.

Denise teaches part-time in a semi-rural town 25kms from the regional centre. This year she has moved from a spacious 1970's style pre-school centre to a demountable on-site at the primary school. The poor acoustics and lack of space have created a noisy indoor environment that has impacted on her planning within these physical constraints.

From these profiles it was clear that personal experience influenced the developing belief system of these teachers who all acknowledged experience in and out of school as impacting on their personal practical knowledge. It was apparent that experience in the first years of teaching was influential in constructing a positive or negative self-image that connected to their ideology. While Rosemary described the benefits of having an experienced mentor teacher in her early experience, Leah described the confusion and frustration that impacted on her professional development:

My first appointment was to a north-west centre. Here I spent 2 ½ years working with three different Principals, four Teacher Assistants* and a transient student population. The developmental philosophy that was my base was questioned. I had to detail subject areas in my programming to meet school expectations. The experience made these early years of teaching frustrating and difficult. When I moved to the south of the state my experience was similarly fraught with inconsistency, difficult Principals and demands of changes within the education system. It was interrupted by periods of maternity leave. One Principal told me I had to make up my mind whether I wanted to be a teacher or mother.

I have been teaching at my present school for seven years now with one year off to have my third baby. I have a wonderful Principal, great support from the Deputy and am finally able to evaluate my programmes and develop the children's skills rather than just try to keep my head above water. My self-esteem has grown by having school support for my philosophy of early childhood education. I look for challenges and take on new initiatives. Finally I have been given the chance to be the teacher I wanted to become

* Although Education Assistant is the official title I have used Teacher Assistant, the term more commonly used by the teachers in this study.

when I walked out of college. I can be a good teacher and a good mother at the same time.

In her present full time position, Leah teaches a mixed-age group of Kindergarten and Pre-Primary children in a smaller suburban school. Her Kindergarten “Joeys” each attends for two mornings and two afternoons and make up one third of the group. She is the only early childhood trained teacher on her school staff.

Troy’s story as the only non-early childhood trained teacher was unique in this group. Her Maori background, bi-lingual training and her inexperience teaching in an early childhood setting combine to give her an experience which is different from others in this study. Her current appointment for one term only also creates a different context, this school being established primarily in response to the needs of the urban Indigenous population in the area. Improving literacy standards for these children is a high priority in the school. Troy believes that her calm temperament and her experience as a mother of six children have impacted on her teaching practice. Her own low socio-economic background and the search for her own cultural identity has given her compassion for the children she teaches and a desire to help them accept themselves. She is excited by the move to give them back their Nyungar language, to re-affirm confidence in their own culture. Troy tells her story:

I was excited to take up the position of Kindergarten teacher even though I knew it would last for only one term. It has been my first experience with this age group although I have had a variety of teaching experiences since coming to Australia from New Zealand.

My training began in 1985 in New Zealand, straight from High School and home. In 1986 I married and only returned to complete my diploma in 1998, this time at a Maori University called Te Whare Wananga O Awanuirangi. My qualifications equipped me to teach in both mainstream and bi-lingual, primary school environments so I felt privileged to start working with Indigenous people here.

These seven women had seven stories to tell yet often spoke with one voice - of care and concern for the children in their Kindergartens. All were mothers and experienced teachers whose teaching practice had been interrupted at some stage either by maternity leave, travel or experience in other child-care situations – or a combination of these. Julie and Leah held full time positions while the others were in part-time positions in schools. Only Leah was teaching a mixed Kindergarten/Pre-Primary group. Only Carol had children attend full day sessions. Each had an individual narrative to tell expressing their personal experience and personalities and yet together they constructed a multi-faceted picture of the Kindergarten teacher typical of this region. Table 1 shows a profile of the seven participant teachers.

Table 1

Profiles of participant teachers showing factors that relate to their present situation

	Training		Class		Position		Sessions		School	
	EC	Pr	K	K-P	Full time	Part time	½ day	full day	Govt	Ind
Carol	x		x			x		x	x	
Joy	x		x			x	x			x
Rosemary	x		x			x	x		x	
Julie	x		x		x		x		x	
Denise	x		x			x	x		x	
Leah	x			x	x		x		x	
Troy		x	x			x	x			x

Note EC refers to early childhood
 Pr Primary
 K Kindergarten
 K-P Kindergarten –Pre-Primary
 Ind independent (non-Govt school)

The education district in which they work comprises one large regional centre, a suburban population and peripheral rural towns. The population encompasses a range of socio-economic levels and an urban Indigenous community. The sample is representative of the local group of Kindergarten teachers who are mostly experienced teachers and mothers. It is as diverse as could be achieved given the participatory nature of the study and the demands requested of the women to engage in reflective journaling and focus group meetings in addition to the complexities of their professional and personal lives. That all are women is a comment on the gendered nature of early childhood education as no men were available in the district for inclusion in the sample.

The Method

Time-frame for data collection

Data collection was organised to fit within the first term of the school year, 2002. I negotiated a timetable that included an initial visit for video-recording to be followed with an individual meeting to view the video and discuss what was recorded. I made it clear I wanted to be as unobtrusive as possible as I would record whatever was happening at the time and then would tease out the language elements in the interview. Teachers were asked for a preferred time during the session for my visits that either began at the commencement or mid-way through the session and lasted about an hour, not all made up of recording time. I hoped to record a block of activity either at the beginning or later part of a session that would include a range of language interactions.

The first focus group meeting occurred during this initial round of recording and interviews as outlined in Table 2. I planned to continue this cyclical pattern with a minimum of two rounds of video-recording, interview and focus group meetings during the period of data collection, possibly to be followed by more individual meetings to tease out issues and clarify data. As it happened, I was able to meet with each teacher except Troy three times, and the focus group meetings continued through the life of the study at the request of the participants.

Table 2**Timetable for data collection**

Feb 6-8	Letters of consent distributed to schools.	Speak with Principals and participants.
Feb 19-26	Video-recording, interview 1	Denise, Rosemary, Leah
Feb 26	Focus meeting 1	Organisation, sharing stories Rosemary, Denise, Leah, Troy
March 6-13	Video-recording, interview 1	Troy, Joy, Carol, Julie
March 13	Focus meeting 2	Sharing stories Joy, Carol, Troy, Julie Rosemary
March 18-27	Video-recording, interview 2	All except interview with Troy
April 19	Interview 2/3	Troy
April 23 - May 20	Interview 3	All except Troy
June 15	Focus meeting 3	Overview, rating survey, Mapping the landscape. Rosemary, Julie, Carol, Joy, Leah, Denise
August 31	Focus meeting 4	Reviewing the data Rosemary, Carol, Julie, Joy, Denise, Troy

Data collection

Data collection comprised two distinct elements that occurred concurrently:

- A social dimension: teachers' stories shared at focus group meetings and
- An individual dimension: video-recorded segments of sessions followed by semi-structured interviews with individual teachers.

This was a design that gave scope for individual conversations in some depth as well as the social, collegiate dimension of group discussion. I believed the two would offer different type of data that had the potential to enrich the study. Though each had its own characteristics they became linked as individual teachers came together in the group to share and bounce off each other, in much the same way as they described children in group discussions in their Kindergartens.

In this study I foreground stories about language learning told by teachers who have been asked to collaborate in the textualising of them. I have used the terms 'teacher's story' and 'narratives of experience' to differentiate between the two types of narrative data of this study. 'Teachers' stories' describes those incidents first recorded and reflected on by teachers in the journaling and shared with the focus group while 'narratives of experience' refers to those jointly constructed by myself and the individual teachers from transcripts of interviews based on video-recordings. Because I became a participant observer during my visits to each Kindergarten, my own observations from behind the camera and while joining in non-recorded activities (including assisting with escorting Joy's group for school photos and sharing fruit-time with Carol's group) became part of the data supplementing the material of the interviews. I have drawn from it in this report to enrich the picture of language activities in the Kindergartens but only inasmuch as it supported the narrative data and presented another perspective to cross-reference with that of the teachers.

Teachers' stories and the focus group

Despite the preliminary establishment phase in 2001 the teachers looked for guidance in structuring their reflective writing and welcomed the suggested format I gave them (Appendix II). I asked them to share written copy/ies of stories that illustrated language events in their Kindergartens for discussion at focus group meetings. These provided a pool of stories some of which would be selected for inclusion in the research report. The frequency of entries was left to the discretion of the individual participants. Some found written recording more difficult than others. Ultimately I believed that it was not the number of entries, but the significance of what teachers saw as worth recording that was of value to the study.

The following questions were used to guide and organise the teachers' own reflective thinking and journaling relevant to this study:

- Why is this story [about language learning] important?
- How does it demonstrate my philosophy of teaching language?
- What teaching strategies are demonstrated?
- How would you want to explain its significance to an observer?

The stories that follow in Chapters Five, Six and Seven are presented as recorded by the teachers indicating how each developed her own style of writing. While most were recorded during the period of data collection, a few, notably Rosemary's Show and Tell (p 56) were drawn from earlier journaling during the establishment phase.

Focus group sessions provided a forum for sharing stories and open-ended group discussion. They were initially unrelated to the narratives of experience but later became a forum for me to disseminate tentative findings and seek responses from teachers in the group. At no time did individual transcripts of interviews form part of the focus group meetings, although points raised in individual interviews were repeated in group discussion because of the common focus of the subject matter. Following the meeting on 6th April I wrote in my journal:

... there was a definite climate of supportive relationships, the positive effect of this collaborative approach. If we do sometimes move from the focus it is because there is a collegial space for sharing problems and issues of concern. And in listening to them articulate their stories and express deeper meanings there is a resonance too ... of children learning language, learning to express and explain...

The focus group did indeed take on a life of its own that held exciting potential for professional development beyond the parameters of this study. At times individual teachers struggled to explain why a recorded incident was significant; how it demonstrated their beliefs about young children learning language. Time and time again the resonance between children and adults engaged in the same process of developing language skills was heard as competent experienced women learned to

articulate the meaning of their actions, just as they asked of the children in their classrooms.

But first there was the problem of finding a time and place when we could meet. This remained the greatest practical problem because each had work and family commitments that limited her availability. Our homes and schools were separated by physical distance of close to 100 kms across the district. Finally we decided to find what seemed to be the best option to accommodate most people most of the time and planned to keep in contact with others by notes, phone or email. Attendance at focus group meetings ranged from five to seven women, including myself, and was juggled around family and school commitments. Coming together in this way held a social as well as professional significance.

I had anticipated having to lead the group initially but was keen to encourage them to control the discussion maintaining the focus on language learning issues. I tried using an audio-tape to record the meetings but background noise was a problem and I found it was more effective to keep notes, referring to the tape for confirmation of what I recorded. This strategy was useful in giving me a prescribed role as listener and recorder. Occasionally I found that I could inject information relevant to the discussion based on current reading. I believe this was consistent with Carr and Kemmis' (1986, p. 161) description of a "critical friend" whose knowledge could help peers grow in understanding.

Focus group meetings were organised so that each person had time to present a story, explain its significance and have a short period of open discussion. Always mindful of the value of their time I acted as time-keeper and redirected the discussion if necessary. Generally we did keep focussed unless an issue of concern to the whole group came to the fore. After each meeting I wrote up notes and the key points of the discussion relevant to the research study. Questions that arose from the meeting gave direction for further probing in individual interviews or through reading. At each meeting after the first I was able to present a summary of points from the previous meeting categorised by emerging themes. It was my intention to assist the members to see the bigger picture and to demonstrate the value of their contribution to it.

The focus group discussion did not add to the data but did, I believe, improve its quality by serving as a forum for teachers to present their stories with opportunity to clarify meaning. It acted as a pathway for open communication between the participants and myself throughout the course of the study. It had significance in terms of the methodological framework in building positive relationships of trust consistent with the ethic of caring. The group was in fact so well received that there was a demand to continue meetings after the period of data collection. I was able to use these to put forward the emergent themes and issues for discussion and feedback as the research developed.

Participants were asked to select for inclusion in the report the one or two stories that they considered best represented what language looked like in their Kindergartens, demonstrated their teaching strategies and, with reflection, could indicate their beliefs relevant to children learning language at Kindergarten. The stories were mostly positive celebrations of children's achievements but did include isolated examples of frustration and dilemma. While the stories contained in the following chapters are written in the teachers' own words with their own reflective interpretation, I do not deny my voice in controlling the direction, purpose and final presentation of material that follows. The participants were given the opportunity to read and respond to the draft and all accepted this offer.

I anticipated that the video-recordings and interviews would provide more opportunity for me to direct the questioning and probe more deeply. The data collected here would add another dimension to the 'teachers' stories' and help build 'narratives of experience' for comparative analysis with their stories shared in the focus group.

Video-recording

There were two reasons for my decision to use video-recordings as a base for interviews. Firstly, it would give a shared vision of events in the Kindergarten as a base for discussion between the teacher and myself. I believed this would be preferable to teachers trying to recall from my observational notes what events I may have been referring to. After all Kindergartens are busy places. There are many

interactions happening at any given time and the interview was delayed till a later time or day. Secondly, I hoped it would enable me to be relatively invisible behind the camera as I focussed on the teacher working with children.

The video-recording method proved effective because teachers were able to view themselves and recall the events and their intentions at the time. At first I felt they were self-conscious of being recorded but this was overcome once they focussed on the children and not the camera.

My desire to be invisible was not always so successful. Children were very natural and rarely played to the camera but I should have realised just how accepting, curious and honest 4-year-old children are! I needed to be open and explicit in explaining my presence and showing children the camera from the outset. It was less obtrusive to become an acknowledged participant in the group than to try to remain the 'fly on the wall'. In the case of Troy's excursion I actually became the camera-man recording the event for their later viewing. As a participant I was able to join in fruit-time conversation in Carol's Kindergarten, help escort Joy's group around the school for class photos and acknowledge children who approached me in all of the Kindergartens.

The one problem that I had with the camera was when the battery died leaving me with only a short segment of activities. In the context of the whole study this was not problematic as enough material for discussion was produced from a relatively short recording. Recordings ranged from 10 minutes to ½ hour. Over the two occasions that I taped sessions with each Kindergarten group I was able to record a range of activities and interactions at different times. In deciding what to record I tried to keep the teacher in view as she interacted with children because I wanted her to be able to recall her position when viewing the tape. At no time was I denied consent to use the camera except in the case of a few individual children who were easily identified and avoided. As much as I would have liked to share the tapes with the focus group, I did not, preferring to keep well within the ethical parameters set out in my request for consent.

Interviews and 'narratives of experience'

The interviews were each held as soon as could be arranged with the participant after the recording session. Negotiating a meeting was a matter of agreeing on a place and time convenient to both the teacher and myself. The venue was either at the school or in our homes. It sometimes followed immediately after the recorded Kindergarten session but was sometimes delayed until the teacher and I could find a mutually convenient meeting time. The video recordings provided a wealth of material for in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant (Burns, 1994). It was my intention that these interviews should be of the style described by Gudmundsdottir (1992), developing as a conversation where shared meaning develops through the dialogue.

Although the recordings provided differential material for discussion, I maintained a structure of basic questions so that there would be some basis for comparison between the interview data (Appendix III). I began with a request for the teachers to tell me what was happening in terms of language learning, then the question about their intended strategies and finally asked them to explain how it related to their belief system. This line of questioning was parallel with the framework for reflective journaling and so maintained the research focus. However, there was opportunity to explore contextual meaning on an individual basis according to what emerged from the recording. I asked how representative the sample was of language learning in their practice and inquired how they linked their planning to the Curriculum Framework.

Because the interview developed as a conversation, I frequently found myself restating the participant's response or adding a comment from my own point of view. Whilst this may have demonstrated a flaw in my questioning technique and may have endangered the integrity of the participants I believe it acted to encourage them to further clarify their position. Because of the differential visual material that the interviews were built on each conversation had unique information to offer. This provided richness in the data that intensified the picture of language learning and gave depth of insight into each teacher's viewpoint. Interviews were taped, and generally were timed to coincide with the length of the tape, ½ hour. Sometimes conversations continued longer than this, but the amount of material to this point was

more than enough to provide sufficient data relevant to the research questions. In fact I was overwhelmed by the amount of valuable data that came from these conversations and expressed this to the participants. My concern became that of doing justice to their contribution.

Rather than differences in the range of activities observed and the philosophical beliefs expressed by the teachers, different emphases became apparent dependant on the priorities given by individual teachers according to their personal pedagogical theories. This will become clear in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 as I describe and interpret the data. The individual interviews filled out a broader picture of what language learning looked like at Kindergarten and why teachers did the things they did. In the first round of interviews some participants were somewhat hesitant in expressing their meaning, and spoke of their difficulty in articulating what they instinctively knew. The second round, however, found them more relaxed. During this phase the negative case came to the fore with words like 'dilemma', 'interruptions' and 'problem' used in relation to events or contextual issues. The third round of interviews was more summative as I tried to bring together their thoughts in relation to the emerging themes and issues. This interview was not linked to video-recording. I asked for highlights and dilemmas, the highs and lows of their daily work, as well as their perspective on the impact of personal experience on their practice. I asked them how they perceived their role in supporting children's language learning. As we concluded I thanked them for their co-operation and valuable input.

After each interview I transcribed the tape fully, and followed this with a preliminary categorisation according to the broad areas of the study. From the transcripts of the three interviews I constructed a 'narrative of experience' for each teacher and returned this to them to be edited. These narratives together with the texts of teachers' stories were used to identify themes, commonalities and differences as a basis for analysis. The transcripts remained the primary reference for the actual words in context for each teacher.

Interpretation

My intention was primarily to interpret meaning that would map the landscape from the teacher's perspective but also to set the teaching practices described in the data

against current literature concerning language learning by young children. My intention here was to establish how the local landscape of seven Kindergartens fitted into the wider picture.

Eisner (1991) outlines four dimensions of educational criticism:

- Description which enables readers to visualise a place or process;
- Interpretation as an explanation of meaning;
- Evaluation, an appraisal of educational value, and
- Thematics, telling a story. The theme embedded in the situation extends beyond it to other situations by a process of naturalistic generalisation.

Eisner's framework gave me the structure I needed for the process that followed. I saw the application of this process as most appropriate to the emergent nature of this study where the theory lay in the data and there was a need to revisit the literature throughout the life of the study in order to have some basis for comparison of the emerging themes from the stories and the narratives.

Analysis initially occurred through the teachers' own reflective practice and through group discussion. A second level of analysis was my interpretation as I constructed narratives based on the interviews. The next stage was to compare the stories and narratives of individual teachers, consider any additional data from my own observations and build these into an interpretive account categorised under the principal aspects of the study – activities, strategies and beliefs. I maintained the broad categories of activity (what?), strategy (how?) and beliefs (why?) which reflected the research questions but coded within these categories to establish patterns, commonalities and differences expressed by key words or phrases used by the participants. Using this analysis I could then identify each participant's position for comparison.

Because the interviews had produced variable data I added a rating survey to the tools for data collection (Appendix IV), listing the key words from the grids and asking participants, at one focus meeting, to rate each in relation to their practice

from very low priority to very high on a scale of 1-5. This survey was of minor significance but did help to clarify their position and fill in the gaps and so added to my analysis of the data.

Following Eisner's framework I then synthesised the data into an evaluative appraisal against current research literature, especially Dickinson and Tabors (2001) home-school study in America. Finally I focussed on thematics, drawing out what I selected as major themes for the wider audience of Kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators for whom I believe there is relevance.

Glaser, (cited in Wildy, 1999), argues that meaning in data is generated not by the strategy but by the researcher, something I acknowledge as being constitutive in this study. The questions are mine. As teachers reflected on their work, it was my questions that directed and possibly limited their view. The final documentation, the collation of stories, implies a selective process for which I am responsible, even though the participants held control over which of their stories were made available and the textualisation of those stories. Participants were asked to review and agree to the authenticity of transcripts of interviews and all interpretive material. To maintain integrity, collaboration and reciprocity is reflected in the final document but the compilation and presentation is mine and I acknowledge the selective and subjective judgments implicit in the decision-making process.

Summary

In this chapter I have set language learning as the field of study and identified research questions concerning the what, how and why of language learning in the Kindergarten as perceived by seven participant teachers. I introduced these women who were drawn from and representative of a local Network group.

In detailing the methods used I first outlined the time frame and followed with an explanation of 'teachers' stories' and 'narratives of experience' as two types of narrative data. I described the role of the focus group as a forum for sharing teachers' stories and as a channel for open communication between the participants and myself. I outlined how video-recording with follow-up interviews contributed to the construction of the 'narratives of experience' and why I have also drawn on my

own observations to support narrative data. I explained how the data is to be collected, analysed, interpreted and evaluated using Eisner's (1991) four dimensions of educational criticism as a framework. I now move on to a descriptive account of the data as I look into the teachers' stories for the activities that participant teachers saw as supporting children's language learning at Kindergarten.

CHAPTER FIVE

LOOKING AT LANDMARKS: ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE LEARNING

Using Eisner's (1991) framework for educational criticism, I will begin in this chapter with a descriptive account of the stories and narratives that comprise the rich data of this study and follow with an interpretive discussion in Chapters Six and Seven. Through the stories we get to know the participants who first recorded the stories in their journals, reflected on their meaning and then shared them with other members of the focus group set up as part of this research study. We begin to see those activities that are identified by the participants as supporting children's language learning.

Ayers (1992, p. 35) stated that "we not only tell our stories but in a powerful way our stories tell us". Each of the stories that follows has been selected by one of the seven teacher participants as being of significance in telling about some aspect of language learning in her Kindergarten. They are connected by each teacher's focus on children's language in self-directed play and in teacher-directed activities. Children are seen in a whole group for 'Show and Tell' or a story; in small groups at fruit-time or in play inside and outside. There are examples of individual children engaged in conversation with the teacher. What do the teachers identify as supporting language learning?

"Language is the program"

If a child were to move between any of the Kindergartens in this study s/he would recognise a degree of familiarity in the organisation and range of activities available. "Language is the program," stated Rosemary. "[It] flows through everything" said Joy of her integrated curriculum where there are numerous opportunities for developing language through social interaction across all learning areas. Though some of the activities recorded in the data were directed, initiated or extended by the teacher, others were initiated by the children.

What follows describes language in use in a range of contexts indicated by the settings of each story. Teachers observe as children practise language in play and they respond when the children initiate language events. They are seen to surround

the children with language, model how language sounds and works and give the children the functional need to make decisions about using language for social communication, for developing literacy and for cognitive processes.

Language in play

'Ownership' was a term used by several of the teachers to refer to children's self-directed use of language in dramatic play wherein they create a context for practising and demonstrating competency in the vocabulary and patterns of language. In holding ownership of their play they choose whether or not to take up suggestions offered by the teacher, whether or not to accept the teacher into their imaginary world. Troy stated that children "own the language" of their sandpit game where imagination and reality are blurred; where an older child becomes the play-leader and the teacher intervenes with questions such as "Are those heavy fish?" to model more complex sentences and concepts. Alex uses the play to practise categorising sea animals using specific vocabulary, while Taleisha expresses her understanding of social rules when she initiates conversation with Troy. In the play Troy, as 'participant observer', watches a child-initiated play that extends the theme she has been working on with the group. As she says, "I had been working on a sea theme for much of the term without seeing evidence of the children using it. Now when I hadn't planned anything I saw the play and heard the language in use."

Sandpit Play

I was sitting calmly watching some play in the sandpit. Alex was playing with a new toy, a bucket tied by a long cord to the top of the fireman's pole. He was throwing it down and pulling it up repeatedly. I called out, "Fill it up with sand then pour it out from there."

He said, "No, I'm fishing."

When he threw it down again I said, "OK, I'll put 3 fish in." I put in three handfuls of sand. He pulled up the bucket, straining with the extra weight.

"Are those heavy fish?" I stated, not really expecting a response but rather verbalising in words what his face was telling me.

He said, "You're the dolphin."

"OK," I said and returned to my sitting spot. Other children came to join the play.

A little later I saw Alex still playing with his bucket. Amy, a Pre-primary girl, was putting some sticks and a leaf into it. She said to Alex, "OK, you've got some fish and crabs." He called out to me, "Mrs Violet, I've got some fish and crabs for you, fish and one crab" (holding up one finger to verify).

"What are you going to do now?" I asked. He said, "Throw them back," but Amy responded with, "No, eat 'em!" So they pretended to eat them and threw me a couple of sticks.

Taleisha was watching all of this and saw my fish beside me in a pile. She asked, "Are you going to cook your sticks at home?" I answered, "Yes."

"Nooo!" she said, shaking her head, you're going to leave them here."

I just laughed and agreed with her by nodding my head, reinforcing her unspoken belief that stealing was not good!

Why is this story important? Because it's the most language I have heard in the playground this term. I was lucky to be there at the time. The play involved Kindy and Pre-Primary children playing together, learning from each other. It showed me the progression of language that children used from being able to name things like 'fish' and then classify into different types – like fish, crabs and dolphins. Alex showed me he was counting and wanted me to know that he knew how many crabs he had. It showed me that children are learning during free play. They are pretending yet keeping tabs on what is real. Taleisha recognised that taking things home that belong at school was wrong and communicated that; a real concept in a make-believe situation. This kind of interaction excites me because the use of language in play becomes so complex and interesting. It's fun!

I was also excited because I had been working on a 'sea' theme for much of the term without seeing evidence of the children using it. Now when I hadn't planned anything I saw the play and heard the language in use. This demonstrated how children extend their language through play. They express all sorts of things they know during play and they own the language.

Joy also shared a story of sandpit play (recorded in Chapter Six) where she noted how impressed she was with the social courtesies used by children involved in role-

play in the sandpit. She observed that social courtesies were “something we had been talking about inside at fruit-time.” In their stories Troy and Joy both observed the transfer of teacher-led indoor activities to child-initiated outside play. At a focus group meeting Joy told another story of role play, this time in the home corner, when she briefly stepped in to extend the possibilities for language use then stepped back to observe the children practising appropriate language in play of their own making. As Troy commented, “the language in play becomes so complex and interesting. It’s fun!”

Language in books

Denise’s story takes place outside and again shows how a teacher-initiated activity is translated into children’s play, leaving the teacher to stand back and observe as children take ownership of the language of a traditional story. In this incident the teacher has first read a story, initiated talk about it and planned associated hands-on activities. Now the children have taken ownership of the structure and language of the narrative. It was not their first experience of dramatisation based on literature as I had previously recorded a similar incident on my first visit to their Kindergarten. On that occasion children re-enacted a story read to them with the authority of the printed word to guide them, made clear by one child, Kylie, who stated, “Well, that’s what’s in the book!”

The Three Little Pigs

12/03/02 A small group of children engaged in free play outdoors.

I had read the story of the Three Little Pigs. We talked about it and collaged the three houses but we didn’t re-enact it. The cardboard ‘houses’ were attached to climbing frames outside and left for the children to play with if they wished.

Kylie, Callan and Ashton were the pigs, Allie the wolf.

Callan climbs into the house of bricks.

Kylie, shaking her head says, “No, no, stop, no.”

Callan looks up. Kylie says, “It’s the wrong house... The straw house.”

She points. Heads turn.

The pigs all run to the house of straw.

Allie, the wolf runs after roaring, "I'm coming!" Her hands are waving, a big smile on her face. She reaches the straw house. Kylie calls, "You have to huff and puff."

Allie, in a loud voice calls, "I'm going to blow your house down."

This particular play sequence was special because Allie is a very quiet, introverted child who rarely chooses to participate actively in songs and games with the whole group. Through dramatised role-play in this child-initiated game she felt secure and confident enough to play an excellent, big bad wolf. It was wonderful to see her and hear the language and the tone of her voice.

Books and stories are a great avenue for teaching language, and dramatisation allows for self-expression through active play.

Books and stories were rated highly by all the teachers in the study and were observed in use in all Kindergartens. Rosemary and Julie each read a story to the whole group at the close of the session, Rosemary finding a story had a calming effect on the children and promoted opportunities for discussion. Carol shared a book and talked about it prior to fruit-time while Joy and Leah were observed using books to introduce thematic activities. Carol explained how she liked to read books more than once, to re-visit familiar ones in order to find greater depth of meaning. Leah and Rosemary both valued the role of books in enriching vocabulary and giving children experience hearing rhyme, alliteration and the rhythm of language. Troy found that books extended an experience and offered new vocabulary and an opportunity to develop confidence through dramatisation. For her group the daily Nyungar language session contained a simple story in the Nyungar language. Denise rated books "at the top" of her program, and was the only teacher to regularly read to small groups rather than the whole group; while she read to half of her group her Teacher Assistant read to the other.

All teachers reported having books available throughout the sessions and encouraging parents to be reading partners when at Kindergarten. In Rosemary and Carol's groups I observed children reading with other children as a free choice activity. According to the teachers the stories chosen would frequently be those

previously read to the whole group. Re-visiting the story with different reading partners, or through dramatisation and role-play was recorded in Denise's story and on video-tape as common practice in these Kindergartens.

Language and thinking

In the activities discussed so far the links between child-initiated play and language for social communication are evident. The role of books for developing literacy was observed. Child-initiated play was seen to offer opportunities for exploring concepts and problem-solving. In the following story told by Julie we glimpse two boys engaged in play that becomes problematic when Julie asks, "What would happen if ...?" Arising from a common interest in trains and the home experience of one boy, this play sequence extended over a period of days and saw language linked to cognition; the development of a learning partnership between the boys and the teacher and literacy awareness through the pictorial and textual documentation recorded by Julie. Both Julie and Rosemary commented on situations where their modelled writing reinforced "the concept of print as a permanent message" as a step into literacy.

Building a ravine

Keaton was building with the train set. He built part of the track on top of a set of shelves and was pushing the train so it fell off the shelf. In conversation with me Keaton explained that he saw a video about a train falling down a ravine. Ross, playing next to him, listened and was concerned about his train falling down the ravine. "Mine's not going to fall down that big deep hole," he said. He built a structure next to Keaton's and placed his trains inside the building, as in a garage. I asked Ross what would happen if I pulled his train out from the front. He did not answer but thought about it. "Mmm," said Ross.

The next day both boys rebuilt their track and structures, Ross putting blocks in front of his to stop the train from falling and Keaton putting blocks as buffers at the end of his track to stop the train.

Why was this incident important? Getting Keaton to explain what he was doing allowed Ross to hear as well and motivated him to join the problem solving. Both boys needed to express themselves clearly so that others

could understand their activity. Having to explain to someone else extended their language use. The story demonstrates my belief that extending experiences and encouraging problem solving is an important strategy for developing the connected processes of thought and language. The teaching begins with my observation of the children's play, followed by careful questioning to make them clarify their thinking and communicate with meaningful language. The experiences are intrinsically motivating as they come out of their own experience and are an extension of their self-directed play.

I followed the development of the play, taking photos, documenting the conversation with the boys, then displaying their story in the Kindergarten. In this way I was modelling writing and showing that print carries a permanent message that everyone can read.

As in the stories of sandpit play and dramatisation, Building a ravine exemplifies children using play to explore concepts and to practise and make appropriate language their own following some other experience that may have been either teacher-directed as in Troy's 'sea' theme or arising from a home event as with Keaton's train video. Julie explained how documenting the boys' story enabled her to extend the experience and use it to develop beginning literacy concepts.

Word play

An experiential base gave rise to the fruit-time language play of Carol's group of children. Having shared the concrete experience of Kindergarten visits by pets and the discussion connected with these visits, one group developed a nonsense game that highlighted the children's understanding of language concerning gender pronouns. In their game we once again see social relationships in the foreground and the unspoken rules of children's word play as they demonstrate their internalisation of the correct convention for use of gender pronouns. Once again the routine structure of the Kindergarten session provided the social framework for such exploratory play that allowed children to master elements of language.

Fruit-time talk

One morning Rachel and her Mum brought a pet fantail pigeon to show. This prompted discussion including: "He can't lay eggs, he's a boy, he's a male. The following week a dog came to visit and a similar discussion followed. When "He's a male, he's a boy" came up Tyler said, "I'm a boy too. I'm a male." Ellie commented, "I'm a girl. I'm a female."

Following these visits I listened to six children sharing a plate of fruit:

Daniel (pointing to Sarah): Him did it!

Sarah: I didn't do it. I'm a girl.

Pointing to Tyler. Her did it!

Tyler: I didn't do it. I'm a boy – pointing to Ellie and laughing – Him did it!

This game proceeded for a while involving all at the table and more general laughter. Zack had just been pointed to with "Her did it." He replied, "No, I'm a boy. She did it." The game continued but this time with 'he' and 'she' instead of 'him' and 'her'.

This incident shows children who have shared a common experience and the discussion associated with it, taking ownership of some elements of language that came from the discussion. In a game of their own making they demonstrated a very clear understanding of one important 'rule' while sharing the humour of it. It is important to have fun and enjoy learning!

Playing with words is a theme developed by Leah in her description of the question and answer conversation with Jason that accompanied the process of drawing a self-portrait. The drawing itself became a product of the activity but the richness of the event lay equally in the notion of 'angry eyebrows' and 'wiggly and wild hair' as well as the verbal expression of feelings shared between teacher and child in the process of the activity. The child was in control of the situation. Not to be deterred by the question, "Can you draw the tummy now?" Jason complied but quickly returned to what he saw as important, the facial details, orally documenting the process as he drew. As with the noncommittal "Mmm," that Julie had as a response to her inquiry about the train, Leah's question, "Why?" receives only a superficial

"Cos I wanted to." These responses may indicate some difficulty in either the thought process and/or expression of meaning with this level of questioning.

Angry Eyebrows

Scene: Jason and myself. Jason is drawing a picture of himself with me guiding him.

"Look at my hair. It's all wiggly and wild."

"Yeah, that's great hair. Can you draw the tummy now?"

Jason draws the rest of his body and goes back to the face.

"I need a mouth. Look, I've drawn a sad mouth."

"Why did you draw a sad mouth?"

"Cos I wanted to."

"Can you draw the rest of your face?"

"I need eyebrows." (Laughs) "Look, I drew angry eyebrows." (Laughs again).

"Why did you draw angry eyebrows?"

"Cos they look funny. I look really angry in this picture, don't I?"

"Yes, you do. Have you been angry lately?"

"Yes, I was angry last night. This is me last night."

Jason laughs as he looks at the picture and I laugh with him. It's a great picture.

Jason had great delight in creating this picture and talking about it. Through his verbalisation he was able to see that others could share his delight and sense of humour. Jason was also looking for approval. What he has drawn is what his audience sees. He is communicating through words and drawing. (Fig 1)



Figure 1. Jason's angry eyebrows.

Julie and Leah both demonstrated through their stories the connection between pictorial representation of events and language. Photos of the boys' constructions accompanied Julie's written record of their explanation of the train play sequence. Leah recorded in her story the oral language that accompanied and explained the drawing process. In both cases language allowed others to interpret meaning from pictures.

Language for school

Rosemary, Joy, Carol and Denise found 'Show and Tell' (or Surprise Boxes) to be an activity that developed specific language skills as well as building self-confidence in each child as they became the focus of attention in the group. Each of them also commented on the connection it made between school and home because parents were asked to be involved in the child's choice of item to show and preparation of the clues or description s/he tells. As in the case of visiting pets referred to in Carol's story of Fruit-time talk, 'Show and Tell' can also be the shared experience that leads to other language in play.

'Show and Tell' is a routine segment of Rosemary's session and one that focuses in specific terms on the language component of the activity. In the following story told by Rosemary we see children operating at two levels, firstly as themselves engaged in a familiar Kindy activity but with the added dimension of role-play where they have taken ownership of the language and behaviour appropriate to the activity. The children have reached this degree of independence after months of teacher input and support, not only in practising speaker and audience roles, but also with scaffolding of descriptive language and questioning techniques. Through 'Show and Tell' they have been learning 'how to do school', how to use 'school language' in an appropriate context.

Show and Tell

Setting: September 2001 Whole group mat session

One morning I had given the children their cue to come to the mat when a parent distracted me. A couple of minutes later I was pleased to find the children sitting nicely on the mat with Lachlan role-playing myself as the

teacher. Using my language, and word perfect, he led four children in turn through their show and tell session for 10 minutes without any intervention from myself or other adults.

Show and tell is part of our every day program as I find it is a convenient method to develop many skills including:

- Oral language skills
- Giving each child the chance to be centre of attention
- Modelling language skills
- Improving questioning techniques
- Improving communication between home and school by bringing interesting objects from home.
- Practising audience skills.

It was wonderful to view:

- Lachlan displaying the confidence and initiative to perform the role as teacher.
- The other children responding to Lachlan and behaving appropriately.
- The level of language skills especially questioning ability.

We now have 'grown -up' Show and Tell. Each child sits in the chair and performs independently, choosing 2 children from the group to ask questions with little or no intervention or help from any adult.

A range of language events

The activities described in the stories included so far were all supported by the video-taped recordings and further expanded in conversational interviews with the teachers. Not told in the stories shared here, but recorded on tape were other language events which I briefly describe here in order to augment the picture presented in the sample of teachers' stories.

I recorded Denise administering the TAC language screening test (Bell, Shaw & Lindsay, 2001) to one child. She planned to use this diagnostic tool with every child

early in the year in order to compile profiles for individuals and the group. The information would then be used in her planning to meet identified needs.

I accompanied Troy's class on an excursion, travelling on the school bus to see boats in the marina and play on the beach. Troy tried to introduce new vocabulary into sand-play but the children were too engrossed in their own ideas to respond. I recorded mat sessions with Leah, Denise and Rosemary and observed children working on computers either with another adult or other children. There were teacher-directed table activities that children were encouraged to do.

In the case of computer use Rosemary had selected software with care and was keen that the experience would involve language interaction with a learning partner. She commented on how she had suggested to a tertiary student on work experience in her Kindergarten that she talk with the child working on the computer, "use your voice, start another thought pattern in the child" rather than both child and partner sitting in silence. Rosemary believed that building a social dimension of interactive language into the activity enriched its learning potential for the child by having her/him use cognitive skills to question, think about and explain what s/he was doing.

Table activities sometimes continued in the midst of interruptions to the usual flow of the session as was the case when Joy was anxiously trying to help each child complete Easter baskets on the day when the class photos were being taken. She commented that usually she felt able 'to go with the flow' but the considerable interruption to the sessional routine put pressure on her to rush. She felt she was denied the time to extend conversation with each child using mathematical language as she had intended.

Leah had an instructional activity based on sorting and classification planned for a session that was interrupted by a behaviour management issue that required her attention. She explained how reluctant children who needed the most encouragement had most of her attention by coming towards the end of the session, after the interruptions: "Kids who are stronger always come first.... Those who are last, who need a lot of help get the majority of my time so it kind of works out evenly." This was supported by my observation when it was mostly older children at the table with

the exception of one very articulate 4-year-old who, having written her name on her paper, listened to Leah's instructions and watched the older children intently in order to learn from them how to go about solving the problem inherent in the activity. Other Kindergarten children at this time were either being called by the Teacher Assistant to complete another activity or were engaged in free play. In her interview Leah told me that all the younger children had later come to have a go at the sorting/classifying activity.

Not all structured table activities were fraught with interruptions; some like the playdough table were available for children's free play. In other examples the Teacher Assistant or a parent helped children to effectively explore activities. Rosemary worked with individual children scribing for them a message in an Easter card. As I video-recorded her she was writing, "And I really love these people in my family" for one young girl.

There was another teacher-directed activity mentioned by Leah and Denise in interviews but not otherwise recorded. This was a segment of mat-time referred to as "Grandma's session" because of the central role of a "Grandma" puppet in a programme of direct language instruction developed locally to address speech and language skills, especially early phonological awareness. Leah referred to her use of this focus session as a "special" time she gave to the Kindergarten children in her Kindergarten/Pre-Primary group. Because of the make-up of her group most of her planning, while being open-ended, addresses the needs of the older children. "Grandma's session" enables her to focus on specific language needs of the younger children. This program required children to listen and actively respond to specific instructions given through games, rhymes and songs.

The stories of this study do not describe the whole picture but they do show a range of Kindergarten activities in which language learning is embedded. Rosemary acknowledged her prior teaching in Lachlan's role-play, Leah laughed with Jason over his angry eyebrows, Denise noticed Allie's big wolf voice, Troy listened when Taleisha quietly confided in her; in all of these we observe teachers supporting children to become confident in using language to express themselves and their feelings. When Julie asks, "What if ...?"; when Troy questions, "Are those ...?";

when Joy asks “How can you?” children are expected to become thinkers processing the question and learning to express meaning through words. Where children engage in language games, where a group of children hear a book read and share discussion about it, where Keaton and Ross show and read to others their story of Building a ravine we see Kindergarten as a place for developing literacy skills.

As I move forward into an interpretation of the activities described I will seek to find what strategies are implicit in the stories recorded and reflected on by the teachers; how teachers act to support children learning language in the Kindergarten.

CHAPTER SIX

LOOKING FOR PATHWAYS: STRATEGIES TEACHERS USE

The stories included in Chapter 5 signal a number of strategies used by all of the teachers some of the time. Differences in teaching styles are reflected in the emphases given to different strategies and the priorities teachers place on them for language teaching and learning. Within the teachers' stories in Chapter 5 and others presented in this chapter there are embedded strategies used by these teachers, with further evidence drawn from their narratives of experience.

The chapter is organised around two broad categories that I have identified in the stories: firstly the context for learning and secondly who directs or initiates the language event. I selected these categories as a way of organising this interpretative analysis because teacher participants expressed an understanding that the learning environments they constructed were influential in shaping the type of pedagogical strategies used to create learning opportunities. The previous chapter showed what language learning looks like. I will now consider the question, "How do teachers support language learning at Kindergarten?"

The context for language experience

In the data of this study are examples of three groupings that provide the context for language interaction and learning: the whole group, small informal groups and one on one partnerships. In this study whole group activities tend to be more teacher-directed while small group activities most commonly involve children engaged in play of their own choice where the teacher is often the observer but sometimes seen to direct a table activity using instructional language. One on one interactions may be between two children or a child and adult.

Strategies within whole group activities

In Rosemary's Show and Tell we saw the whole group engaged in speaking and listening to either a child or the teacher. This story and the one that follows of 'a terrible silence' show large group activities where there are clearly defined speaker and listener roles that require all members of the group to use acceptable social conventions. As Rosemary stated she finds 'Show and Tell' to be a convenient

strategy for developing specific oral language skills for both speaker and listener roles.

Shared books were recorded being read in a whole group context in five of the seven Kindergartens but only Carol shared the following story of book-reading. In it she demonstrates how open-ended discussion with the whole group is a strategy that can lead to understanding of new concepts, new ways of saying things.

A terrible silence*

I read the title of Mem Fox's book, Harriet, you'll drive me wild to the class. "I wonder what 'you'll drive me wild' means?" I asked.

Silence from the children.

"Do you think it means to drive a car?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Drive a boat."

Tegan volunteered, "Drive me crazy." Then Tyler, "Drive me up the wall."

I could see the puzzled looks on a few faces. "Drive me crazy in a car? I asked.

"No!" from most of the children. Then Joel said, "Let's read the book and find out."

So I read the story. At the end, after some talk of what happened in the story I said, "What do you think 'you'll drive me wild' means? Joel stated, "You'll be angry." The children agreed with this.

While reading the book I came to the phrase, 'a terrible silence'. What could this mean? Patricia answered, "You be silent."

I continued, "Harriet is being silent. When we can't hear any noise or any sounds. Let's try making a silence.... Listen" We almost had a silence, but we could still hear Mrs T.'s footsteps.

Next day we were getting ready to listen to "Surprise Box News", a favourite time for the children. I said, "It's time for the surprise boxes but first you need to be ready to be good listeners. Tyler called out, "Yeah, we need a silence, don't we?"

* Fox, M. (2000) Harriet, you'll drive me wild. Sydney: Hodder Headlines

"Like in the story about Harriet? I asked.

"Yeah!" said Tyler.

Carol uses two differing strategies in the story above to tease out the meaning of unfamiliar phrases and so help children to learn new vocabulary, new ways of saying things. At first she allows individuals in the group to contribute to the discussion with ideas while she restates or challenges what is said without giving further explanation to the children. She acts on Joel's call to "read the story and find out" that allows the children to come to their own understanding from the context of the text. However, her strategy changes when she asks what 'a terrible silence' could mean and is met with a minimal response from the children. She decides to give them an explanation and immediately reinforces it with a sensory experience that supports the children's conceptualisation of meaning. In her ability to be flexible she demonstrates how she changes her strategies to meet the perceived needs of the group.

In the survey all but Julie rated whole group activities highly as a time for language learning. Joy stated, "It's times like story-time and mat-time you are really modelling how you want them to do [and say] things." 'Teacher talk' as a strategy for giving information, and group discussion that Leah stated "allows children to bounce off each other" were in evidence in mat sessions recorded in both Joy and Leah's Kindergartens while in Denise's mat session there was time for all children to handle and talk freely about a pet bantam hen that demonstrated her strategy of using shared experience to stimulate talk.

Leah shared a story from a whole group discussion at mat-time, The tea party demonstrating how she used it to introduce new equipment and ideas in a teacher-led discussion.

The Tea Party

My sister, a Pre-Primary teacher, was telling me about a session she had with her children when she asked them to name anyone they wanted to read their stories in class. Imagine, anyone. I ran with this idea and next day introduced a new tea-set to the children. I showed them how to match the

pieces. Then I asked them who they might invite to morning tea – anyone. We had lots of names including parents, siblings, Santa, the Tooth Fairy, the Queen, etc. We then had to decide how we would get an invitation to these people. We looked at asking them, phoning, sending a letter, emailing or faxing.

Through this story Leah demonstrated how she aims to create real purposes for using and practising language in developing early literacy. Leah saw discussion as a means of involving children as partners in the construction of their learning environment.

For Troy the use of mat-time created a dilemma. She commented, “The Nyungar language is formally taught to the children daily by a Nyungar teacher so my mat time with the children is taken up supporting her and helping the children learn the language of their culture.” Troy felt she was missing out on this whole group social learning time with the children. She resolved this by stepping back and rationalising that from a professional perspective it was her duty to support the school ethos and that this time was precious for building the community’s cultural identity. Personally she believed that to show respect and interest in the Nyungar language would benefit both the children and herself. After coming to this decision her strategy was to immerse herself in the session as a learner with the children. With the absence of mat-time, fruit time became her important group sharing time.

Strategies in small group activities

Under this heading I have grouped activities set up for children to participate in as small groups and small groups of children who come together for periods of informal play.

Fruit-time is sometimes a whole group sharing session that may offer an opportunity to ‘grab the teachable moment’ as illustrated in the introductory vignette, Yoghurts for fruit-time but more often was observed to be used to intentionally encourage social interaction among small groups of children. Carol demonstrated the significance of this for language learning when she told of Fruit-time talk recorded in

Chapter Five. On one visit to her Kindergarten I participated in another small group discussion at fruit time where the conversation began with something tangible and present, the fruit and cheese on the plate, but moved into an exploration of where cheese comes from. At the same time children seated with Carol took their conversation into the realms of imagination stimulated by a simple question, "Does cheese grow on trees [like apples]?" Small group discussion at the fruit table showed potential for a variety of language interactions.

Small informal groups create potential for opportunistic teaching. Groups of two or more children are visible both inside at table activities, as in Julie's story Building a ravine and outside at play. Joy described a play sequence that also demonstrated how she, as an observant teacher, intervenes to enrich the possibilities for learning: stepping into the play briefly to extend the opportunity for language use and then stepping back to allow the children to maintain control of their dramatic play. In this way children use play to practise language and behaviours modelled at home or Kindergarten.

The telephone

4/04/02: 2 children at play in the sandpit.

Many children were in the sandpit area which also includes the climbing equipment. Eric was underneath the equipment playing alone. He noticed a new piece of equipment -the speaker tube. He positioned his mouth close to it and started yelling, "Hello, hello, who is there?" Penny, who was above him on the fort, started yelling back without using the speaker, "Hello, hello, it's me!"

Eric kept yelling back into the speaker/phone, "Hello, hello, hello!" Penny had now seen the speaker/phone close to her and yelled back into it, "It's Penny!"

Both children had their mouths pressed to the speakers. I asked if they could hear the other through the speaker. Eric said, "No, I can just hear her." I asked how he could hear her better? He replied, "I can hear her."

Penny said, "I know," and put her ear to the speaker, then called Eric to talk into it. He looked at me and I asked him if he would like to ask Penny

anything. He yelled into the speaker/phone, "Penny, do you want to come over to my house and have morning tea?"

I pointed to my ear then to the speaker as he was still watching me and he put his ear to the speaker, then yelled, "You can talk now, I'm listening." She called back, "Yes, I'm coming."

She climbed down to where Eric was, stopped at the doorway and knocked. Eric said, "Come in. Would you like a cup of tea? She replied, "Yes, please." Eric hopped up and asked her to wait a minute. He went running off to get some toys which he filled with sand, then handed them to her saying, "Here's your tea. Would you like some cake too?"

Other children in the area were becoming interested in this game and Holly came to Eric's door, knocked, then yelled, "Eric, can I come in too?"

Eric: Yes.

Holly: Is it a birthday party?

Eric: Yes! Mine!

Holly: Then I'll bring a cake. She picked up a bucket of sand and took it into Eric's house.

Eric: Where are the candles?

Holly: (picking up small sticks or leaves to put on top) Lets put some on.

I had to stop watching then as another child needed help elsewhere.

This was a child-centred and initiated game. I intervened only to draw attention to the way one could listen while the other spoke into the 'phone'.

These children were intentional in their use of language and I was impressed with the way they carried out the game for quite a long time including others in it. They used good manners when speaking to each other, something we had been talking about inside at fruit time just before coming outside to play. I would have liked to stay and see what else was said and done. When I returned after helping another child, about six children were sitting in Eric's 'house'.

The story demonstrated my role as observer, intervening only to extend the play opportunity, then stepping back. I was able to model turn-taking in speaker and listener roles using this new piece of equipment, and used facial expression to affirm what they were doing.

In this play sequence, I observed children using play to practise adult roles and acceptable social courtesies, reinforcing and taking ownership of the language that had been taught at fruit time.

Where small groups of children come together in play or participate in a structured activity planned by the teacher opportunities arise for either intentional use of language or opportunistic teaching. Small groups provide the context for much valuable language experience.

In the stories of sandpit play the teacher is positioned as the participant observer who sometimes intervenes to extend the play before stepping back into the observer role. In other instances table activities were structured as vehicles for explicit language learning with teacher direction. Leah demonstrated teacher instructional talk in a sorting/classifying activity that required children to follow specific instructions, and use cognitive skills to find a solution to the problem inherent in the activity. Joy planned a craft activity (Easter baskets) as a vehicle for comprehension of mathematical concepts in the form of instructions.

One on one partnerships

The third scenario recorded in Leah's story of Angry Eyebrows (Chapter 5) shows a one on one partnership between teacher and child. In these cases there is a specific and deliberate focus on a specific form of language interaction, whether an extended question and answer discourse or recording a child's message in print. Recorded on tape, Denise was observed as she administered a language screening test to an individual child for assessment purposes. Although this was not a typical activity the children in her group were keen to have this period of personal attention and some requested a second turn. In fact it was more common to observe more complex or specific language interactions in one on one partnerships. Joy worked with individual children to make Easter baskets asking them to paste decorative material "on the edges" or "the top" of the box; Troy listened when Taleisha confided in her that "I like Danny" and heard new vocabulary being used by Jay when he referred to the "barnacles" he had drawn on a whale. Such partnerships were building blocks

for personal relationships and social confidence. Rosemary describes how personal conversations provide scope for meeting individual needs:

The Easter Card

Connor was dictating to me the language he wanted recorded in the Easter card he had made. As he watched me print he suddenly pointed to a letter M and said in an excited voice, "I have one of those on my computer and my Mum has one in her name." This led to lots of discussion about the letter names and sounds we had written. This activity gave the opportunity for purposeful writing that was also social. By taking it home and having it read by Mum or Dad the concept of print as a permanent message was reinforced.

Rosemary commented in interview that scaffolding more complex language in a variety of contexts was important: "Children learn language by using it and responding to it." She believed it was necessary to find a balance between whole group, small group and one on one partnerships in order to cater for the diversity of learning styles and the different language interaction each offered: "Some of the children actually learn more being an onlooker than they do working directly."

Who initiates the language event?

Either the teacher (sometimes another adult) or a child will initiate each language interaction and in so doing open a range of possible strategies for language development. The stories recorded in this study give some insight into what each teacher perceived as a significant strategy in her teaching practice. They are expanded by narratives constructed from interview data to build a detailed picture of language learning at Kindergarten.

Teacher-initiated events

Teachers were seen to initiate language events in subtle as well as overt ways. 'Teacher talk' can take a variety of forms. Rosemary shared her observation of Lachlan role-playing the teacher mimicking her language and mannerisms to control a Show and Tell session towards the latter part of the year. He was demonstrating his observation of repeated sessions that Rosemary had modelled, gradually

developing the description and questioning components of the routine, supporting the children towards confidence and scaffolding the language and behaviour of speaker and listener roles. Joy's story of The telephone shows children at play using social conventions previously discussed with the group by Joy. Denise initiated the dramatic play that followed her reading of The three little pigs but the story she recorded showed children taking ownership of that language in a dramatisation of their own. Troy commented on how her thematic work on the sea flowed into the children's sandpit play. All of these stories demonstrate how teachers are instrumental in constructing the environment for learning prior to children taking ownership and practising the language in their play.

More explicit was the extended question and answer discourse that Leah held with Jason as he drew his picture and explored the feel of words – “wiggly and wild hair”, “angry eyebrows”. It is not clear whether Jason chose to draw or whether Leah had requested him to do so but this pattern of questioning is a strategy used by Leah to guide and extend the children's thinking. Julie favours careful and specific questioning as a strategy to “elicit what the children know and extend their language use”. She stated, “extending experiences and encouraging problem-solving is an important strategy for developing the connected processes of thought and language.”

Shared experience may be in the form of a concrete or hands on activity planned by the teacher such as a visit to Kindy of a pet or an excursion to see boats as in Troy's case but it may also be a shared book reading and the associated discussion. It was generally agreed by all the teachers in the study group that it is often appropriate at Kindergarten to “just do it” as Denise stated and let the language follow the initial experience or simply flow through the activity. This did not imply a lack of intentionality but rather was a planned strategy that connected language to the children's experience.

The use of shared books was used as a strategy for developing vocabulary, increasing awareness of the patterns of language and building knowledge through teacher led discussion as we saw in Carol's story of 'a terrible silence'. In seeking to clarify the children's understanding and expand their vocabulary, Carol demonstrated the use of open-ended questioning, not providing an answer but taking heed of Joel's

suggestion to “read the book and find out”. In this way she used books to develop concepts and vocabulary.

Carol’s story of teacher-led discussion and Leah’s story of a discussion at mat-time about the new tea-set demonstrated teacher-directed strategies that encouraged children “to bounce off each other” in constructing their learning. In both these examples the teachers concerned stated that they were happy to change the direction of the discussion in response to the children’s interest.

A table activity is often valued for the language that accompanies it – either an explanation of the process as in Julie’s ravine story, the comprehension of specific instructions as in Leah’s sorting exercise or the opportunity for extended discourse of a more informal kind. As Denise commented, “sitting beside a child working with playdough can stimulate extended language interactions on a range of subjects!”

Despite the range of teacher-initiated strategies illustrated by the stories or recorded on video, the teachers were more likely to record those showing children in play when they held an observer role. How does the teacher use the informality of child-initiated play as a strategy for language learning and development?

Child-initiated events

Three strategies were applied by the teachers to capitalise on the potential for language development in play. The first of these was to observe but stand back, listen but not intervene. In this way Denise was able to reflect on the interaction among the players of The three little pigs, and note the roles and language used by each. Carol listened without the need to intervene to the fruit-time talk of a group of her children. Rosemary was able to stand back and observe the results of her modelling in Show and Tell. This non-interventionist style was more often observed outside where the teachers were conscious of their supervisory role and the need to keep everyone in view. In this position the evidence suggested that teachers maintained an observer/listener role while remaining accessible to all the children.

The second strategy showed the teacher as a participant in the play. All the teachers in this study rated this opportunistic strategy to “grab the teachable moment” very

highly and all were seen to exercise some degree of intervention in order to “extend the language” or “guide the thinking process.” Examples of this strategy are recorded in stories of play in the sandpit, with blocks and trains and in drawing. The stories were supported by the video-taped recordings showing Rosemary engaged in question and answer discourse in the sandpit and Julie discussing the length of the threaded cotton-reels one child showed her. Professional insight based on personal experience appears to be the principal determinant in teachers' decision-making about when to intervene and when to step back.

In a third response to child-initiated activity teachers may step in to document the child's work to create a permanent record. Documentation is a strategy less obviously used by the teachers in this group though all their centres showed evidence of children's scribed stories and all were conscious of the need to build portfolios of the children's work for parent reporting and accountability procedures. Julie rated documentation very highly as a means of involving the child in reflective thinking about his/her learning. With her stated fascination of the metacognitive aspects of language, Julie tried to help each child find the language to explain the significance of their projects and “document the process”– whether a play sequence as described in Building a ravine or a box construction of a rocket that was video-taped during one session. In this situation the position of child and teacher are reversed. The child initiated the activity which the teacher followed up to develop its potential for language use. Julie finds she becomes the learner when she uses this inquiry method to support the child's thinking and explanation.

There are other times too when the child initiates a language interaction with the teacher and again, the teacher's insight heightens her awareness of the significance of the event and consequently influences her response. Rosemary recorded this clearly when Clayton sought her approval:

Big Bouncing

Clayton came racing up to me and said, “I did big bouncing and nobody watched me – how good I am.” Clayton is a quiet child who rarely initiates interaction with others. In this case he used language to satisfy an emotional need. I asked Clayton, “Would you like me to watch you?” No verbal

response but he smiled and raced back to bounce again. His confidence to approach others has been reinforced.

Such interactions require that the teacher is available and accessible so taking a central position in the play area is not only a supervisory strategy but also creates the opportunity for children to initiate significant confidence building interaction.

Giving children time and space to explore language of social communication, to explore new vocabulary, to re-visit earlier experiences was identified by all the teachers as a necessary strategy if children were to develop their language competency in the social context of Kindergarten. Carol stated “they need time to practise” and also reflected the thoughts of Troy, Leah, Denise, Julie and Joy that for all the intensity of learning children should “enjoy and have fun” and that as teachers “we should never lose the magic” of young children learning about their world and the empowerment that language brings.

Implicit in these comments are glimpses of the philosophical beliefs underlying the teachers’ choice of strategies. The participant teachers’ beliefs relevant to this study will be my concern as I continue with an interpretation of data in the following chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LOOKING INTO THE LANDSCAPE: TEACHERS' BELIEFS

To this point I have sought to portray what some aspects of language learning look like in the seven Kindergartens of the study and to listen to the teachers' interpretation of how the activities provide a pathway to support language development. The next question is, "Why do the teachers select certain strategies to support language learning?" The stories told by teachers in this group revealed how their personal beliefs drove their practice. The conversational form of the interviews, linked as it was to the video-taped recordings, gave teachers an opportunity to reflect on their actions and articulate their reasons for their actions. In this chapter I probe the data more deeply to interpret the teachers' beliefs that add further insight into the meaning of their decisions.

Child ownership of language

The first and most obvious characteristic inherent in all the stories was the teachers' belief that children should take ownership of their language development. I earlier explained how this term was frequently used by teachers in the group when referring to children taking charge of their choice of words and phrases. It was used in relation to children using approximations of adult speech as they practised using language in play. It was used when teachers observed children initiating conversation or asking questions requiring a level of social confidence. There was laughter, delight, pleasure and excitement expressed in the stories told of children using language in a variety of situations. "Jason laughs and I laugh with him," writes Leah while Denise reflects, "It was wonderful to see her and hear the language ...".

These are women who believe that children at Kindergarten should "play and have fun". Play was viewed as an important vehicle for language learning through which children take 'ownership' of their language. Troy observed, "they express all sorts of things they know during play and they own the language." Similarly Joy stated, "children use play to take ownership of language," a view that was central to their philosophy that play was an important vehicle for learning and developing mastery of language.

Integrated learning, experiential knowledge

Language could not easily be separated from other learning areas but, as Joy stated, was “right through everything” in a curriculum based on a belief in an integrated approach to education of the whole child. All agreed that Kindergarten was a place to build experiential knowledge that would give meaning to language. Rosemary spoke of providing “a rich and varied body of experience” and Julie wrote: “[t]he story demonstrates my belief that extending experiences and encouraging problem solving is an important strategy for developing the connected processes of thought and language.”

In Troy’s story we see her watching and listening to a group of children who are exploring concepts, vocabulary and social conventions in their play. Troy recalled her own childhood and how she believed that children who had a broad range of experiences seemed to be more successful at school. For this reason she took her children on an excursion, an activity that possibly contributed to the complex play sequence of which she wrote. She believed it was important to offer a variety of experiences that would give the children greater knowledge of the world. She also commented that she wanted them to understand that learning was all around them, both in and out of school.

Carol took this belief in an experiential base for learning one step further by highlighting the social aspect of shared experience when she stated, “Language is built on social experience.” In fact all teachers demonstrated through their stories and in interview that language and social learning were inseparable at Kindergarten. Every story recorded language occurring in social partnerships either between children or teacher and child/ren. For children to verbalise their feelings, needs and ideas was to find empowerment in social situations that related to developing independence. It indicated linguistic competence and social confidence. Troy observed how children in play were “learning from each other”; Joy was pleased to hear children practising social courtesies in their play; Leah and Jason laughed together about his drawing; Julie noticed that “getting Keaton to explain what he was doing allowed Ross to hear and motivated him to join in verbalising the problem solving.”

Partnerships for socially constructed learning

For these teachers a social interactionist philosophy was at the core of their beliefs about language learning. All acknowledged a joint partnership between teacher and children in constructing the curriculum. By this they meant that the children take new learning from an activity according to their individual levels of development, cultural experience and background knowledge. New learning may or may not be what was anticipated or planned by the teacher for that activity, but rather what the child makes of it. In this way each child is pro-active in building his/her own curriculum.

Alongside this is a belief that each child's learning is influenced by his/her developmental clock. Leah told us in her profile how difficult and frustrating her first years of teaching became when the developmental philosophy that was her base was questioned. Leah now teaches a mixed-age group of pre-schoolers and accepts differences in maturity between her "Joeys" and "Kangaroos", reflected in the different expectations she holds for each group. At the commencement of the school year she "had the 'Kangaroos' do everything first because they would role model ... and the 'Joeys' would follow." She has found "the younger ones are a bit slower with their thought processes " but recognises that "[the 'Kangaroos'] have already had a year's worth of me guiding this type of thinking." However, the groups are not clearly defined but show a blurring of capabilities that can be attributed to personal development and/or social experience, not age alone. Leah expects to teach her pre-schoolers for a two-year period and believes the relationships built in their "Joey" year will provide the foundation for confidence and joy in learning when those children become her "Kangaroos".

Rosemary told how she had found it necessary to adjust the level of language activities and expectations when working with Kindergarten groups. I video-taped a 'Show and Tell' session early in the year where Rosemary showed very clearly how much support she gave children by allowing them to sit on her knee for security, while she modelled the language for description and questioning. Her story from later in the (previous) year illustrated the independence and social confidence of children nurtured under this philosophy. Rosemary attached great importance to her responsibility for building the learning environment of the Kindergarten, having had her personal belief strengthened by the Reggio Emilia concept of the environment as

teacher. Joy expressed a similar conviction that the teacher was responsible for the structure and organisation of the Kindergarten environment while maintaining that within this the children were pro-active in shaping their learning.

A secure environment

Building an environment of security was believed to be an important pre-requisite for children learning to be competent and confident language users. Data for this study were collected during first term and each teacher commented on the need to establish routines and social behaviours and the language for these “at this time of the year”. In reflecting on the term’s work Troy stated how “her time building relationships had begun to pay off” when children began to initiate conversation with her. Earlier she had written:

When the [children] began their first school experience I felt a little overawed. Somehow I had to gain their trust and have them like Kindergarten enough to attend regularly. The tone of my voice, the choice of my words had to communicate security and kindness. So for the first couple of weeks the language I heard was mostly my own – directing, comforting, reassuring language.

She stated her belief that learning will occur in a climate of security and trust or as Denise said, “children learn in a safe, secure and happy environment.” It would seem that security is considered a pre-requisite if new language is to develop.

Acceptance of diversity

There was a common statement of a belief in the acceptance of diversity. Acceptance implies respect for the cultural identity and home language of the children as well as the diversity of learning styles. For Troy it was a priority to support the ethos of the school by helping to re-affirm confidence in the Nyungar culture. By taking on the role of learner, showing interest in the Nyungar language sessions and working to build partnerships with children and their parents she actively demonstrated her belief. She also highlighted the dilemma faced by other Kindergarten teachers in accepting home language but modelling school language. She reflected on her first weeks in the Kindergarten:

Often they communicated by nodding their heads, tugging my clothes or calling, “oy”. I had to get used to their home language, like using the word

“ana” at the end of a sentence as a question or exclamation: “We’re gonna have fruit time ana?” The children also called me and other women “aun’y”. I was faced with the dilemma of correcting their pronunciation ... because this is school and I’m a professional teacher and they are here to learn proper English – or – to recognise “aun’y” as valid language because they’re accepting me into their world and I’m becoming the student learning their culture through their language. I responded, “That’s your aun’y ...ana?”

Recognition of diversity demands that teachers respond by providing diversity in learning activities. Denise referred to her personal experience as a mother in confirming her belief in the very real differences between children and the need to act to cater for the range of learning styles among children. Rosemary and Troy also acknowledged the influence of personal parenting experience on their teaching. This belief in diversity goes hand in hand with the understanding expressed by Joy that “each child is worthy of equal opportunity”. What the opportunity refers to and how this is translated into practice is not so clear. However, the teachers’ stories are dotted with words like “watching”, “asked”, “talked”, “listened” “read” that give evidence of their intention to know, understand and respond to each child’s needs by offering a range of activities, and being flexible in the strategies they use.

The dilemma of intervention

Intervention is seen by Denise, Joy and Rosemary as part of their responsibility to give a child “equal opportunity” to develop language competency. Leah stated that she would not hesitate to “correct” a child’s speech if it made for improved communication. Denise described how personal experience as a parent had convinced her of the benefits of early intervention where speech and language therapy was considered appropriate and her efforts to work in collaboration with Speech and Language Pathologists. For Julie it was more problematic. With her strong socio-cultural perspective and belief in ‘the rich child’ of the Reggio Emilia approach she asked how she could justify intervention. “Do I bite my tongue or act to correct a child’s speech?” Julie believed it was sometimes necessary to intervene in order to improve language competency. She reflected on her responsibility to maximise each child’s potential, recognising the power of language in society. All believed that the modelling they gave for language was of the highest importance.

As Joy stated, “the children’s language will reflect the adult model” as it was demonstrated in her story of The telephone (in Chapter Six). Troy, however, suggested that sometimes “we adults just have to be patient and wait to see the fruits of our effort.”

A community of learners

Julie clearly articulated her belief in the Kindergarten as a “functioning community of learners” and this was strongly reflected in her approach to co-operative and collaborative efforts between children from the very beginning of the year as recorded in the story of Building a ravine recorded in Chapter Five. Partnerships were integral to the social learning of language across all Kindergartens with all teachers recognising the value of adults other than the teacher as learning partners for the children in addition to partnerships between children. Learning language in the social context of the Kindergarten presented changing social groupings and interactive partnerships with varying opportunities for developing and using purposeful oral language.

Although Leah shared one story of frustration, there was general agreement that an experienced Assistant was valuable in an interactive role with the children. As Julie said, “The hardest bit is trying to see [and talk to] everyone” so collaboration between adults in the setting was an advantage. Parents were not shown in an active role in any stories but were referred to by all teachers during the interviews. As reading partners, excursion assistants and helpers with activities it would seem that parents are welcome at Kindergarten although Julie spoke more strongly than most of her “willingness to be assertive in encouraging parent involvement in building learning partnerships with children” that she considered beneficial to language development.

Summary

Teachers did not find it easy to articulate their beliefs about children learning language. I would suggest that the participant teachers viewed beliefs about children learning language as interconnected with more general philosophies about holistic development and learning in developmentally appropriate practice. Teachers shared a common belief that children should take ownership of their language in an integrated

curriculum that saw language flowing through all learning. There was a conviction that experiential knowledge was an essential base for the conceptualisation of meaning of language and that social partnerships in a secure environment were foundational to the learning of language. There was a belief expressed that developmental maturity influenced the capability of individual children's learning as well as a stated acceptance of diversity reflecting both developmental maturity and cultural experience.

Beliefs about language learning were demonstrated in a practical way through the teachers' stories where we saw how the teachers modelled language, guided children's thinking by questioning, gave children time to use language in play and responded to children who initiated language interactions with them. These practices indicated that these teachers believed that children will develop language skill given:

- appropriate modelling,
- time and space to practise,
- the functional need to use language,
- and acknowledgment/encouragement for their efforts.

Troy perhaps came closest to describing the complexities of social interaction, experience, partnerships and play that underpin teaching and learning language at Kindergarten when she wrote:

Sometimes we are the book. We tell the story, model the language, introduce new ideas. Their play is like a page in the story and when we comment or question or exclaim in response we are reading out the invisible print of their story. Sometimes we are the story and they in turn read us out loud. Exciting stuff.

The two previous chapters and this one have sought to address the three research questions concerning the what, how and why of language learning in the seven Kindergartens of this study from the perspective of their teachers. In the discussion that follows in Chapter 8 I will place this descriptive and interpretive account alongside literature relevant to 3 to 5-year-old children learning language in pre-school settings. My intention is to discover how the evidence of this study is

positioned in the wider research picture before synthesizing the findings in response to the over-arching question, 'How do Kindergarten teachers perceive their practices to support children's language learning?'

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN APPRAISAL OF THE LANDSCAPE: LINKING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Evaluation is the third dimension of educational criticism described by Eisner (1991) as an appraisal of educational value. The analyses of the stories and supporting interview data that make up this narrative study of teachers' practice together build a composite picture of language learning opportunities in the Kindergarten environment as perceived by the teachers. As curriculum agents (Clandinin & Connolly, 1988) and learning partners (Berk & Winsler, 1995) teachers are influential in the lives of children. Personal beliefs impact on the choice of strategies used to support language learning. Together beliefs and strategies help shape teachers' practice. Here I intend to discuss the educational value of the teachers' strategies in relation to research literature. I will do this by first locating the study group of teachers within the theory and follow with an appraisal of their strategies in practice.

Language – learning and development

Piaget and Vygotsky are prominent psychologists who have helped shape current understanding of how young children learn. Whilst not mutually exclusive, their theories offer opposing views of the relationship between development and learning. Both saw children as active in constructing their own knowledge. Whereas Piaget viewed development as leading learning as children engaged independently with an objective world, Vygotsky saw learning leading development in a socially constructed world (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Piagetian theory directed early childhood educators to construct environments which children explored as they moved through developmental stages of emergent learning. Language was a secondary outgrowth of sensori-motor development as the child moved from ego-centricity towards adulthood (Berk & Winsler, 1995). From a Vygotskian perspective, language was pivotal to cognitive development, always embedded in a socio-cultural context (Vygotsky, 1986; Berk & Winsler, 1995) in which teachers were required to take a pro-active role in partnering children's learning.

The relevance of these theories to this study lies in their influence on teachers' personal practical theories (Ross, Cornett & McCutcheon, 1992). Starting from a

developmental orientation the teacher participants showed how personal and professional experience had moved them along a continuum towards the socio-cultural view. There was general recognition amongst these teachers that the children's immaturity required an adjustment in the level of language used with more modelling for Kindergarten children who were not as adept in their language use as older pre-schoolers. As Julie stated, "They just don't have the words." In Leah's case it was clear that she held different expectations for her "Joeys" and "Kangaroos". How much development was related to a 'biological clock' and how much could be attributed to social experience was blurred.

Teachers' practice indicated an acceptance of the developmental notion of children having time to play and explore the environment at their own level and in their own time while the teacher took an observer or supervisory role and held responsibility for the structure of the environment and the resources available for children's use. Julie, however, explicitly stated that her role as observer was an active one: "to know every child's individual level in order to extend [his] knowledge." Others also spoke of intervention to "guide the thinking process", or "extend the thinking" so it would appear that the intention was to be active in a participant observer role.

All teachers held a strong belief in the need to build experiential knowledge to give meaning to language, to conceptualise the meaning of words. All were convinced that social interaction was essential for language development and believed they had a pro-active role as a learning partner with the children. This Vygotskian influence was apparent in the importance attached to building relationships and the value given to imaginative role-play. However, in practice it was often difficult to find time to spend with every child in order to translate the theory into practice. Constraints of supervision, as expressed by Carol, or the interruptions described in the data from Joy and Leah that demand teachers' attention during the course of a session interfere with this intention.

The Reggio Emilia approach

Four of the seven teachers expressed interest in the Reggio Emilia approach to early education although only Julie had fully embraced this in her practice and was consciously constructing an environment to support the highly collaborative

problem-solving characteristics of the Reggio Emilia model described by Edwards, Gandini and Forman (1993). Others were at an exploratory stage investigating the possibilities of this approach in the local context.

It may be useful to briefly consider the example of 'best practice' in a cultural context that is demonstrated by the Reggio Emilia approach to early years education. Described by Edwards, et al. (1993), it is a pedagogy developing since post-war years in the municipality of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy. Evolving from the long tradition of early childhood educators in Italy including Pestalozzi and Montessori and influenced by the experiential philosophy of Dewey, it has been built on Vygotskian socio-cultural principles and reflects the priority given to the education of young children by the community. Classrooms in Reggio Emilia schools are organised to support a highly collaborative problem-solving approach to learning with the emphasis on exploring the many ways or 'languages' of self-expression. Teachers work in pairs and often follow a class through two or three years building close relationships with the children. In addition, specialist teachers foster artistic projects. Documentation and reflection are recognised as important components of effective practice and time allocated for these. A co-ordinator, the *pedagogista*, facilitates collaborative planning by all teachers. In this approach strong lines of communication between school, home and community support the children's learning.

It is a dynamic model of education that has received much attention world-wide (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999) and is influencing thinking locally. Julie has been especially influenced by the recognition given by the Reggio Emilia concept of the 'rich' or competent child as a co-constructor of knowledge and identity in relationships with other children and adults. Rosemary too, commented on her heightened awareness of the environment as the third teacher (alongside the two co-teachers) that has come from her reading about the Reggio Emilia approach.

Certainly the data supplies some evidence of the teachers' willingness to work with an emergent curriculum and an awareness of the concept of the multiple 'languages' of children's self-expression. In practice the video-tapes showed that this level of socio-cultural learning was more likely to happen in an opportunistic than in a

systematic way. I would suggest that most teachers felt more comfortable using themes of their own choice at least to “get the ball rolling”.

The data show teachers who have moved from a Piagetian developmental base but who are still searching for ways to implement socio-cultural beliefs in practice. In an effort to move beyond developmentalism Burns (1999) described a dynamic learning process that brings biological development and socio-cultural experience together. Burns referred to the developmental, cultural and knowledge dimensions of learning and how these were reflected in the overarching outcomes of the Curriculum Framework (Curriculum Council, 1998). Given this interpretation of developmentally appropriate practice that encompasses the NAEYC (1996) position statement (cited in Cuthill, Reid & Hill, 1998) the teachers could all be seen to be adapting to changing pedagogical theories as they grew in experience. Central to their beliefs was a common view of language learning embedded in social interaction. There was an assumption that their teaching was underpinned by developmentally appropriate practice in which play had a central role. Beyond that it was difficult for them to articulate their philosophies and only Julie was explicit in stating her social constructivist position: “Children at Kindergarten learn in partnership with other children and adults, always in a social relationship.”

Language acquisition

There has been no general consensus in theoretical accounts of language acquisition. The social interactionist school acknowledged biological contributions by way of a pre-disposition to language learning but Chomsky proposed that children are born with a Language Acquisition Device that is innate (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991; Bruner, 1983). Following the Vygotskian theory that all language is social in origin, Bruner (1983, p. 18) saw the child as a participant in the real world where functionalism is a driving force for developing language. He recognised that mastery of language is achieved by possessing a set of language learning capacities, such as Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD), but that this can only function with social support in a transactional format, a ‘Language Acquisition Support System’ (LASS). The construction of language through interaction between LAD and LASS enables the child to enter the linguistic community and the culture to which the

language gives access. "Language cannot be understood save in its cultural setting" (Bruner, 1983, p. 134).

Troy described the lack of verbal communication of her children on entry to Kindergarten and how they used actions rather than words to have their needs met: "When the children spoke to me I realised some of them were still learning how to talk.... When they spoke I had to interpret what they were trying to communicate." She was unsure whether this was due to cultural or developmental factors. Either way the functionalism of which Bruner speaks is demonstrated through her experience, the Kindergarten context making new demands for children to be understood by people outside their family group.

Language for social communication is the first priority when children enter the Kindergarten. A recurring theme in the stories shared by teachers in this study is of children finding words for self-expression. At the end of Term 1 teachers recounted the highlights of these early weeks of schooling. These included children beginning to initiate conversation, to learn and use names of other children, to be confident enough to ask for help or participate in group activities, all social skills that were important for social access to education in school. As the data for this study were collected during the first term of the school year there was perhaps greater emphasis on this aspect of language use than if it were to have occurred later in the year although it is consistent with the findings of Smith (2001) that American pre-school teachers in the home-school study gave social aspects of pre-school their highest priority. In socially constructed learning there is first the need to make social connections.

Teachers accepted the diversity of language and levels of language competency that the children showed on entry. Whether or not their practice reflected action to truly work with diversity was not so apparent. Only in Troy's situation was cultural identity made explicit in the school. Troy drew on her background experience to address issues concerning the children's exposure to multiple languages of home, school and Nyungar culture. In other cases the assumption of school language being the acceptable model indicated an expectation that all children would strive towards these norms. This was seen to be the case when Joy described Show and Tell: "Even

if they get restless they are learning what's expected" and fruit-time: "I guess I really do intervene with good manners because I want them to be aware that's what the expectation is."

There is a direct relationship here to Bourdieu's view of language. Grenfell (1998, p. 78) quotes Bourdieu in describing a word as "a socio-cultural time capsule packed with socially derived meaning". For Bourdieu, language is not only constructed in social discourse, as in Vygotskian theory, it is also structuring in building social relations of class and power (Grenfell & James, 1998). Bourdieu attached considerable importance to the value of language as symbolic capital where "linguistic relations are always relations of symbolic power" (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 73). Leah spoke of empowerment in relation to children's ownership of language and Julie stated her belief that "language is power". Generally there was an assumption that the dominant discourse of school was the correct model for children at Kindergarten. When Joy stated, "children's language will reflect the adult model" she was voicing her responsibility to demonstrate "school" language for the children just as Troy reflected on her dilemma: "this is school ... and I'm here to teach them proper English or ...". The Kindergarten teacher works to help children acquire the *habitus* necessary for success in the school community. In teaching children how to 'do school' these teachers believe they are building the linguistic capital of children and consequently giving them greater access to formal schooling.

Language development and early intervention

The general access young children now have to schooling at Kindergarten does create a window of opportunity for early intervention and teachers voiced a responsibility to address this issue. The concept of intervention however has various interpretations that sometimes create dilemmas for teachers. A problem arises when intervention for speech and language disability/delay as understood by the deficit model is set against the competent child of the socio-cultural perspective.

Here we have two aspects of intervention – to correct or improve a child's speech/language against age norms that is the model used by speech pathologists, or intervention to support a child's language development through social interaction in a school context. In theory it may be relatively simple to separate the two but in

practice teachers have the authority and the responsibility to make some difficult decisions. Children enter Kindergarten with a wide range of language experience and competency as the data has shown. Teachers agree to accept diversity “to work with what we have” within the parameters of the Kindergarten environment but they do not necessarily have the specific training to make judgments about whether or not a child needs therapy or whether the stimulation of the Kindergarten language curriculum will be sufficient to lead him/her forward. It can be a time for rapid language acquisition and the child may make sudden and dramatic progress in a language-rich environment. Yet if the opportunity is missed at the critical time for language development it may be harder for that child to later overcome problems. Dr Diane Paul-Brown, Director of clinical issues in speech-language pathology for the American Speech Language – Hearing Association stated “ We now know the earlier the intervention the better the brain can reorganize” (cited in Epstein, 1999). It is better to act early than not to act at all.

The teachers in this study showed a range of responses that reflected personal beliefs. Denise acted with a feeling of “parental responsibility” to work collaboratively with local Speech Pathologists to take action, screening all children and making referrals early in the year if it was indicated. Leah also acted without hesitation to intervene. Rosemary spoke of the difficulty of sometimes convincing parents that their children would benefit from such intervention, while Julie observed that children whose speech was not clear were less socially competent and it was therefore her responsibility to take action to improve their levels of language competency.

Recent brain research indicates early intervention can be effective and long-lasting but timing is critical (Shore, 1997). The critical period for language acquisition occurs in the first five years making the Kindergarten year a crucial time for children in the transition between home and school. Dickinson and McCabe (1991) speak of oral language as one strand in a literacy continuum that begins at birth and continues to adulthood. In this development, phonology, semantics, syntax and discourse are woven together in speaking and listening, reading and writing.

Phonological development proceeds from perception, through production to processing of the sounds of speech. The production of adult speech sounds is largely

complete by age four (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991). Articulation is related to motor development but only where a child neither perceives nor produces a sound is there likely to be a long term processing problem. However, unintelligible speech may create problems for social behaviour. Hearing impairment caused by conditions such as Conductive Hearing Loss, sometimes referred to as 'glue ear', interferes with language development (Education Department of WA, 1998). Therefore, where intervention is necessary it is considered that the earlier this can be addressed the better for the child (Rice & Wilcox, 1995; Paul-Brown, cited in Epstein, 1999). This suggests that teachers are right to intervene during the Kindergarten year.

Dickinson and McCabe (1991) speak of a vocabulary explosion between two and five years of age with individual differences both in rate and type of vocabulary. Children may first develop either a referential vocabulary of labels for objects, people or actions, or an expressive language of imitative phrases and talk of personal and social issues. Both strategies can be thought of as part of a continuum that sees qualitative and quantitative expansion in the pre-school years. Kindergarten is prime time for the absorption of new vocabulary and the conceptualisation of meaning in the way demonstrated by Carol in her discussion around the text of a book in order to expand the vocabulary and semantic knowledge of children.

Vygotsky (1986) was particularly concerned with the development of concepts using words as a verbal plane. Words are attributed meaning but only much later does the child reach the level of conceptualisation characteristic of fully developed thought. Words comprise a symbolic system of meaning, which act to transfer meaning from the social plane to inner psychological thought. This use of words as 'tools of the mind' is foundational to Vygotskian theory. It underlies the importance of social interaction and play to a child's learning. Given opportunities at Kindergarten to hear, practise and assign meaning to words and experience their significance in social contexts, the child develops concepts and understandings beyond their primary functional use. The belief of these teachers in building experiential knowledge whether through the visit of a pet, making an Easter basket or discovering what a 'terrible silence' feels like; of encouraging imaginative play as a time for children to practise new language is viewed as an essential part of the learning process.

Dickinson and McCabe (1991) speak of the process of language development as being like a braid, the multiple strands interwoven simultaneously, rather than a sequential layering of skills. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) make clear, as do Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2000) that language and literacy are on a continuum beginning at birth and proceeding concurrently as the child grows and broadens his/her experience. Children at Kindergarten are becoming literate, their competency dependent on a range of critical connections made in school and at home. Teachers in this study were not overtly concerned with literacy in itself, but rather sought "to address the present [language] needs of the child" believing that this was the best way to build a foundation for the future.

Theirs was a holistic view of language driven by a common pedagogical belief in the balanced growth of the whole child in an integrated learning environment. Smith states:

The beliefs that pre-school teachers hold about young children, their development and appropriate pedagogy are complex and intertwined. They are likely to result from teachers' own personal and educational histories, their past and current experiences with children and the contexts within which they work.

(Smith, 2001, p. 155).

This would certainly hold true for this group of teachers all of whom recognised the influence of their personal and professional experience on their current practice, especially the "professional insight" which determined much of their on-the-spot decision-making.

Strategies for learning oral language

Having examined the theoretical beliefs that informed the practice of the study group of teachers I will turn now to look more closely at the strategies used to facilitate language learning in these Kindergartens. It is important to clarify the scope of oral language in early years' programmes.

The close links between language and literacy are the subject of much research. Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland and Reid (1998) studied the early literacy experiences of

children across a range of settings in Australia in the transition from home to school. Dickinson and Tabors (2001) report on a detailed American study that also followed children's language for literacy from home to the early years of school. Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2000) highlighted the socio-cultural context of literacy practices in the early years. Despite the pre-eminence of literacy in education, it is but one of several aspects of language purpose and function that can be identified in oral language. First steps oral language resource book (Education Dept of WA, 1997) categorises three broad classifications of oral language: social interaction, literacy and thinking. This book is widely available throughout West Australian schools and the perceptions of the Kindergarten teachers in this study reflected this wider understanding of oral language while recognising the interconnectedness of the three. The priority for socialisation at Kindergarten has already been discussed. As I evaluate the strategies demonstrated through the data it will be seen that all three of the above classifications are in fact addressed to a greater or lesser degree depending on the preferred teaching strategies of the teachers.

There is recognisable similarity in the organization of the American pre-schools of the Dickinson and Tabors study described by Smith (2001) and in the local situation where each session was divided into teacher-led routine or repetitive events such as mat-time (circle time,) story-time, fruit-time (meal-time) and blocks of child-initiated free play or choice of activities. Social contexts for language use were found in whole group, small group or individual partnerships.

Dickinson and Tabors (2001) describe with qualitative and quantitative detail the connections between early language and literacy in home and pre-school language practices. Their observations and analyses document specific language interactions during large group activities and free play, meal-time and book-reading. These same language events feature in the stories told by the teachers in this study highlighting the cross-cultural recognition of the significance of these activities to language development. In order to have a basis for comparison I will use these events to evaluate teaching strategies in practice.

Large-group activity – mat or circle time

A daily mat session or circle time is an important context for social interaction that brings the whole group together. Much can occur at mat-time: songs, rhymes and games, Show and Tell, thematic discussions and book reading in addition to housekeeping activities like checking the roll. All of these were either recorded in the teachers' stories or on video-tape during the course of data collection. What is apparent is that mat-time is teacher-directed with participation encouraged from all members of the group according to certain rules or social conventions. It would seem also to be the principal time for 'teacher talk' to the whole group. When one person speaks and others listen it is most likely to be the teachers' voice that is heard. When watching the video-taped recordings teachers frequently commented on how much more talking they actually did than they realized.

Dickinson (2001) examined large group time as a conversational setting supporting language and literacy development. He noted that there has been little research on this aspect of children's language experience but that a study in Bermuda indicated that language heard in this context may have beneficial effects on children's language growth. Rosemary noted that it was a time for children "to bounce off each other" in discussion and Leah explained how even calling the roll could initiate discussion about names and relationships.

Dickinson (2001) found that effective large-group times include focused and purposeful conversations. The mat sessions that I observed in fact kept conversation to a minimum and focused on ritualistic routines, songs/games/dramatisation, Show and Tell, teacher explanation of activities for the day and sometimes included book reading. It must be considered again that these were early school days for the children and the teachers' focus was on establishing routines. As Denise said she found it preferable to "just do it" and let the talk flow through activities that followed.

"In addition to enriching the language-learning opportunities of group times with their own words, skilled teachers also could support children's language by providing room for children's voices" (Dickinson, 2001, p. 248). The high profile given to Show and Tell indicated the value placed on this activity for specific social

and language skills that allow the child's voice to be heard. It gave a focus for discussion on something of interest in the child's world. This segment had significance for the child's developing social confidence as well as language skills for speaking and listening, notably social conventions, description and question and answer techniques. In both Rosemary and Joy's video-taped Show and Tell segments the teacher's voice was still dominant but as Rosemary's story demonstrated this was part of the intentional scaffolding given to support the children towards independence; part of the construction of 'doing school', admirably demonstrated in the story Rosemary shared.

It must be remembered that coming together in a large group for instructional purposes was a new social experience for many children. The familiarity of teacher-led routines helped build the secure environment of which Rosemary spoke. While the large group can be intimidating for some it can also be a protective net in which children actively acquire receptive language as a necessary pre-cursor to expressive speech. The passive child who is attentive is also participating.

However, it can be fraught with frustration for some children who find it difficult to sit still and maintain attention in the group. 'Control talk' by the teacher can interrupt the connectedness of the session just as much as disruptive behaviour by children. The teacher 'reads' the group and is flexible in response to their attention span. It is not the length but the quality of language interaction that is important. Effective teachers:

- hold the attention of the group.
- avoid long stretches of talk extending the same topic.
- incorporate varied vocabulary and encourage children to use novel words.
- ensure that the talk is informative, challenges children to think and provided explanations of what they and the group are doing.

(Dickinson, 2001, p. 252)

In all the observed mat sessions these principles were being applied in various ways as teachers responded to the dynamics of each group. Leah involved a number of children in a discussion about names and relationships; Denise allowed time for all children to handle and talk about a visiting pet before moving on to a dramatised

story, followed quickly by an explanation of the activities for the day; Joy worked hard to hold the attention of individual children within the group when she introduced the theme by using a book. She had her Teacher Assistant sit with one child to help keep the child focussed. It was not easy to hold the attention of the group of 4-year-olds and talk to control behaviour sometimes interrupted the flow of the session. That the teachers in this study valued the time was highlighted by Troy whose mat-time was taken up as a Nyungar language session with Aunty Norma. In rationalising her feeling of deprivation she gave value to the cultural significance of the session and placed herself in it as a learner with the children.

Mat-time served one other purpose not identified by Dickinson (2001) in the American study. That is the role of rhymes, songs and language games for developing early phonological awareness. Rohl, (2000) explains the potential of everyday routines for systematic experiences to help children decode the sound structure of words. "It is important that these experiences are enjoyable, meaningful to the children, part of everyday routines and are targeted at children's levels of development" (Rohl, 2000, p. 80). Researchers disagree about the timing of the emergence of metalinguistic awareness but it would appear that it can be from the age of three, just as children enter Kindergarten. Lundberg (1991, p. 52) described a Danish programme training pre-literate children in phonological awareness that "demonstrated the critical importance of direct, explicit teaching" while Bradley and Bryant stated: "sensitivity to the sounds in words that children acquire before they go to school plays an important role in the way that they learn to read" (Bradley & Bryant, 1991, p. 44).

Mat-time offers an ideal opportunity for 'word play' but there was no evidence of explicit phonological awareness teaching in the local data. The songs and rhymes included in this whole group time were nonetheless one of the few ways this important aspect of language for literacy was seen to be addressed in the Kindergartens. This may well be attributed to the early stage of the year because Rosemary made a comment about rhyming games and both Leah and Denise referred to a language focus program using 'Grandma Puppet' that they incorporate into whole group sessions later in the year.

Meal-time or fruit-time – social conversation

In the local context fruit-time equated with the meal-time of the American study. It was another routine in the Kindergarten culture, one that made connections meal-time at home and with what was important in a child's life. Cote (2001, p. 205) referring to the Head Start program in the USA, states that the mandatory meal times in which teachers sit with children "reflects the fact that meals provide opportunities for conversation that teachers should use." There is little research on the benefits of this for language development and yet it is clear from the stories of teachers in this local study that the potential is there for a variety of language purposes.

Troy brought her whole group together at this time to compensate for the use of her mat-time as "Nyungar time". She felt that food was a great way of bringing the group together. Sitting with the children, it offered the opportunity for instructional talk and social conversation. It was a friendly, shared experience which clearly enhanced social and language skills simultaneously.

Fruit-time provided a meaningful context for the introduction of new vocabulary as with the word 'loquats', and in the realistic and imaginative conversations that took place in Carol's classroom. It was an appropriate setting for practising social courtesies. Sometimes the teacher spoke to the whole group, but more often conversation took place in small groups around tables. It was in this way that Carol listened to the children's word play as they invented their rule-based game concerning the use of gender pronouns.

Pre-school children are still in the process of oral mastery of the grammatical system of their language. They "demonstrate a capacity for rule learning that goes beyond rule construction before they comprehend them, and comprehend them before they produce them" (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991, p. 4). The children in Carol's fruit time language game illustrated their propensity for rule learning.

According to Cote (2001, p. 215) children whose teachers were seated at a table with a small group "engaged in significantly more nonpresent talk than did children whose teachers were circulating during mealtimes." Nonpresent talk referred to conversation about subjects beyond what was immediately in front of the children

and showed the greatest benefit to language for literacy. Fortunately for the teachers in this study, the Teacher Assistant and sometimes parent helpers shared this adult role creating the potential for useful conversational language with small groups of children. As Cote (2001, p. 221) suggests, “a lot more than eating may be happening during meal-times.”

Free play

Play is universally recognised as an important vehicle for learning. “Free play is the time when children flex their linguistic and conceptual muscles and contribute to each other’s development” (Dickinson, 2001, p. 253). The stories demonstrated that teachers gave children time to practise and take ownership of language during free play.

Hall & Robinson (2000) described the complexities of play and particularly linked socio-dramatic play to literacy. During play teachers became observers, listeners and inquirers taking their lead from the children, “grabbing the teachable moment” to extend the language opportunity but stepping back to leave the children in command. It was a time for opportunistic teaching that focused more on small group or individual partnerships.

Rivalland (2000) warned not to rely too heavily on informal opportunities for teacher intervention. She cited evidence in the Hill, Comber, Loudon, Rivalland & Reid (1998) study and supported by Walkerdine (1990) that suggested that children most likely to benefit from teaching interventions to extend play are those who are most able to demonstrate literacy competencies to attract attention and capitalise on the adult’s involvement. This may have contributed to Troy’s experience on her excursion when her children failed to respond to her intervention in sand-play. Teachers cannot just rely on using the ‘teachable moment’ but must also plan opportunities to ensure that all children have the chance to engage in a systematic way with language and literacy play that includes scaffolded support from the teacher or other adults in the setting.

The stories very clearly demonstrated how outside play in the sandpit, dramatisation of traditional stories, indoor play in the block corner and even role-playing the

teacher supported rich and varied language development. There was space for extended discourse with individual children while they played, the teacher sitting next to or beside the child; opportunity to guide the thinking process or hear explanations of their thinking as they solved problems in play; time for child initiated conversations with the teacher. Play was a vehicle for integrated learning across all learning areas. Troy commented, "in play language becomes complex and interesting. It's fun!"

Children often partner other children in play. In two situations the data showed older children leading the play of the younger partners. Leah's "Kangaroos" were seen to give the lead to the "Joeys" in their classroom life and in Troy's story it was an older child who led the direction of the fishing game in the shared playground area. Within Kindergarten partnerships between children produce opportunities for scaffolded learning but there is perhaps an advantage when older children are included among their learning partners.

Play was shown to be an opportunity for developing collaborative problem-solving of the type described and used as a priority for learning by Julie. All the teachers used this strategy to some extent when they presented a problem or asked an open-ended question to children engaged in play activity. According to Berk and Winsler (1995, p. 27), citing the work of Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989); Lave and Wenger (1991), cognition is always situated in activity and "people learn best when they are working with others while actively engaged in a problem." To be effective in developing such joint problem-solving teachers need effective questioning techniques, an acute awareness of the potential of children's play and creative thinking to build a stimulating environment.

Teachers in this study had some skill in the type of questioning required to promote higher order thinking but were challenged to use it spontaneously in response to play situations. The children similarly found it challenging to answer this level of question. Julie found that sometimes they demonstrated their thinking through action rather than words. Leah and Rosemary both showed examples of pursuing a line of questioning without getting or giving an answer. Leah described her technique as "ask, pause, and if no answer then move on and come back to it later". However, in

play there is room for a hierarchy of levels of questioning. These teachers stated that professional insight or personal experience guided them when they determined how they questioned children. In play they allowed themselves to be governed by the children's responses or lack of reply.

For free play to offer potential for language development there must be time to play and provision of interesting and varied play areas with props that are changed periodically (Dickinson, 2001). Themes that encourage varied vocabulary may be introduced during large group discussions or book reading. Rice and Wilcox (1995) also promoted a thematic base for building a language-focused curriculum for the preschool classroom. Their concern was for children with speech/language impairments or those learning English as a second language integrated with 'normal' English speaking children. They described a highly interactive play-based environment where adults were trained to intervene to stimulate language development through socio-dramatic play.

Teachers in this study certainly provided blocks of time for play and the use of themes was familiar to them. Joy recounted a problem in her school where teachers of other years held a proprietorial interest over thematic resources and were critical of the Kindergarten using "their themes". Parents in this school also had a strong voice and disliked the children repeating themes over consecutive years. As the newest members of the school community it seemed that Kindergarten teachers had to speak up if they were to address an emergent curriculum rather than present plans for approval a term or more in advance. Sharing resources was a practical problem but it appeared that collaboration was to be one way only.

Props for thematic play were visible in some Kindergartens. Rosemary had selected a equipment for the sand-pit and the playdough table that linked to a theme and Denise's story based equipment that the children helped to make promoted dramatisation. Troy had set up a 'fish and chip shop' and initiated dramatic play that the children continued for themselves. This is not to say that the provision of changing resources was not a feature overall but rather a comment again on the early stage of the year when children were still becoming familiar with the physical environment as well as the social opportunities of Kindergarten. Teachers here did

not have the advantage of a high ratio of trained adults to children that was the case in the classroom described by Rice and Wilcox (1999) but did value an experienced Teacher Assistant in an interactive role with the children.

Book-reading

Books had a prominent place in the Kindergartens reflecting the high priority given to them for developing literacy. "Book reading has special potential for fostering the type of language development that is linked to literacy," stated Dickinson (2001, p. 176). The study group teachers all stated that they used books daily choosing them not only for the story but also for elements of language including vocabulary, rhyme and potential for dramatisation or thematic discussion. Carol and Denise told stories that reflect on the varied learning strategies associated with this language event.

In all but Denise's Kindergarten the principal book-reading activity occurred as a whole group experience. Carol demonstrated through the story 'a terrible silence' that lively discussion could be encouraged in a large group context, but, in reflecting on her journaling, she was made aware that some children dominated while others were not heard at all.

I question whether reading a book to the whole group meets the diverse needs of the children. From the socio-cultural view children need to be challenged within a dynamic zone of sensitivity, the "Zone of Proximal Development" (Berk & Winsler, 1994). As Saxby (1997, p. 4) states, "Would that each new listening or reading experience was pitched at just a fraction beyond the child's attained level of linguistic mastery, for that is when growth occurs". From observation I would suggest that children without a background experience of shared book reading sometimes found it difficult to access the potential for learning in a large group context. Some may well have been alienated by the experience, showing inattentive behaviour that detracted from the value of the activity. Denise's practice of reading to smaller groups appeared to allow for greater participation by children as active listeners and speakers. There was opportunity to select different books for the groups and to have children physically closer to the reader. This practice is supported by Dickinson (2001).

The teachers in this study would conditionally agree with Sheridan (2000) who considers that story reading provides a time for pleasure and success for all children. For children who enter Kindergarten without a background experience of shared books, the path to finding pleasure and success is not always smooth. Dickinson (2001) concluded that while most teachers stated that book reading was an important way to support literacy growth, fewer approached book use in a carefully thought out, intentional manner.

There was evidence in this study of opportunities for children to access books informally at all Kindergartens. Some children chose to read books alone or with reading partners that included parents or other children. Reporting on reading partnerships of children in the transition to school Renshaw (1994) noted that adult/child, child/child and solitary reading formed complementary contexts in forming and consolidating children's emergent reading competencies. He suggested that pre-school children are challenged during scaffolded partnerships with adults or more experienced reading partners, use more egalitarian partnerships with friends or younger siblings to appropriate and use the reading strategies of their adult partners and often retain a dialogic quality in solitary contexts that may include pretend reading to toys. Dickinson (2001) commented that individualised book-reading time in American pre-schools is often given by adults in response to a child's request and that typically children already interested in literacy are those who receive these extra opportunities. This study does not have the data to make any comment on the local situation.

Multi-cultural dimensions

Children from two years of age begin to use sentences to recount personal narratives and interact socially in conversations that increase in length and complexity as well as in the chance of a response from their peers (Dickinson & McCabe, 1991). However, there are substantial cultural differences in the way that children structure their narratives that may be misunderstood in multi-cultural classrooms and affect the understanding children have of stories read to them. Mallan (1993) speaks of the differences in oral and written narratives and the need to stretch the literary experiences of children. It is imperative that children with no background in story be immersed in a "rich and varied literature programme if they are to compete on equal

terms with their peers” (Mallan, 1993, p. 258). While teachers would agree with this, it needs to be placed alongside the possibility of a rich narrative tradition in the home culture.

Using a socio-cultural approach to minority group education, Moll (1992) involved community participation in language/literacy learning in schools. Whilst he is primarily concerned with older children, the experience of Troy’s Nyungar children with Aunty Norma’s stories is indicative of this principle applied locally in one Kindergarten. However, in this situation the language of the stories is not that used in the home but is the traditional language of the culture being re-introduced to the community. Troy expressed her wish for a Nyungar speaker to be available throughout the sessions to better reinforce the programme.

In her unique situation Troy would gladly have applied the principles put forward by Moll but first had some problems to address. She found it difficult to cross cultural boundaries to encourage parental involvement. Most of her children were collected and taken home by bus denying her daily contact with their parents. She took steps to address this problem by inviting parents to join the class excursion and by going on the bus herself, something she “wished [she] had done all term” as a way of breaking down barriers and getting to know the parents and home background of the children.

Another issue for Troy, noted earlier, was the silence of the children in the first weeks, their lack of verbal communication. She wondered if this were cultural, or related to other factors, notably the socio-economic level of the community in general. She worked to build trust and security so that children would enjoy coming and want to attend regularly. Regular attendance created more opportunities to enrich their language experiences. The expectation remained that these children with little expressive language on entry would cope with three languages at school– the Aboriginal English of their homes, school English for access to formal education and the Nyungar language traditional to their community but spoken by only a few.

Summary

Beliefs and strategies come together in teachers' practice. This appraisal has focused on the four strategies selected by Dickinson (2001) for their potential in developing language for literacy. There are recognisable similarities between his observations and those demonstrated in this study and yet in both socialisation was more likely to be the first priority even though "language was through everything". It is clear that through social learning in the Kindergarten environment children are making critical connections with literacy and developing the connected cognitive processes of thought and language.

The data in this study build a composite picture of a rich and varied landscape of language learning in one local context. Taken together the teachers complement each other in the priorities given to different strategies. Taken individually each constructs a unique world reflecting the dynamic relationships built between the individual teacher and the children in her group. Each teacher's practice is influenced by personal experience and reflects her intention to accept the diversity of children in the group, to build a secure and happy environment and to expand the children's knowledge of the world. Language is embedded in naturalistic contexts that move children into the social and literate world of school while celebrating the present moment in their development.

In the final chapter I will outline my findings and identify emergent themes that move beyond the boundaries of this study. I will put forward some tentative recommendations that arise from the research.

CHAPTER NINE

A COMPLEX AND DYNAMIC LANDSCAPE: FINDINGS

The features of language learning that I have described, interpreted and evaluated in the previous chapters using Eisner's (1991) framework, map a complex and dynamic landscape bounded by the context of seven teachers in seven Kindergarten classrooms in regional Western Australia. The map has been jointly constructed by the teachers and myself from their stories and through narratives of experience based on video-taped recordings and transcripts of interviews. We have been able to focus on the Kindergarten not as a bridge between home and school but as a place of important and significant language learning in its own right. It is time to identify major features that stand out in this landscape and beyond as I consider firstly the findings from the questions asking what? how? and why? and then bring these together through two emerging themes of partnerships and balance to conclude with a picture of how seven teachers perceive their practices to support children's language learning at Kindergarten.

Landmarks: What activities do teachers identify?

In the stories and narratives of experience we have viewed a dynamic, interactive environment where language is integrated into all aspects of the seven Kindergartens. There was a fluidity of movement as groupings constantly changed to provide a range of opportunities for interactive language for a variety of purposes with different social partnerships.

Play was central to learning language as children engaged in imaginative play outside in the sandpit, in the home corner or with trains and blocks. Child-initiated play was seen to extend themes introduced by the teacher through books as in Denise's story of The three little pigs or after group discussion as Joy described. Julie explained how she developed the language learning between two boys engaged in train and block play by asking questions and documenting their work.

Book reading was common to all Kindergartens, mostly viewed as a whole group activity. In reading and talking about books children learned new words and expressions that added to their knowledge as demonstrated by Carol in her story of 'a

terrible silence'. Books were dramatised, promoted thematic discussion as a form of shared experience and gave children experience in hearing patterns of language. Children were read to by the teacher and also read with other children, a Teacher Assistant or alone. Teachers could explore strategies to give all children individualised book reading time with a range of partners in order to more effectively address individual needs.

Small groups of children were seen engaged in either structured activities such as sorting/classifying or independent play constructing with blocks and were challenged by teachers to listen, follow instructions, solve problems, make requests or explain their actions to others.

Language was also developed in one on one interactions illustrated by Leah in her conversation with Jason about his angry eyebrows and Rosemary in her story of Big bouncing. In these personal moments children were able to express feelings and develop confidence to use language for social communication. At other times pragmatics of social language appropriate to the school context were taught. Rosemary's Show and Tell exemplified children not only learning to use expressive language in a group but also learning how to be listeners in this context.

In the Kindergartens of this study teachers demonstrated that they construct wide-ranging opportunities for children to learn and develop competence in using language in play and structured activities, through books, discussion and in personal interactions with individual children. Language was used in spontaneous conversation as well as in more deliberate question and answer interactions; by small groups of children in play of their own creation and in the more formal structure of the whole group where clearly defined social conventions influenced language use. In each Kindergarten children were immersed in a language-rich environment. Language itself was pivotal to learning.

Pathways: How do teachers support children's language learning?

In probing the data to find the ways the participant teachers went about supporting children's language learning in their Kindergartens, it was first noticeable that they saw themselves as instrumental in constructing the learning environment that was

itself a means of supporting learning. By environment they meant the physical environment, how material resources were placed and used, and also the social environment constructed with the children in establishing a climate of security and trust in which learning and using language could occur. Rosemary and Julie especially indicated that the created environment impacted on the type and range of opportunities for children to be exposed to new vocabulary and ways of using language, to practise using language and to gain competence in using functional oral language appropriate to situation and the social group. For this reason I identify the strategic function of whole group, small group and one on one partnerships that teachers intentionally plan, intentionally creating differing contexts for language use.

The whole group context included group discussions, book reading and Show and Tell, activities that mostly saw the teacher as director. It was a time that the teachers planned for children to learn some behaviours associated with the school context: learning to share attention with peers, to take turns to speak, to listen with a joint focus of attention and to respond to what others had to say. The songs, rhymes and games that were included in a mat-session had relevance for children learning about language, notably phonological awareness. In Troy's case mat-time was the time for her to become a learner with the children during Nyungar language sessions. Joy referred to the significance of these whole group activities when she stated that "it's times like story-time and mat-time you are really modelling how you want them to do things." The whole group context was considered strategically important for learning certain types of oral language and associated social behaviours.

Teachers structured large blocks of time for children to working in small groups either in self-directed play or with teacher guidance. In small groups children had time to use language in dramatic play exploring concepts and practising adult-like language. While engaged in small group activities they were asked to explain what they were doing or how they were going (or had gone) about a task in order to link language and thought. Table activities that reflected particular learning areas, such as mathematics, were equally relevant as vehicles for learning and using associated oral language. Fruit-time was mostly planned as a small group activity that promoted conversation of a general nature.

Small group activity inside and outside was significant because of the large block of time given to it, reflecting its strategic importance in the overall organisation of the Kindergarten session. It was Denise who commented that rather than spend time in preliminary discussion it was often better to “just do it” and let the language flow naturally through the activity. Small group activities and small groups of children coming together in play offered valuable opportunities for collaborative learning and opportunistic teaching.

One on one partnerships, however, were significant in meeting individual children’s specific language needs as Leah showed in her conversation with Jason and as in Denise’s explanation of using a language screening tool to build specific knowledge about children in her group.

Teachers were seen to support language learning in explicit and indirect ways. ‘Teacher talk’ took on different forms when Leah directed an interaction through questioning, Carol led a group discussion about the book she was to read, Joy modelled courtesies she considered appropriate and Julie suggested how Keaton might explain to Ross about his train/block play. Rosemary showed that when teachers deliberately took up an observer position they made themselves accessible for children to initiate interactions with them. Denise, Troy and Joy all gave examples of how information given in one context was taken up by children in another.

The participant teachers showed considerable flexibility in changing their strategies from giving information to listening; from planned discussion to spontaneous response and from intervention to observation. There was evidence of teachers modelling language, encouraging children to try new vocabulary, giving them time to practise, acknowledging their efforts and celebrating with them in becoming competent language users. The challenge may be to balance opportunistic teaching with systematic planning within a play-based curriculum.

Looking into the landscape: Why do teachers choose certain strategies?

The teachers of this study found it difficult to articulate beliefs about children learning language that were separate from more general beliefs expressing their personal and collective philosophy of early childhood education. For that reason these findings reflect a holistic view of integrated learning concerned with the balanced growth of the whole child.

The phrase 'ownership' was used repeatedly by teachers in this study to refer to children being self-directed in what, when and how they chose to use expressive oral language. It was clear that they believed it was important for children to feel in control of their own language use and worked to give them opportunities to develop confidence and competence as language users in the school context. They believed play was a central pathway for development of language and structured much of their planning around this belief.

It was agreed that Kindergarten was a place to build social and sensory experience of the world that could help children conceptualise the meaning of words, as in the examples of Yoghurts (loquats) for fruit-time and 'A terrible silence'. There were numerous examples of concrete experiences being used as a vehicle for building vocabulary and associated concepts: Troy's excursion, the visit of a pet in Denise and Carol's Kindergartens, references to playdough, box and block construction and making baskets. Carol described book reading as shared experience of a social kind that extended the group experience.

The belief expressed in social or shared experience as an essential foundation for learning demonstrated the social interactionist philosophy that directed children's language learning in the study Kindergartens. Partnerships between teacher and children, children and other children and children with other adults in the setting especially the Teacher Assistant were identified as being where the language happened, and therefore foundational to learning language. The teachers also believed that children were pro-active in the joint construction of the curriculum, albeit with teacher responsibility for building the learning environment and maintaining a direction consistent with school expectations. Joy spoke of "going with the flow", Leah of changing direction to follow the children's lead while

Denise, Julie and Carol all spoke of exploring possibilities of an emergent curriculum.

Teachers believed that biological development and cultural background were factors contributing to diversity in children and accepted that as teachers they “work with what we have” to lead each child forward. Before children could access the learning opportunities of Kindergarten they believed it was necessary for them to feel safe and secure. Troy especially commented on her challenge to build relationships of trust if the children were to benefit from attendance at Kindergarten.

For some, particularly Julie, there was a dilemma between the stated acceptance of diversity and the question of intervention which she resolved by reflecting on her belief that responsibility to improve children’s language competency sometimes meant intervention was necessary. She was influenced by her belief in the Kindergarten as a “community of learners” where partnerships and collaborative learning required skill in language for social communication. The child who was not so proficient was at a disadvantage, a belief that echoed Bourdieu’s cultural capital metaphor. Other teachers also believed that the children, teacher and other adults in the setting together constructed the community of learners that fostered children’s developing language skill.

A map emerges: How Kindergarten teachers perceive their practices to support children’s language learning?

When I began this contextual study I had no fixed idea of outcomes other than a map of the language learning landscape of the Kindergarten from the perspective of the seven teacher participants. It is an incomplete map. Details remain undiscovered. Questions remain unanswered. From the data I have found that learning partnerships and finding balance through diversity have emerged as significant themes that underlie the perceptions the seven participant teachers hold about how they support children’s language learning through their practice. These themes have relevance for others involved in children’s language learning in the context of the school system.

Partnerships

Kindergartens are highly dynamic, complex societies wherein the Kindergarten culture that supports children's learning is developed through the interaction of all its members. Language learning does not occur as a discrete subject or learning area but through highly complex relationships within the social group. Teachers are central figures with authority to be influential in the creation of these learning communities. They work to build security and confidence when children first enter school. The physical, social and cognitive environment they construct affects children's development.

In the stories and narratives of this study, language in the Kindergarten environment has been seen to flow through the curriculum as children actively acquire and develop oral language for social communication, for cognition and for literacy. The latter may be viewed as an outgrowth of the other two. Becoming literate at Kindergarten expands the connections between thought and language and extends the social and educational opportunities of children.

From the teacher's perspective there are two categories of partnerships that together support children's language development. The first of these is the relationship of the teacher to the child/ren. The second builds a network that supports the teacher and consequently the children: the collaborative partnerships of teachers with other adults in the setting.

Teachers in this study described the importance of building security and trust in relationships as foundational to language learning. Leah demonstrated through her conversation with Jason the intensity of expression that can occur in an individual partnership where the teacher accepts the unique qualities of the child and is proactive in developing conversation or levels of questioning that can be tailored to individual needs. Rosemary and Troy both shared stories of children having the confidence to confide in them in personal ways. However, time for such encounters is limited in a Kindergarten day and Julie reminded us how difficult it is to find time for everyone, to know their present level of attainment and lead them forward.

The question, 'Is equal enough?' comes to mind when speaking, as Joy did, of children being "worthy of equal opportunity." If it is true, as suggested in the literature (Rivalland, 2000), that children with less language/literacy competency are less likely to access teacher information then perhaps teachers should consider giving more of their time and energy, or giving it differently, to these children through a range of strategies that truly address the issue of equal social access to school-based education.

Teachers work to build relationships not only with individual children but also with the whole group while children must learn to share 'their' teacher with all the other children in the class. A partnership of a different kind develops as teachers work to build a group identity; to encourage children to acquire the *habitus* of the school community. In the context of the classroom children have new lessons in social behaviour to learn. The teacher works to find appropriate language to hold the attention of the group. Diversity among individuals may be subjugated by the needs of the group or the priority of the teacher to provide information and model acceptable behaviour and patterns of language.

Carol showed us how it is possible to allow children to contribute to group discussion in a lively way in her story of 'a terrible silence', demonstrating her capacity to respond to the children and lead them to make important discoveries through the group. However, Carol also reflected on the evidence in her journaling that indicated that some children dominate the discussion while others are not heard at all. While the quiet child who is attentive may be gaining much receptive language, others may gain nothing. Teachers show flexibility in response to the group to be effective in supporting language development while they direct considerable energy into teaching children 'how to do school' in the Kindergarten year.

Teachers also recognised that children partner other children especially in play. They encouraged relationships where there was child ownership of language and the opportunity to develop collaborative learning and problem-solving techniques. In a Kindergarten children's ages span 12 months. They bring a diversity of background experience and language competency with them that can influence other children.

Socially, however, school is a new experience for all of them and the teachers repeatedly recorded the priority given to establishing routines and social behaviours consistent with expectations of school behaviour. In Leah's mixed-age group of Kindergarten and Pre-Primary children the older 'Kangaroos' who already had an established code of school behaviour became role models for their younger classmates. Troy also recorded the interaction between older children and her 4-year-olds in the sandpit when an older child took a leadership role that added her experience to the play sequence. Questions arise about how mixed-age groupings can be used to support children learning language at school.

When asked, Leah described her position as the teacher in the class as "the hub" of a dynamic model that saw individual children circulating, intersecting, coming together for a time and moving on as partnerships changed, shifted and stabilised during the course of a session. It would seem to be a fair description of the action and interaction in the Kindergarten.

Teachers in this study referred to other adults that partnered children's learning in the Kindergarten. They referred to the support of the Teacher Assistant in an interactive role with the children. The Indigenous Education Worker (IEW) was an important cultural role model as was the Nyungar teacher. However, Troy felt it was unfortunate a Nyungar speaker was not available throughout the Kindergarten session to better foster this aspect of language development.

All the teachers in this study mentioned parents as partners in education. Their involvement as helpers was welcomed in all centres but their presence was more visible in some than in others. Julie especially noted her assertiveness in encouraging their active participation in the life of the Kindergarten. These teachers actively sought to make connections with home by involving parents in their child's activities, inviting them to stay or take a rostered turn helping to work with their own and other children or including them in special events like excursions.

At Kindergarten the teacher welcomes the child into the school community and in doing so also makes the first contact with parents. Teachers expressed the need to inform parents of practices to support their child's learning including book-reading,

As Denise noted, family life is complex and parents are not always able or willing to access informal opportunities offered by teachers to be actively involved in their child's Kindergarten education. How to communicate effectively with parents can often be problematic.

Finding balance through diversity

A second recurring theme that has emerged in this study is that of teachers finding a balance between the range of strategies used to support language learning and the diverse needs of the children. As teachers strive to balance the developmental, knowledge and cultural dimensions of learning referred to by Burns (1996) they also address the balance between teacher and child-initiated learning activities and large group and small group or individual strategies that contribute to developmentally appropriate practice. While teachers give attention to social communication they also address content-based knowledge that expands vocabulary and extends linguistic competence. In their effort to accept and address cultural diversity and diverse learning styles they also question their responsibility to intervene for improving language for social communication and access to formal learning. While they exercise professional insight in "grabbing the teachable moment" they also strive to meet each child's needs in an intentional, systematic approach to constructing curricula.

In the strategies used for language learning there is a place for teacher input in contributing to knowledge and patterns of language use. Teachers have the opportunity to build children's language by introducing varied vocabulary, modelling patterns of language and constructing a stimulating environment for their exploration and play. In many ways the children "feed off" the teacher, a phrase used by both Leah and Denise, in direct and less overt ways as they participate in discussions, rhymes, games and stories, shared experiences, and the range of teacher-directed activities that they are encouraged to do. Teachers spend time "giving them the words," "guiding their thinking" and modelling social courtesies.

To balance the considerable direction given by teachers the data described provision of large blocks of free play both inside and outside. In some instances this saw the teacher step into a supervisory role mindful of her duty of care to all the children all

the time. In imaginative play children took command of their own language. Joy and Troy demonstrated how the teacher sometimes intervened to develop the language potential while Leah engaged a child in extended conversation as he drew a self-portrait. In both these situations the children remained in control of their actions and language. When the teacher took a visible, supervisory position, as Rosemary did, children had access to her to seek approval, attention or support. Initiating conversation or seeking the teacher's intervention on their behalf required a degree of self-confidence balanced by the child's functional need to use language for his/her own purpose.

At other times the teacher responded to child-initiated activity by taking on the role of inquirer, learning from the children by listening to their explanations or recounts and sometimes documenting the process. Careful questioning of the type described and used by Julie in this situation extended the complexity of children's language. Rosemary and Joy expressed the responsibility they felt as teachers for structuring a learning environment that encouraged children's cognitive growth through exploration and interaction. At Kindergarten both teacher-directed and child-initiated activities promote different language competencies that are complementary.

Attendance at Kindergarten challenges children to become a member of a new type of social group that requires them to share the attention of the teacher and work cooperatively with many children. In this study the whole group mat-time or book reading showed that children had demands made on them to share a joint focus of attention and take turns in speaker and listener roles. Generally, in the large group they spent rather more time as listeners than in other more personal contexts. Sitting still could be difficult, even alienating for some, just as much as it offered a chance for children to "bounce off each other" or "feed off" the teacher in discussion or enjoy the confidence building attention of the group in 'Show and Tell'. Diversity among individuals was subjugated to the over-riding needs of the group and teacher 'control talk' sometimes interrupted the continuity of the discussion. For the teacher it was a time to address the whole group for instruction, to build a group identity through songs and games, to enjoy word play or share a common experience as in 'Show and Tell' or book reading.

Discussion in a large group was not always a satisfying experience. Carol observed that not all children participated. Denise preferred to let the discussion flow through the activities. The small group and individualised activity offered greater potential for addressing the diverse needs of individuals, building relationships based on security and trust and structuring challenge according to specific levels of development. Children sometimes worked alone like Jason drawing, with a partner like Keaton and Ross with the trains and blocks or in the highly complex social groups seen in examples of sandpit play. Conversations in these contexts were tuned to personal interests and levels of communication.

Teachers expressed a belief in socialisation as the primary focus of learning at Kindergarten and were opposed to any shift towards an academic approach. It was this belief that led to the assertion from Joy and others that they address the present needs of the child and not concern themselves with the future demands of formal literacy. However, there remained a significant content base in their curricula that was demonstrated through themes that linked activities, influenced the choice of books and created a base for discussion. Such content-based instruction sometimes flowed into purposeful play including literacy related tasks like making Easter cards.

In their planning teachers aimed to balance social experience with the knowledge dimension of learning. When teachers emphasised the social domain, language for social interaction or expression of feelings dominated and the teacher's role was more likely to be as an observer intervening to model language for social courtesies or to give approval or acknowledgment as Rosemary showed for Clayton's big bouncing. On the other hand, content-based activities such as Leah's sorting/classification activity or Denise's dramatisation linked directly to the growth of cognitive and literacy knowledge. Across both aspects there was a recognised need to give children time to re-visit, practise and make the experience and associated language their own.

Teachers faced a dilemma in finding a balance between the acceptance of cultural diversity and intervention to standardise language to that of the dominant school discourse. They expressed a sense of responsibility to teach children the language

and behaviour of school. It was only in Troy's situation that there was explicit recognition of cultural difference central to the school's ethos. Teachers in this study recognised the disparate home backgrounds of children and were accepting of the wide range of language competency exhibited by children on entry to school. However, they demonstrated a belief that it was their responsibility to familiarise children with language of school and lead them towards competence in using language appropriate to this context.

While teachers in this study were shown to be astute observers who used their professional insight to act in opportunistic ways to extend learning, Rivalland (2000) suggested that opportunistic teaching may not be enough. To once again use Connelly and Clandinin's (1988, p. 3) terminology, it is the teacher's responsibility as "curriculum agent" to systematically connect to the "narratives of experience" of each child in order to construct effective curricula. This challenges teachers to move beyond a single curriculum constructed with the whole class as one entity and tap into each child's individual interests and experience as Julie did with her 'train' boys building the ravine. It is evident that teachers are not the only curriculum agents at work in the Kindergarten. Troy's children in the sandpit, Jason with his drawing, Carol's fruit-time talk and Clayton's big bouncing illustrated how children, too, have their own agenda. Teachers, as Julie indicated, work to know and act on children's present interests and levels of attainment in order to challenge them to move forward with their learning in their Zone of Proximal Development. Teachers in this study agreed to a belief in a jointly constructed curriculum but in practice they were challenged to construct multiple curricula to connect with individual children's needs. They were further challenged to document the complexities of such a dynamic programme to satisfy accountability procedures in their schools.

Despite the best intentions of their teachers, children whose *habitus* most closely represents the dominant school culture inevitably have an advantage over their peers. As Rice (2000) stated, children at Kindergarten behave like capitalists. Those with the greatest linguistic capital to trade will move ahead of their peers. In addressing this imbalance, teachers strive to connect to the lifeworlds of individual children to maximise the potential of Kindergarten for language development with respect for cultural diversity.

Conclusion

In bringing my research to a conclusion I have identified two themes, partnerships and finding balance through diversity, that I believe have relevance for other Kindergarten teachers and perhaps others involved with early childhood education.

In this narrative study the participant teachers have demonstrated a high awareness of the pivotal role of language in the child's development. From their stories I have been able to construct a rich and varied landscape of language experience in the Kindergarten.

This study maps a landscape through which children make a significant journey as they develop the language that will take them from home towards formal schooling. It has relevance for Kindergarten teachers and for educators who would seek to understand how young children develop language in educational settings. It is an unfinished map that I hope others will find worthy of further exploration.

I have been privileged to work with this group of teachers, women who shared a vision though each had a unique view of the landscape. There is uncertainty for teachers in redefining their role, in resolving dilemmas in their practice, in adjusting to change but there is a lesson to be learned from these teachers: to maintain a wider vision, celebrate the joy of young children discovering language and remember to "never lose the magic". This study has been constructed from the teachers' perspectives using their stories of children learning language and learning about language. I conclude as I began - with a story that reminds us that although the teacher's view may be central to gaining an insight into the Kindergarten world, the child is also active in constructing the landscape.

Danny's dog

Each child had a pigeon-hole large enough for his/her bag and work to take home. Each pigeon-hole was labelled with the child's name and a picture: eg, Danny and a picture of a dog. One morning the teacher was writing a name on a piece of art while the child watched. "D-a-n-n-y says Danny," she said. "That's my dog's name," said Danny.

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APPENDIX I
LETTERS OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT

Letter to participants



1st November, 2001

Dear

As a Master of Education student at Edith Cowan University, I am currently preparing a research study into the perceptions Kindergarten teachers hold about their language teaching practices, with a special interest in the narratives told by teachers themselves. My intention is to document the stories that teachers record and reflect on in their journals, and compare these with data from interviews based on observation in each Kindergarten. My purpose is to determine how teachers think about language learning at this beginning stage of schooling, and how this might impact on the children's entry to school.

As a member of the Kindergarten Network Group I am inviting you to participate in this study. To be involved you will need to be part of the focus group using reflective journaling for professional development, and be willing to share your personal stories concerning language learning in your class with others in the group. You will be asked to select stories for inclusion in this study, at all times having control over which stories are selected and how they are interpreted and recorded. I will be asking participants, and Principals, to allow me to observe a session in their Kindergarten, making a video recording of it to be used exclusively as a basis for discussion between you, the participant and myself, the researcher. Data from this discussion would be compared with the themes emerging from the narratives.

All the data will be treated with complete confidentiality. No real names, of people or location, will be used in any written documentation, unless you specifically request that your own work be identified as such with your name. The video-tape will be erased following our discussion. Participation is and remains voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time.

I will be pleased to answer any queries you may have, at any stage. I hope this study will be mutually beneficial and give a space for your voice to be heard in the field of educational research, as well as helping you in your practice. For my part I value your knowledge and your contribution in terms of time and effort. Together we may add to knowledge about language learning in our Kindergartens.

Please complete the attached consent form and return it to me. I will contact you to confirm details of times for group meetings and visits to your Kindergarten. I look forward to working together on this research.

Thank you,
Yours sincerely,

**CONSENT FORM
FOR PARTICIPATION IN
MASTER OF EDUCATION
RESEARCH**

Having read the information letter and had questions answered to my satisfaction regarding the proposed research study being undertaken by Denise Lindsay as part of the requirements for the Master of Education Degree at Edith Cowan University, I understand that:

- The purpose of the research is to gain insight into how teachers think about language teaching strategies at Kindergarten.
- The method of research will involve comparison of data from teachers' reflective interpretation of their own stories, with data from interviews following observation at Kindergarten. Each teacher participant will control the selection and use of her own stories.
- Video taping of a Kindergarten session will be used for discussion between the researcher and each teacher about her observed language teaching strategies. The tape will be erased immediately following the discussion. The discussion will be taped for later transcription and this audio-tape erased.
- The data collected will be used solely for the purpose of this research study and its associated reports.
- No real names of people or location will be used, unless a teacher specifically requests that her name be attached to her own stories which form part of the study. No children's names will be used.
- Participation is voluntary. Participants may withdraw at any time.
- Participants are invited to read and comment on all written documentation arising from their contributions, including the final report.

I agree to participate in the study, having been fully informed about all aspects of the study. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate, realising that I may withdraw at any time. I agree that the research data gathered for this study may be published provided I am not identifiable unless I state in writing that I wish to have my own name used to identify me as the author of my own stories.

SIGNATURE
OF PARTICIPANT _____ **DATE** _____

Letter to Principals



1st November 2001

Dear

As a Master of Education student at Edith Cowan University, I am requesting your permission to collect data from within your school for the research study which is part of the requirements for this degree. The attached letter sets out the purpose and methods of the study as presented to Kindergarten teachers including a member of your staff, _____, who has agreed to be a participant in the study.

My request is that I should be able to observe one session in the Kindergarten, to be used as described. I understand the sensitivity concerning video-taping of children but ask to use this method, with each parent's consent, solely as a basis for discussion between myself and (the teacher) about teaching strategies observed and recorded. The tape will be erased immediately following the discussion. I will hold all transcriptions and notes until the completion of the study. At no time will it be used for any purpose other than that described above.

The visit will be during Term One, at a time to be arranged with the teacher. It is my intention that the extra work voluntarily engaged in by the participants will impact positively on their professional development by developing reflective journaling. Children are involved only as the focus of teachers' work in Kindergarten and stand to benefit from improved practice. The location, and all data collected, will remain confidential and will be used solely for the purpose set out.

I welcome any questions you may have, and look forward to working in association with your school in seeking insight into language learning at Kindergarten and its impact on children's entry to school.

Yours sincerely,

Denise Lindsay, B.Ed.

Parent consent for video-taping



1st November, 2001

Dear

As part of my research for the Master of Education Degree at Edith Cowan University, I am planning to video a Kindergarten session at (your child's Kindergarten). This tape will be used solely as a basis for discussion with (your child's teacher) about the strategies she is using for language learning. It will not be viewed by anyone other than _____ and myself and will be erased immediately after our discussion. Names of children and location will remain confidential throughout the research study, and will not be used in any written material associated with the study.

The focus of the video will be on the teacher. However, children will be included when they are interacting with her. If you are willing for your child to be taped, please read and sign the consent form and return it to (your child's teacher) at the Kindergarten. If you have any questions please feel free to ask.

Thank you.
Yours sincerely,

Denise Lindsay, B.Ed.

PARENT CONSENT FORM

I have read the information concerning the use of video-tape for collecting research data at Kindergarten.

I understand that the video will be used solely as a basis for discussion between _____ and Denise Lindsay and that names and location will remain confidential. I understand that the tape will be erased following the discussion.

I give my consent for my child _____ to be video-taped according to the conditions described.

SIGNED _____ DATE _____

APPENDIX II
Sample format for reflective journaling

Date: 19th Feb **Context:** free play 9-45am **Players:** Anna and 2 or 3 boys.

Snapshot of the incident:

After hearing and joining in the story of Mrs Wishy Washy at mat time the children all wanted to act it out. Later I watched some of them doing the same, but with various interpretations. I overheard Anna sorting it out with authority, saying, " Well that's what's in the book!" She was pointing to the book on a chair as she made her point.

Reflect on it:

Why is this story important?

This story tells about children learning about language from books and from each other through play.

How does it demonstrate my philosophy of teaching language?

I like to initiate possibilities, children hear book language but then learn about it through their own play.

What teaching strategies are demonstrated?

Modelling and demonstration to whole group; small group self-directed play; observation without intervention.

How would you want to explain its significance to an observer?

Children need to have opportunity to enjoy stories/books for literacy learning, but they need time to play to construct their own learning. It was great that they took it up themselves. no adults.

APPENDIX III

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview 1 and 2

I began by showing the video recordings. Sometimes this promoted spontaneous description of activity, sometimes we watched then paused the tape to talk. Where it had not been described I began by asking:

Can you tell me what was happening? or

Do you want to make a comment on that?

Following a conversational style I would then probe by incorporating the following questions where appropriate:

What strategies do you identify from that episode?

Does that fit with strategies that are representative of what you do on a regular basis?

How do you feel that it illustrates your philosophy about how children learn language?

How do you see your role?

At what point do you think about how it connects to the Curriculum Framework?

In addition questions specific to each individual teacher arising out of the actual recorded activity were included in the conversation.

Interview 3

This followed a standard set of questions to each participant:

How does experience impact on your day to day practice?

What, in the stories you shared, best demonstrate your preferred language teaching strategies?

What problems/dilemmas have you faced?
How have you dealt with or resolved these?

What have been highlights for you in relation to children's language learning?

In summary, how do you perceive your role supporting children's language learning?

APPENDIX IV
RATING SURVEY

Focus Meeting 4 15th June 2002

How do you rate the following on a scale of 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) in your language learning curriculum?

Activities	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>
Mat session					
Show and Tell					
Stories					
Teacher-initiated activities					
Free play					
Fruit time					
Language focus sessions					
Screening for Speech/Lang.					
Excursions					
Strategies					
'teacher talk' / teacher instructions					
'grab the teachable moment'					
're-visit the experience'					
shared books					
child-initiated play					
extended conversations with individual children					
experience first then talk - 'just do it'					
children 'bounce off each other'					
'documenting the process'					
question to 'elicit their thinking'					
screening/ intervention for speech/language					
Beliefs					
Developmental clock controls child's learning					
Language is learned in social partnerships.					
Security and trust in relationships.					
'Language is right through everything.'					
K is a place to build experiential knowledge of world					
K is a place to 'play and have fun'.					
Teacher exercises a 'parental sense of responsibility'.					
'Address the present to build foundation for the future'.					
'Accept diversity and work with that'.					