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Characteristics of Teacher Language Exchange with Preschool Children

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

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M.Ed., Salem State College, 1995

BA, Boston College, 1991

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Research has documented the influence of early home language experiences on children's development and educational success, but as many children spend large portions of their days in childcare centers, preschool teachers have similar potential to have a profound and lasting influence on children's language development. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the varying levels of quantity and quality of teacher language exchanges with preschool students in independently-funded childcare facilities. The work of Hart and Risley on parental language exchange formed the conceptual framework for this study. The research questions guiding this study focused on affirmative versus prohibitive speech used by preschool teachers, length of back and forth exchanges between teachers and students, and teacher use of complex vocabulary. Data were collected via classroom observations of 6 preschool teachers in one northeastern state in the United States during free playtime. Key themes relevant to the research questions were identified via open coding. Overall, affirmations exceeded prohibitions, but the majority of teacher language was not explicitly affirmative or prohibitive. The length of back and forth exchanges and use of complex vocabulary varied both in terms of teachers and multiple observations of the same teacher. As it appeared that the physical design of the classroom and daily schedule influenced these differences, it is important for administrators to consider the effect of physical space design and daily scheduling on teacher-child language exchanges. This study may contribute to positive social change by inspiring improvements in teacher-child language interactions, which may enhance children's development.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to all of the early childhood educators who work tirelessly to support the growth and development of young children. I would like to especially acknowledge the teaching staff of Brockton Day Nursery and Wollaston Child Care Center who challenge and inspire me to continue to learn and grow as a professional and be the best that I can be to support the teachers, families and children of Massachusetts. It has been a privilege to work with you. Your work in the classroom inspired me as I progressed through my studies at Walden University. I hope that some of the knowledge that I gained through my studies and research at other centers will help me to implement the best programming that I can for the children, families and staff at my own center.

Acknowledgments

Firstly, I would like to thank my family for their patience and support. My husband Stephen and Emily, Alexander and Nathaniel helped out with extra chores and were forgiving when the countless hours that I spent in front of the computer took away from our family time. I especially want to thank Nathaniel, who at the age of twelve, reminded me that all of the schoolwork expectations that I set for him applied to me as well. Even as a middle school student, he worked hard at keeping me on track.

I would also like to thank my chair, Dr. Patricia Nan Anderson for all of her feedback and encouragement to grow as a writer and scholar. I have learned so much because of her insight and expertise.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Half of incoming kindergarteners arrive at school with the necessary foundational skills that equip them to access the curriculum successfully (Anthony, Williams, Zhang, Landry, & Dunkelberger, 2014; Davenport & Kulsrud, 2014; Dorman, Anthony, Osborne-Fears, & Fischer, 2017). This has prompted a growing body of research to identify and address issues that contribute to this deficiency. One factor that has been demonstrated to be influential is the language environment experienced by young children at home. For example, Hart and Risley (1995) found marked differences in both the total number of words spoken and the types of messages conveyed. These differences were associated with variability in children's academic accomplishment at age nine. In addition, Merz et al. (2015) found that parental responsiveness is predictive of a wide range of school readiness outcomes and parental inferential language influences children's vocabulary and emotional knowledge. Tamis-LeMonda, Luo, McFadden, Bandel, and Vallotton (2019) found that characteristics of the early learning environment including maternal engagement were associated with fifth grade academic skills.

Because the majority of preschoolers in the United States are enrolled in an early education and care program (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015), it seems logical to consider the quality of language environments experienced by children in independently-funded early childhood programs. In many cases, low levels of teacher-child language exchange are evident in early education and care programs (Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014; Torr & Pham, 2016). For example, Head Start, a program of the United States Department of Health and Human services that provides comprehensive

early childhood education and support services to low income families, regularly assesses the quality of interactions of teachers with children, using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The CLASS is an observation tool developed at the University of Virginia to define and assess the quality of interactions between teachers and students within the classroom setting in the domains of emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support (Pianta et al., 2008). In 2014, the average ratings across Head Start programs nationwide for emotional support and classroom organization were relatively high, at 6.10 and 5.83 respectively. However, the average rating was2.9 in the domain of instructional support (Teachstone, 2014). Duval, Bouchard, Hamel and Pagé (2016) also found the domain of instructional support to be lower than classroom organization and emotional support. Instructional support scores tended to fall within the 2.5- 3 range (Hamre, 2014; Hollingsworth & Vandermaas-Peeler, 2017). As most of these studies were conducted in state and federally-sponsored highly0regulated programs, these results are likely to overestimate interaction quality among the broader set of independently-funded nonprofit and for-profit childcare centers and family childcare homes. In the state that was the focus of this study, Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) reliable rater visits conducted between July and December 2015 resulted in average ratings of 5.4 (out of 7.0) for interactions. This score seems high; however, these ratings represent a select group of programs applying to level 4, the highest tier of the Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). It is reasonable to suspect that most programs in the state demonstrate much lower levels of teacher-child interaction quality than the elite level 4 applicant centers. The focus of this study was the

level of quality of teacher-child interactions experienced by preschool children in independently-funded early education and care centers. This study has the potential to create social change because interactions during early childhood have been associated with greater academic and cognitive achievement and fewer outward-directed problems during elementary school and adolescence (Pianta, Downer, & Hamre, 2016).

Background

Children enter elementary school with different readiness skills in both the academic and social emotional developmental domains (Anthony et al., 2014; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). In industrialized countries, many are concerned that not all children are well prepared for the adjustment to formal schooling (von Suchodoletz, Fäche, Gunzenhauser, & Hamre, 2014). According to Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, and Grifenhagen (2014), many children come to school from homes in which the use of academic language is limited. This has prompted numerous researchers to explore the reasons for this disparity; many have focused on differences in terms of the quality and quantity of language experienced by children at home.

Hart and Risley (1995) found significant inequalities in terms of the number and quality of words spoken as well as the ratio of encouraging speech to discouraging speech within the family setting. Children from professional families heard approximately 2,150 words each hour as contrasted with children from working class families who heard about 1,250 words per hour and children from welfare recipient families who heard approximately 616 words each hour (Hart & Risley, 1995). In addition, children from professional families experienced six encouraging statements for every discouraging

statement, but children from working class families received only two encouragements for each discouragement, and children from families who received government assistance experienced two discouragements for every encouragement (Hart & Risley, 1995).

This raises the question of how best to support children from low language environments. Van Druten-Freitman Dennesn, Gijsel, and Verhoeven (2015) found that attending a preschool classroom with a highly-educated teacher supported the vocabulary growth of dual language learners. Similarly, Cadima et al. (2016) and Herndon and Waggoner (2015) found that classroom quality served as a protective factor for children exposed to several risk factors.

Because a majority of preschool age children attend some form of early childhood program, educators within these programs have the potential to greatly influence children's development. As a result, a growing body of research focuses on the specific characteristics that comprise the classroom language environment. Carr, Mokrova, Vernon-Feagans, and Burchinal (2019) concluded that higher levels of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support in prekindergarten and kindergarten are associated with the development of children's language, literacy, and math skills. Hamre et al. (2014) concluded that when teachers offered more responsive interactions in general, children showed advancement in terms of their cognitive and relational functioning and self-regulation. In addition, positive management and cognitive stimulation were specifically associated with children's development.

Currently, there is a wide range of quality among environments within preschool classrooms (Helmerhorst, Riksen-Walraven, Vermeer, Fukkink, & Tavecchio, 2014; Jung

et al, 2016; Meacham, Vukelich, Han, & Buell, 2016; Pianta et al., 2016). Unfortunately, interactions experienced in most settings are of mediocre quality as measured by tools such as ECERS and CLASS, and not sufficient to ensure that children have the skills needed for success in kindergarten (Hamre, 2014). Von Suchodoletz et al. (2014) found that the quality of interactions experienced by children varied widely and the level of emotional support offered to children decreased during the day in classrooms with a high child-teacher ratio.

Helmerhorst et al. (2014) discussed the background and development of the Caregiver Interaction Profile (CIP), an observation tool used to rate six important skills of caregivers for interacting with children aged birth to 4 years old in childcare centers. These skills were "sensitive responsiveness, respect for autonomy, structuring and limit setting, verbal communication, developmental stimulation, and fostering positive peer interactions" (Helmerhorst et al., 2014, p. 771). They found considerable individual variation in caregiver interaction, even within the same program, so that children may experience great differences in the quality of interactions with different caregivers, even within the same classroom. According to Helmerhorst et al. (2014), differences were especially great in the characteristics of sensitive responsiveness, respect for autonomy, and verbal communication. This indicates a need for further investigation of the specific nature of interactions as well as strategies to improve the quality of interactions experienced by each child.

Pianta et al. (2016) said, because most studies of preschools and preschool teachers are conducted in highly-regulated federal and state-funded programs, the results

may overestimate the quality of interactions that occur in the broader world of childcare. For example, observations of classrooms in a mix of state-funded prekindergarten, Head Start, and childcare classrooms revealed that teachers in the childcare classrooms scored lower on social and organizational aspects of interaction that did the other two prototypes of early childhood education (Pianta et al., 2016). According to the State Capacity Building Center of the Federal Administration for Children and Families (2017), 16% of early childhood centers in the United States are government-funded. Therefore, continued research is needed to better understand characteristics of teacher-child interactions experienced by preschoolers in nonprofit and privately funded childcare centers. Careful examination of the balance of affirmative and negative language, quality of feedback offered to children, and language modeling may provide insights into the actual language environments experienced by preschool children.

Problem Statement

Despite considerable research focusing on the quality of language interactions experienced by children attending early childhood programs, there is still much to be learned about the quantity and quality of language environments in early childhood classrooms. Therefore, more research is needed to learn more about the specific characteristics of teacher-child language interactions within typical independently-funded childcare centers. The results present in the literature may actually overestimate the level of interaction quality experienced by children in a typical child care center or family childcare home. The setting of the current study may help to identify strategies to improve teacher-child language interactions and resulting outcomes for all children. Lack

of information with regard to the level of quality of teacher-child interactions experienced by preschool children in independently-funded early education and care centers is the problem that guides this study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the language environment experienced by children attending independently-funded early education and care programs in a culturally diverse city in the northeastern United States. In particular, I examined the quality and quantity of teacher-child language exchanges during time devoted to free play. The research questions guiding this study focused on preschool teachers' use of affirmative versus prohibitive speech, length of back and forth exchanges between teachers and students, and teachers' use of complex vocabulary.

Research Questions

Three questions based on the characteristics of adult-child language exchange determined by Hart and Risley and characteristics of interactions assessed by the CLASS guided this study:

RQ1: How does teacher language in a preschool classroom include affirmative and prohibitive speech during free play?

RQ2: In what ways does teacher language in a preschool classroom support back and forth exchanges between teachers and children during free play?

RQ3: How do preschool teachers use complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during free play?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study involved the work of Hart and Risley. Specifically, children in low-language homes heard an average of 615 words per hour, and children from high-language homes heard an average of 2153 words per hour (Hart & Risley, 1995). Another significant difference was the ratio of affirmations to prohibitions, with children in low-language homes hearing more negative speech and less positive speech than children from high-language homes.

These trends carried over into children's spoken vocabulary as well. Children from low language homes have a mean vocabulary of 500 words at kindergarten entrance compared with children from high language environments who have a vocabulary averaging 1200 words (Hart & Risley, 1995). The majority of the words used by children were those modeled by their parents in everyday conversation. Low language has been associated with cognitive, social, and academic difficulties (Merz et al., 2015).

Hart and Risley's work forms the conceptual framework for this study because the same factors that impact children's language experience at home may also be at work in the preschool classroom. In this study, I used observation methods similar to those employed by Hart and Risley to assess the language exchange of preschool teachers with children during unstructured periods of independent play within the classroom setting.

In addition, I focused my observations on teacher-child language characteristics included within the instructional support domain of the CLASS. The CLASS is an observation tool developed at the University of Virginia to define and assess the quality of interactions between teachers and students within the classroom setting (Pianta et al.,

2008). According to Pianta et al. (2008), interaction characteristics can be grouped into three domains of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The domain of instructional support includes concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling (Pianta et al., 2008). These dimensions, particularly quality of feedback, form a measure of classroom instructional quality that is predictive of student academic functioning in the areas of literacy and general knowledge (Pianta et al., 2008). This is often the domain in which classrooms score the lowest (Jung et al., 2016; Teachstone, 2014). The educational importance of this domain coupled with relatively low instructional support scores that are typical in observations point to a need for further study of these interaction characteristics.

The research questions reflect teacher-child interaction characteristics included within the CLASS. For example, affirmative versus prohibitive speech, back and forth language interactions, and the use of complex vocabulary. These characteristics of teacher interactions within the preschool classroom were explored during this study.

Nature of the Study

This was a case study examining teacher language in a childcare setting. This research method provided an opportunity to investigate the classroom language environment within the context of actual classroom interactions. The characteristics of the language environment experienced by preschoolers in independently-funded child care were explored through direct observation similar to the protocol followed by Hart and Risley.

Classroom observations of six teachers were conducted during free playtime. Teacher-child language exchanges were recorded via written field notes. Two hours of free playtime were observed in each classroom. Four participants were observed twice for a period of at least 1 hour. In two cases, a third observation was added to ensure the two 2 hours of free playtime were observed.

Following the observations, the research questions were used to group the data and identify key themes. For example, the number and nature of affirmative statements and prohibitions were identified to answer RQ1. The number and nature of back and forth exchanges and teacher use of complex vocabulary were identified to answer to RQ2 and RQ3, respectively. These themes are based on language characteristics described in the CLASS; how each theme can be identified empirically will be described in Chapter 3. The extent to which these categories of language exchange occurred provided insights into the characteristics of the preschool language environment that have implications for children's development.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study.

Affirmative speech: Explicit indications of approval or statements directly following a child's utterance that confirm and/or expand upon the ideas presented by the child's statement (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Back and forth language exchanges: Two-part interactions that occur in conversation. The caregiver times his or her response to the child's behavior. For

example, a question and answer, statement, and follow-up comment constitute a back and forth language exchange (Institute for Early Learning & Brain Science University of Washington, 2016).

Free play: The portion of the preschool day in which children use materials such as blocks, puzzles, dramatic play, and art materials alone or in self-organizing groups. During free play, the number of activities may be limited as long as children are able to choose where, with whom, and what they play (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005).

Independently-funded: Childcare centers and family child care homes that are not tax-supported. This includes proprietary businesses and many nonprofit centers and excludes Head Start programs, state-funded programs, and city- or county-funded programs. It also excludes programs run by publicly-funded school districts but may include proprietary or nonprofit programs housed in public school buildings.

Prohibitive speech: Explicit disapproval or imperatives (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Teacher-child interactions: Back-and-forth exchanges that occur throughout each day between teachers and children, including those that are instructional and social in nature (Hamre et al., 2012).

Tier two vocabulary: Words which are high frequency words that may be used in a variety of domains. They are frequently used in adult conversation and literature (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013).

Tier three vocabulary: Words that are used infrequently and relate to very specific topics and domains (Beck et al., 2013).

Vocabulary: Words said in spontaneous speech during activities and contexts of free play (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Assumptions

I assumed that the interactions that occurred during observations were typical of most days. Hart and Risley (1995) found that levels of language exchange at home were predictably consistent over multiple observations. I assumed that this consistency holds true for classroom settings as well. Although the sample will be relatively small in size, I assumed that the programs and classrooms selected were fairly typical of those experienced by preschool children generally. The classrooms selected were all within centers that are state-licensed but do not receive Head Start or Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) funding. UPK programs receive state funds to provide programming to support children's kindergarten readiness.

Scope and Delimitations

The topic of teacher child language exchange is extensive with a seemingly limitless number of characteristics that could be considered in a multitude of settings. For the purposes of this study, observations were conducted during free play time and focused on the balance of affirmative versus prohibitive speech, back and forth exchanges, and the use of complex vocabulary. Narrowing the focus provided the opportunity to consider the specifics of teacher-child language exchanges in more depth. The research questions that guided the analysis of the language were developed based the parameters determined by Hart and Risley and the CLASS. The number of back and forth exchanges and the use of complex vocabulary fall within the domain of instructional

support, an area in which preschool teachers often score lower than in the domain of emotional support (Teachstone, 2014).

For the purpose of this study, the setting was limited to a small sample of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredited and Department of Early Education and Care licensed early childhood programs in one state in the northeastern United States. This relatively small sample of six teachers was selected to capture the complexity of children's language experiences within independently-funded early education and care programs. Naturalistic observations served as a way to capture details of the interactions that occurred.

Limitations

The small sample size and the fact that all observations were conducted in one state are not always considered to be limitations in qualitative research. However, they may affect the transferability of the results to other settings. Regulatory factors such as teacher-child ratios that exist in other states may influence the transferability of the results.

One potential bias could be my extensive experience with full day independently-funded early education and care settings in the state in which the study is conducted. I may have perceived the settings with preconceived expectations, although I was not familiar with the teachers involved in the study. One method of addressing this bias is through the use of an observational protocol to ensure that all observations are conducted, recorded, and analyzed in a systematic manner.

Significance

Since Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated an association between the quantity and quality of language experienced by young children within the family setting, the quality and quantity of language experienced by children in group care settings also may provide significant opportunities to influence their social and cognitive development. By examining teacher-child language exchanges, I may provide information about language use in childcare settings. This information may contribute to developmental gains for children.

In the United States, more than half of preschool aged children are enrolled in a center-based early education and care program (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015; Sawyer et al. 2018). Only 16% of early childhood centers in the United States are government funded (State Capacity Building Center of the Federal Administration for Children and Families, 2017). Tuition and fees make up the primary source of funding for early education and care programs (US Department of Health & Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2017). Yet most studies of language exchange in childcare environments have been conducted in government-funded settings, and not independently-funded centers or family childcare homes. Because children may spend more of their waking hours in the care of their teachers than parents, and because for most children this care is in independently-funded centers or family childcare homes, it is logical that teacher interactions in such settings are worthy of study using the Hart and Risley protocol.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I provided an introduction to the study's problem, purpose and research design. Hart and Risley (1995) said that adult-child language interactions have a notable impact on children's language and cognitive development and the quality of language exchange experienced by children with their parents at home varies greatly. Variations in language interactions experienced by children and its impact on children's development has been reported by numerous other researchers.

In Chapter 2, I will present a literature review examining current research regarding adult-child interactions, quality indicators that affect language exchange in early childhood programs, and what is known about teacher-child language interactions. I will also describe my literature search strategy and describe the conceptual framework that underlies this study. In Chapter 3, I will detail the research methods used in the present study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Over the past few decades, much attention has been focused on kindergarten readiness and factors contributing to the wide variation in children's early academic skills upon kindergarten entry. One factor that has emerged as having a pivotal role in early learning is the quality and quantity of adult child interactions experienced in both the home and other settings. Numerous researchers have documented the impact of language environment on development. Children from high-income families are likely to know about twice as many words as children from low-income families by first grade (Neuman, 2014).

Despite the evidence supporting the value of rich parent-child language interactions, considerable variation still exists in terms of the quality of language environments experienced by children in early childhood programs (Helmerhorst et al., 2014; Meacham et al., 2016; Pianta et al., 2016). Significant variations in terms of teachers' sensitive responsiveness, respect for autonomy, and verbal communication were found even within the same program or classroom (Helmerhorst et al., 2014). Similarly, Meacham et al. (2016) said that even when teachers implemented the same curriculum within comparably-equipped dramatic play areas, teachers' responsiveness in terms of both topic initiation and topic continuation varied considerably.

In Chapter 2, I will provide a review of the current literature focusing on variation of language environments experienced by young children, the impact of this variation on children's development, the emergence of teacher-child interactions as a key indicator of quality in early childhood settings, specific aspects of teacher-child language exchanges,

and the need for further research in this area. I will begin this chapter by describing how I searched for literature. Then, I will explain the conceptual framework that underlies this study.

Literature Search Strategy

The Walden University Library was used to identify numerous journal articles to inform this research project. The databases used were: Education Source, SAGE Journals, Science Direct, Taylor and Francis Online, ERIC, and Education Research Starters. Key search terms were: *teacher-child interactions, preschool, parental language, feedback preschool teacher vocabulary, child care quality, free play in preschool, prohibitions and affirmations in preschool, preschool language environment, and teacher-child conversations*. The focus was on research from 2014 – 2019. However, a few older sources were included due to their specific relevance to the topic.

In addition, the book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of American Children* provided a conceptual framework that formed the basis of this study. I also examined the CLASS. This tool is widely used within early childhood settings to evaluate the quality of interactions experienced by children in the domains of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support (Pianta et al., 2008). In addition, agencies such as the Department of Early Education and Care in the state that is the location for the study, Child Care State Capacity Building Center, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics were used to gather information about childcare use, quality standards, and regulatory requirements.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was the work of Hart and Risley (1995), who found drastic differences in the quality and quantity of language experienced by young children in their home environments. Hart and Risley (1995) found that children in low-language homes heard an average of 615 words per hour and children from high-language homes heard an average of 2153 words per hour. The language experience among children also differed in that those raised in low-language homes heard more negative speech and less positive speech than children from high-language homes.

Among the families that were studied by Hart and Risley, these trends were also evident in children's spoken vocabulary. Hart and Risley (1995) found that at kindergarten entrance, children from low language homes had a mean vocabulary of 500 words compared with children from high language environments who had a vocabulary averaging 1200 words. Eighty-six to 98% of the words in children's vocabularies were present in parents' vocabularies as well. Similarly, Mertz et al. (2015) found that parental responsiveness was predictive of several school readiness skills, including vocabulary growth. Language interactions experienced by children have the potential to significantly impact each child's development and learning.

Hart and Risley were not the first to recognize the influence of language on children's development. The influence of language interactions on learning was also embraced by Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believed language is essential to intellectual development, calling the most significant moment the point at which children make the connection between ideas, practical activities and the words that represent them. In

addition, Liebeskind, Piotrowski, Lapierre, and Linebarger (2014), Merz et al. (2015) and Reynolds et al. (2019) all demonstrated associations between the home language environment and children's present and future academic success. Specifically, Merz et al. (2015) reported that parental responsiveness predicted growth in the areas of early math and literacy as well as emotion knowledge. Liebeskind et.al. (2014) found that for each day per week that a parent engages in a language-based interaction, there was a 3.13 percentile increase in the child's productive language scores. Similarly, characteristics of mothers' and father's language such as the mean length of utterance and questions that requiring more than a one word answer were predictive of positive kindergarten vocabulary and math outcomes (Reynolds et al., 2019).

The CLASS is a widely-used measure of quality of interactions that occur within a classroom setting. Unlike many other instruments, this tool focuses exclusively on interactions rather than materials, physical environment, curriculum, or safety (Pianta et al., 2008). It considers classroom quality in terms of the domains of emotional support, classroom observation, and instructional support. RQ1 focused on affirmative versus prohibitive speech which falls within the emotional support dimension of the CLASS. RQ2 and RQ3 focused on aspects of interactions within the instructional support domain. For example, back and forth language exchanges between teachers and children and the teachers' use of complex vocabulary were studied.

In this study, I employed an open-ended observation method, similar to that used by Hart and Risley (1995), to investigate the language exchange of teachers with children during activities in preschool. Specifically, open-ended observations were used to

examine language exchanges that occur during free play in independently-funded preschool classrooms. The CLASS was used as a framework for examining the specific qualities of language exchanges. Both the quantity and quality of language were considered. This approach provided a high level of detail which helped to build a deep understanding of the nature of teacher-child language interactions.

In the pages that follow in this section, I will review current literature pertaining to the identified problem and my purpose in conducting this study. Topics I will address include quality of language environment, quality of childcare, and interactions during preschool. A summary will end this section.

Quality of Language Environment

Hart and Risley (1995) said the impact of the language environment experienced by children is profound and lasting. Liebeskind et al. (2014) found a strong association between parent-child interactions and children's language production. Simple interactions such as having discussions while running errands could increase children's language production with or without the presence of media such as books. No special materials or formal plan was required. Rather, everyday activities such as grocery shopping, cleaning, or riding a bus have the potential for rich language learning. In addition, Reynolds et al. (2019) conducted a study including 567 children from two parent families living in six high poverty rural areas investigating parental language input during a shared picture book experiment during the first three years of life and children's kindergarten academic achievement in kindergarten. They found that mean length of utterance and use of wh-questions, requiring more than a one-word response, were associated with greater

academic success. Clearly, a variety of aspects of the home language environment contribute to children's language learning.

The relationship between parental responsiveness and inferential language with school readiness among socioeconomically disadvantaged students was also investigated by Merz et al. (2015). They found that responsiveness was predictive of both cognitive and emotional skills one year later. In addition, parental use of inferential language input was associated with children's language and emotional skills. They also reported that the influence of the parental language techniques varied according to the initial skill level of the child. When children had stronger initial language skills, greater levels of parental inferential language increased vocabulary development. In contrast, no association was found with parental inferential language and children's vocabulary development among children with lower initial language skills. This speaks to the interplay between children's characteristics and the language experiences provided.

In considering the quality of language environments experienced by children, one question that arises is the contribution of the language environments experienced outside of the home. For instance, what influence do the language interactions with teachers in early education and care programs have on children's development? Hart and Risley (1995) found that although preschool interventions could temporarily increase vocabulary growth, the effect was not lasting. Children's vocabulary could be increased through preschool instruction, but the next year, when the children were in kindergarten, the boost in vocabulary was lost (Hart & Risley,1995). They concluded that if they were to

understand vocabulary differences, they should focus on the language exchanges that occurred at home.

In contrast, other researchers found that early childhood programs influence children's development. Carr et al. (2019) found that higher quality instructional support during pre-kindergarten predicted higher language skills in kindergarten. This effect was enhanced by higher quality instructional support in kindergarten. Similarly, they found that higher quality emotional support, instructional support and classroom management scores were associated with better literacy skills in kindergarten. Again, the effect was enhanced by higher scores in all of these domains in kindergarten classrooms (Carr et al., 2019). Similarly, Anderson and Phillips (2017) found that emotional and instructional support were associated with stronger kindergarten academic skills and indirectly with test scores in middle school. Ansari and Pianta (2018) found the impact of high quality child care persisted when followed by high quality in elementary school classrooms. In recognition of the influence of both home and classroom influences on language, Landry et al. (2017) investigated the combined effect of successful Head Start classroom intervention (The Early Education Model, TEEM) and home intervention (Play and Learning Strategies, PALS). Their hypothesis that simultaneous home and school programs would be more powerful than either the classroom or home interventions alone was not completely supported. Nevertheless, future research may identify more successful strategies for combined home and school interventions.

Neuman et al. (2017) found notable differences in both the home and school language environments. Specifically, they discovered that children from low income

environments experienced lower quality language both at home and at school. Thus, these students begin their educational journey with a double disadvantage. This presents an opportunity for families and educators to overcome this hurdle and support children by bolstering the quality and quantity of language experienced by children in both settings.

Children's early classroom language environment has been demonstrated to have a lasting influence on their development. For example, Dickinson and Porche (2011) found that teachers' language in preschool classrooms supported children's language development in ways that were evident at the end of kindergarten and in Grade 4 reading comprehension. Specifically, teachers' higher use of sophisticated vocabulary was associated with greater emergent literacy and receptive vocabulary in kindergarten and with better fourth grade reading comprehension and word recognition. Students in classrooms with more responsive teachers experienced more growth in early literacy and language, developed increased working memory skills, and reduced levels of teacher-reported conflict (Hamre et al., 2014).

Researchers have also attempted to determine whether a specific threshold in classroom quality is associated with improved school readiness skills. Hatfield et al. (2016) investigated the influence of classroom quality as defined by effective teacher-child interactions on children's language, literacy, and inhibitory control. This study examined the relationships between specific dimensions of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) assessment tool and children's school readiness skills in a sample of large community preschools and Head Start Programs in several United States cities. Literacy skills such as phonological awareness and print knowledge were

associated with higher CLASS Classroom Organization scores. Inhibitory control and phonological awareness skills were greater when the CLASS Emotional Support score was higher. Although they found that higher levels of school readiness skills were associated with qualities of teacher-child interactions in the higher ranges, they did not find evidence for a specific threshold.

Racial and ethnic diversity in the United States has increased dramatically over the past 35 years and many of today's young children come from families who speak languages other than or in addition to English (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). Therefore, it makes sense to consider the effect of language support strategies on children's growth and learning. Cheatham, Jimenez-Silva and Park (2015)., described many feedback strategies that may be beneficial for dual language learners as well as monolingual students such as elicitation, direct feedback, and recasts. Van Druten et al., (2015) found that dual language learner students of highly educated preschool teachers experienced greater levels of vocabulary growth than did children of similar language background taught by teachers with less education. Also, these researchers found that increased experience levels of teachers were negatively associated with vocabulary growth. Sawyer et al. (2018) found that even highly educated teachers rarely used evidence based strategies to support the language development of the dual language learners in their classrooms. Rather, the most frequent form of teacher talk consisted of directives. Neuman and Wright (2014) found that without targeted content-rich instruction, the overall vocabulary growth and content knowledge of dual language learners in preschool actually went down. This points to a need for further investigation

to identify best practices to support these young students. As Yoon, Curby and Winsler (2014) mentioned, it is important for teachers and policy makers to recognize that dual language learners come from diverse backgrounds and a variety of factors influence their language development.

Quality of Child Care

Approximately 61% of preschoolers in the United States were enrolled in an early education and care program in 2012 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015). It is not surprising that in recent years there has been focus on defining and measuring quality. For example, the majority of states has developed quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to measure improve and communicate quality across a number of characteristics (Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2016). Aspects of overall program quality considered by state QRISs include factors such as teacher qualifications, health and safety, curriculum, assessment, and teacher-child interactions.

According to Pianta et al. (2016), definitions of child care quality often include structural elements such as teacher qualifications and daily schedule, classroom environment including furnishings, equipment and learning materials, teacher-student interactions, or an aggregate of all three. In longitudinal studies examining multiple indicators of quality, teacher-child interactions demonstrated unique and positive associations with learning gains (Pianta et al, 2016). Unfortunately, the problem of low levels of teacher-child language exchange is evident in early education and care programs (Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014).

Studies such as the National Center for Early Development and Learning state prekindergarten study, examining multiple domains of interactions, have reported that the quality of interactions varies markedly, ranging from ”sensitive and stimulating to harsh and dismissive” (Pianta, et al., 2016, p.124). Similarly, considerable variation in the quality of interactions as measured by the CLASS was found in a German study conducted by von Suchodoletz et al. (2014).They reported that the average overall levels of emotional support and classroom organization were moderate and the level of instructional support was rather low. However, there was wide variation between classrooms, including those within the same program. Davis and Torr (2016) also found wide variation in the teachers' use of questioning with children under the age of three Continued research is needed to deepen understanding of the specific differences that exist as well as strategies in raise the quality of interactions experienced by children within early childhood programs.

Studies in Pennsylvania and North Carolina (Pianta et al., 2016) found that the quality of interactions along social and organizational dimensions experienced by children in child care programs was lower than that experienced by children who attended state pre-kindergarten programs or Head Start programs. In addition, low income and African-American children were found to be more likely to experience ineffective teacher- child interactions (Pianta et al., 2016). Similarly, Neuman et al. (2017) conducted a quantitative study examining both home and school language supports in the Detroit area. They found that kindergarten classrooms in the poorest communities were characterized by more limited language opportunities. In these

schools, many teachers oversimplified language for the children. These results are in some ways similar to the findings of van Druten-Freitman et al. (2015), who reported that teacher experience levels were negatively associated with the vocabulary growth of dual language learners. They concluded that this may be due in part to the fact that more experienced teachers often worked with children with more risk factors. In response, these teachers may have lowered their expectations for these children. This supports a need for increased focus on the quality of the interactions experienced by all children.

Interactions During Preschool

As described earlier, considerable variability exists among the language environments experienced by children in early childhood programs. In addition to variation among the types of interactions experienced by children who attend different programs, there is much variation experienced by children within programs (Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014; Goble et al. 2016; von Suchodoletz, et al., 2014). Variations occur both among different teachers within a program and at different times within the program day.

Chen and de Groot Kim (2014) investigated interactions that occurred during different parts of the day. Their results differed based on time of day and activity, in that they found that teachers used child centered strategies and interaction promoting strategies the most during circle time, a teacher initiated activity. Similarly, Goble et al. (2016) found less variability in the quality of interactions that occurred during teacher-managed contexts. They found that time spent in teacher managed contexts was positively associated with school readiness.

According to Chen and de Groot Kim (2014), teacher-child interactions occurred the least during breakfast. The level of these interactions during free play fell somewhere in the middle. Overall, Chen and de Groot Kim (2014) found that face to face interactions occurred frequently, but the interactions tended to be unidirectional, consisting primarily of the teachers talking and asking questions requiring only brief responses from the children. Opportunities for extensive conversation were limited. Aras (2016) also considered the interactions that occurred between teachers and children during free playtime. In her phenomenological study, she found that teachers recognized the value of adult involvement in play; however, in practice, teachers' intentional involvement in play was disrupted when conflicts arose or children needed help. Often free playtime was used for teachers' organizational tasks such as completing plans or taking attendance. Goble et al. (2016) found variability in the quality of interactions that occurred during child-managed context. When teachers were directly involved with the child, time spent in child managed contexts was predictive of vocabulary, math, and social skills indicating the potential for maximizing learning during these portions of the day (Bain et al., 2015; Goble et al., 2016; Goble & Pianta, 2017; Trawick-Smith, Swaminathan, and Liu, 2016). Richardson and Murray (2017) found that open-ended play in a natural setting positively affected their interactions with people and objects within that environment, making this a particularly rich setting for learning.

Walsh and Rose (2013) examined the influence of non-eliciting and eliciting questions on children's vocabulary growth during shared storybook reading. Their research demonstrated that among Head Start students, concrete and non-eliciting

questions with the target word in the questions are more beneficial than eliciting questions that required the student to answer with the specific vocabulary word. They concluded that using the desired vocabulary word in the question provided additional exposure that could support the child's vocabulary development. This raises the question as to whether the same effect holds true for vocabulary use in other portions of the day.

Von Suchodoletz et al. (2014) examined the variability in teacher-child interactions within the morning as well as across classrooms. As was the case with Teachstone (2014), the overall scores in the domains of Emotional Support and Classroom Organization were higher than in the domain of Instructional Support. In examining the variability in ratings, von Suchodoltz et. al. (2014) reported that emotional support was lowest at the beginning of the morning and then increased slightly in programs with a low child-teacher ratio. In programs with a high child-teacher ratio, the scores declined throughout the morning. Organizational support remained relatively stable, and instructional support declined as the morning progressed in half-day programs and increased in independently-funded programs.

Cabell, Justice, McGinty, Decoster, and Forston (2015) conducted a study with two aims. Firstly, they examined the impact of professional development on the use of specific strategies to encourage language development. As expected, they found that a yearlong program of professional development increased the volume and quality of teacher conversations with children. Castle et al. (2016) suggested that specialized training in ECE may enhance the quality of care received in early childhood programs. Similarly, Cash, Cabell, Hamre, DeCoster, and Pianta (2015) found that teachers'

knowledge of language was predictive of children's gains in expressive vocabulary and teachers' knowledge of literacy was associated with children's gains in print knowledge. Early, Maxwell, Ponder and Yi (2017) reported that specialized training is associated with improvements in interactions, but there is a need for continued research to identify the most effective training models. This supported Ratcliff et al.'s (2017) recommendation that pre-service and in-service trainings for teachers and paraprofessionals incorporate the importance of language modeling. Secondly, they studied whether teachers' use of specific strategies, described as focused versus dispersed, was associated with children's gains. They found that the overall frequency of extended discourse and invitations for children's predicted children's vocabulary growth. Furthermore, they found that concentrated use of these techniques was more beneficial than the equally distributed use of them (Cabell et al., 2015).

Neuman and Wright (2014) illustrated the importance of activities focusing on concept development. They found that children who experienced targeting lessons in concept development were able to make connections and extend their learning to topics with which they were not familiar. These authors determined that vocabulary was best developed through a combination of explicit and implicit instruction, multiple exposures, and grouping words into categories. Similarly, Bowne, Yokhikawa, and Snow (2017) concluded that the more conceptual information that was incorporated in classroom discussion, the greater the children's end of kindergarten vocabulary was even when other student, teacher and school characteristics were controlled for. This illustrates the

value of purposefully planned learning situations that provide opportunities for concept and vocabulary development.

Similar to the findings of Goble et al. (2016), Meacham et al. (2016) found substantial variation in teacher responsiveness including topic initiating and topic continuing utterances n their qualitative and quantitative study of teacher language during dramatic play in Head Start classrooms,. This variation existed even though the classrooms were equipped with similar dramatic play props and followed the same curriculum. Overall, teachers were more proficient at topic-initiating conversation than topic extending conversation. These authors concluded that these are skills that need further development among teachers.

Ratcliff et al. (2017) conducted an observational study of federally funded prekindergarten programs that was intended to gain insight into how teachers and paraprofessionals modeled language and how the children responded. Hart and Risley (1995) demonstrated that language modeling is important, because they found that children's language grew more like their parents in vocabulary and in language and interactions styles. It seems reasonable to assume that children may also adopt the style of language used by their educators. Ratcliff et al. (2017) conducted four observations were conducted in each classroom for a period of 30 minutes per visit (15 minutes of teacher directed experiences and 15 minutes of non-teacher directed experiences) for a total of 120 minutes. The observers collected data on the language of the teachers, paraprofessionals and children. They focused on the extent to which desired language was used, including speaking in full grammatically correct sentences, asking open-ended

questions, and restating and elaborating on children's responses. They reported that the adults frequently failed to engage in desired language modeling. More specifically, the teachers modeled undesired language usage in 9.5% of their total interactions (4.9% included undesired grammar and sentence structure while 4.6% were one-word responses) and that paraprofessionals used undesired language in 17.4% of their interactions (12.1% contained undesired grammar and sentence structure and 5.3% were one word responses). In terms of student language, these authors found that students engaged in desired language skills, such as speaking in grammatically correct complete sentences, occurred more frequently during communication with peers and during self-talk than during interaction with teachers. One explanation for this could be that the teachers were primarily asking low level questions that required one word answers. In addition, teachers did not encourage the children to elaborate on or expand their responses.

Overall, these findings support other research, which indicated a concern for the quality of language interactions experienced by children in independently-funded early childhood programs and a need to expand understanding of the specific interactions that occur. Children's use of desired language with peers also points to the rich possibilities available in small group play- time.

Key Aspects of Language Exchange

Clearly, the language environment has the potential to impact children's development and learning. Previous research has affirmed the value of prioritizing oral language development during everyday interactions and curriculum within early

childhood classrooms (Chen & de Groot Kim, 2014; Gallagher, 2016; Pianta et al, 2016). Careful examination of specific features of language provides an increased understanding of the language environment experienced by children. Three aspects of language that influence children's development include the balance between affirmative and prohibitive feedback, the extent to which language exchanges are continued for multiple turns, and the use of complex vocabulary.

Hart and Risley (1995) examined the ratio of affirmative to prohibitive feedback during parent/child interactions. Affirmative feedback included direct praise as well as statements in which the parent repeated a child's statement and confirmed its accuracy. Prohibitive speech included restrictions such as "Don't do that." Hart and Risley found a significant difference associated with social strata was the amount of prohibitions parents gave their children. Specifically, the high language parents gave their children prohibitions at an average rate of five per hour. In contrast, the low language parents gave their children an average of 11. Because these parents spoke less on average thus this impact was magnified (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Ziv, Kupermintz, and Aviezer (2016) studied the associations among mothers' use of negative control, children's patterns of processing social information, and how teachers interpret preschool children's behavior. They found that negative parental behaviors during interactive play sessions are linked to less competent and more disruptive children's perceptions and behaviors in other contexts such as preschool. This demonstrates the effect of negative parental controls and points to a need for further examination of the use of affirmations and prohibitions during interactions.

The use of affirmations and prohibitions, as well as other techniques to encourage social-emotional development, plays a significant role in the language interactions experienced by children in preschool classrooms. For example, the Pyramid Model is a widely used framework used in early childhood classrooms for implementing research-based practices to promote social and emotional competence (Hemmeter, Snyder, Fox, & Algina, 2016). Hemmeter et al. (2016) reported that the teachers who applied the Pyramid Model provided higher levels of emotional support, and were more aware and responsive to children's academic and emotional concerns, than teachers who did not (Hemmeter, et al, 2016).

Another feature of language considered by Hart and Risley (1995) was the level of parental responsiveness or the relative amount of a child's experience with controlling the course of the interaction. Two examples of responsiveness occur when a conversation between a child and an adult is initiated by the child and also when adult talk centers around topics of interest to a child and within the child's capacity for understanding. Responsiveness is at the core of teaching in the zone of proximal development (Hart & Risley, 1995). One aspect of the CLASS instructional support dimension is the number of back and forth exchanges that occur (Pianta et al., 2008). Chen and de Groot Kim (2014) found limited instances of teachers implementing strategies for engaging children in bi-directional conversations. They found instead that most of the conversations were largely uni-directional with the teacher doing most of the talking and the child providing only brief answers.

A third aspect of the language environment experienced by children is the extent to which complex vocabulary is used by families and teachers. Neuman et al. (2017) found that parents from low income backgrounds used shorter sentences and fewer different words than working class parents even when engaged in similar activities. Similarly in kindergarten classrooms in low income communities, teachers used less varied and less complex vocabulary than did teachers in working class communities. Parents' sentence complexity was correlated with children's expressive and receptive vocabulary. Children's expressive vocabulary was also correlated with parental lexical diversity. Neuman et al. (2017) found that teachers' language was not associated with children's vocabulary but did contribute to children's early reading skills. The children in the poor neighborhoods did not experience the same level of language growth as those from the working class neighborhoods. Thus, the gap between them increased. This is significant in that early differences in in foundational language and literacy skills such as the size and depth of vocabulary may be linked to persistent gaps in socio-economic status achievement (Neuman et al., 2017).

Barnes and Dickinson (2017) found that medium level comments made during story reading were associated with children's vocabulary growth. Medium level strategies included providing definitions and explaining ideas to expand knowledge. These strategies expand understanding but do not require high levels of background knowledge. Thus, they serve as effective methods for scaffolding children's learning. Hindman, Wasik, and Bradley (2019) found that Head Start teachers rarely asked questions requiring more than one word answers during shared book reading resulting in missed

opportunities for language development. Wasik and Hinman (2014) found that teachers' frequent references to thematic vocabulary was associated with stronger children's vocabulary growth. Hadley, Dickinson, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Nesbitt (2016) found that preschoolers benefit from encountering the same words in multiple contexts such as in book reading and in play. This speaks to the power of play as an opportunity for vocabulary learning.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature provides compelling evidence that children experience significant differences in the language environments and that these environments have profound and lasting implications for children's development. A number of researchers have grappled with the question of how best to support children's learning both in the home and in early education and care settings. The majority of preschoolers are enrolled in some form of early childhood program (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2015; Sawyer et. al, 2018), making this a suitable setting in which to explore language interactions. In these settings, children generally spend a significant portion of their day in play activities (Sawyer et. al, 2018). Therefore, it is logical to assume that this portion of the day provides an important setting to consider teacher child language interactions. In this study, I attempted to build on this body of knowledge by examining teacher-child language exchange in child care settings. In particular, I examined the quality and quantity of teacher-child language exchange during free play. I addressed a gap in the literature by focusing on programs that do not receive Head Start or universal preschool funding. The variability found among interactions also indicates a need to increase

understanding of the specific nature of the language exchanges between teachers and children within early childhood programs.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate language environments experienced by children attending independently-funded early education and care programs in a culturally diverse city in the northeastern United States. More specifically, I examined the quality and quantity of teacher-child language exchanges during free play. In this chapter, I will discuss the methodology selected to guide this inquiry. I will also describe the research design, data collection, and analysis. In addition, I will discuss potential ethical concerns and issues related to the trustworthiness of this study.

Research Design and Rationale

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: How does teacher language in a preschool classroom include affirmative and prohibitive speech during free play?

RQ2: In what ways does teacher language in a preschool classroom support back and forth exchanges between teachers and children during free play?

RQ3: How do preschool teachers use complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during free play?

This research project took the form of an observational case study. A case study consists of a deep exploration of a bounded system in which the participants share a common factor or experience (Creswell, 2012). This investigation occurs within a real-life context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the bounded system is teacher-child language exchanges that occur during free play in preschool. This research method provided an opportunity to investigate the classroom language environment within the

natural context of actual classroom experiences. In an observational case study, participant observation serves as the primary method for data collection. The study focused on a specific activity of the organization.

The characteristics of the language environment experienced by preschoolers in independently-funded childcare were explored through direct observations similar to the method used by Hart & Risley (1995). In addition, the characteristics of the language to be studied are based upon the instructional support domain of the CLASS. This tool is a type of quantitative assessment which generates a numerical score. Examples of language interactions were counted and then described in a narrative manner. This study approached the topic in a primarily qualitative fashion in order to capture details of interactions that occurred. Considering the interactions in this way provided a high level of detail which supported a deep understanding of these interactions. Qualitative research focusses on process rather than outcomes or products (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for collecting and interpreting data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A researcher may accomplish this through a number of roles. In this study, I served as observer as participant, as my observation activities were known to the teachers being studied, yet my focus was on collecting data rather than participating in activities being observed. This stance enabled me to conduct observations within the classroom, generating a solid understanding of the group's activities without participating directly as a member of the classroom community. My role as a researcher was be overt, with participating teachers aware of the

purpose of my activities. I selected this approach as it enabled me to observe firsthand accounts of activities and interactions without disrupting the group or causing it to deviate from usual activities.

As this research relies largely on the collection and interpretation of data, it was important that I was mindful of my personal and professional relationships or biases that may impact the study. In order to reduce the possibility of personal or professional bias or power relationships, I conducted observations in classrooms that were unfamiliar to me. In addition, the programs selected were not in direct competition for students or funding with my own. Potential research sites were identified via public databases and both sites and individual teacher participants were screened for possible conflicts of interest prior to the start of the study. I selected settings in which I had no past or present professional role. I took care to ensure that this study was conducted in an ethical manner. Specific ethical procedures will be described later in Chapter 3.

I used an overt approach in which the participants know my intention. After building rapport, my goal was that my presence did not impact the nature of the interactions that naturally occur within the center. I positioned myself in a way that did not disrupt the classroom activities or call attention to my presence.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The population that was studied was teachers within classrooms in independently-funded early childhood programs in one northeastern state in the United States. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. This method is based on the assumption that the investigator strives to discover, understand, and gain insight into the details of participants' experiences. Typical sampling is a form of purposeful sampling in which the researcher studies a person or site that is typical or ordinary (Creswell, 2012). The goal of this study was to understand the interactions that occur between children and adults during free play time at independently-funded early childhood programs. Typical sampling was used to identify participants and settings that were representative of what the ordinary preschooler experienced.

In order to identify potential participants, childcare programs were identified using public databases such the target state's child care licensing agency, Department of Early Education and Care search engine, and the National Association for the Education of Young Children database of accredited programs. I used these public databases because they provided a comprehensive list of early childhood programs in the state. In order for a program to be identified, it must provide 40 or more hours per week of childcare all year, have at least one classroom that specifically serves preschoolers, and must not be receiving Head Start or UPK funding. Informational letters were sent to the directors of identified programs describing the study and encouraging them to permit their teaching staff to participate. Initially, 20 programs were contacted that were located

within a 15-mile radius of my home or workplace. Additional centers were contacted in order to recruit enough participants. The letter to directors detailed the purpose of the study and nature of the classroom observations. I followed up by phone and email.

Once programs were identified and directors approved participation for their teachers, informational materials were distributed to the teachers at each center. Participating teachers in the study had to meet the following criteria: current employment in a preschool classroom for at least 30 hours per week and a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience. In addition, I visited the sites to answer any questions that the teachers had about the study. The program director was asked to sign a letter of agreement and the teachers were each given an informed consent form. The informed consent form explained the procedures and risks associated with the study as well as the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.

This procedure was followed until six participants were identified. The first six eligible participants to respond served as the focus of this study. Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases that can provide extensive information about the research topic (Lodico et al, 2010). According to Yin (2011), qualitative research may focus on a small number of subjects to be studied intensely. The relatively small number of participants enabled me to record detailed accounts regarding language as experienced by children. The focus was on exploring individuals within their natural context rather than generalizing the results of the study to a larger population. Including multiple sites provides a higher degree of confidence than studying a single classroom (Yin, 2011).

Participating teachers were observed during free play time. The timing of the observations was based on the classroom daily schedule to ensure that they are conducted during free play time. Each teacher was observed twice for a period of at least one hour. Because the free play period was less than an hour, an additional observation was conducted of one participant to make sure that a minimum of two hours of free play observation was conducted. Written field notes and observational checklists were used to record the language exchanges between the teachers and children. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that "observations take place in the setting where the interactions naturally occur" (p. 137). Because the observations took place within the preschool classrooms during a typical day, they provided authentic information about the language exchanges between teachers and children. The data collection ended at the point of saturation, when observations are yielding no new information (Yin, 2011).

The research questions were used as a framework by which to group the data and identify key themes following each observation. Specifically, the observation of the teachers' language were examined to identify examples of affirmative versus prohibitive speech, back and forth language exchanges, and the use of advanced vocabulary. The extent to which these categories of language exchange occurred provided insights into the characteristics of the preschool language environment that have implications for children's development.

Instrumentation

Direct observation was used to gather information about teacher-child interactions that occurred during free play time. An observational protocol was developed to ensure

that observations are conducted in a systematic and focused manner (Lodico et al., 2010). Consistent implementation of the observational protocol helped to ensure that the observations were conducted in a standardized manner. This contributed to the trustworthiness of the study.

Open-ended observation was selected as it enabled me to study actual behavior and document information as it occurs in a setting. Data collection in qualitative research is usually characterized by flexible, naturalistic methods that often take the form of words and pictures (Lodico et al., 2010). I used an observational checklist, included in Appendix C, to ensure that the classroom observations were conducted in a systematic manner. I made field notes to document the observations that occurred between teachers and children. These descriptive field notes recorded a description of the activities within the classroom setting (Lodico et al., 2010), and included detailed descriptions of the interactions observed and transcripts of the language exchanges between teachers and children. Reflective field notes were also written to record preliminary themes, interpretations, and insights into the interactions I observed. The process of recording feelings and ideas about the observation aided me in recognizing how these perceptions may have influenced the observation. In addition to the narrative descriptions of the interactions that occur, examples of affirmative versus prohibitive speech, back and forth language exchanges, and the use of complex vocabulary were counted.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

As stated earlier, eligible childcare programs were identified using public data bases such as the target state's Department of Early Education and Care search engine

and the National Association for the Education of Young Children database of accredited programs. Informational letters were distributed to the directors of identified programs describing the study and encouraging them to share information about study participation with their preschool teachers. The directors were informed about the purpose of the study and nature of the classroom observations. I followed up via telephone and email. Three centers agreed to allow me share information with their teachers and conduct classroom observations at their site. These directors signed a letter of cooperation.

After receiving the director's approval, informational materials were distributed teachers at each center who met the following eligibility criteria: currently employment in a preschool classroom for at least 30 hours per week and a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience. I visited each site to answer any questions that the teachers had about the study. The teachers were asked to sign an informed consent form explaining the purpose and procedure of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and their right to withdraw at any time. The first six eligible participants who volunteers served as participants in the study. I observed all six participants for two hours each as they interacted with children during free play at the early childhood programs where they taught. All of the observations took place between September 14, 2018 and November 26, 2018. The specific dates are listed in Chapter 4. The observations were scheduled on dates and times mutually agreeable to the participants and me. The interactions were recorded via handwritten field notes including transcripts of the language interactions that occurred. Following the observations all participants were thanked for their participation.

Data Analysis Plan

Following the observations, the data were analyzed in order to address the research questions. Qualitative data analysis involves identifying themes, categories, patterns, or answers to the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once the data were collected and organized the process of analysis began. This process started with a preliminary exploratory analysis to get a general sense of the data (Creswell, 2012).

Observation field notes contain a seemingly endless array of information. In order to make sense of the data, I constructed categories based upon the research questions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), categories should be "responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive" (p.213). The categories or themes provided a structure for sorting the data in ways that related to each research question.

The data analysis focused on addressing the research questions that guided the study. RQ1 asked: To what extent is teacher language in a preschool classroom focused on affirmative versus prohibitive speech? This was assessed through the use of the observational checklist included in Appendix A. Affirmative speech includes statements of encouragement, such as "You can do it!", "Wow, that's a tall building you made!" etc. Examples of prohibitive speech include statements such as "Stop that!" and "No!" Analysis included a calculation of the ratio of prohibitions to affirmations, as well as a description of the language used, context, and tone. Any differential application of affirmations and prohibitions that occurred in connection with specific activities, areas of the room, or children was also noted.

RQ2 asked: To what extent does teacher language in a preschool classroom support back and forth exchanges between teachers and children? Again, field notes were used to record and categorize examples of the language exchanges that occurred. Data analysis included a comparison of each teacher's interactions during the two observations and between the different classrooms, as well as situational factors that seemed to affect the number and quality of back and forth exchanges.

RQ3 asked: To what extent do teachers use complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during free play? Field notes were used to record the vocabulary used by teachers during interactions with children, with attention to use of generic words, like "that" and "thing," and use of specific terms and usual words, including nouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. The words used were rated for specificity and distinctiveness using the three tier framework outlined by Beck et al (2013). Firstly, the transcripts were reviewed and words contained within the list of the 100 most frequently used English words (Education First, n.d.) were eliminated. Complex vocabulary was identified by considering the remaining words based on their importance and utility, conceptual understanding, and instructional potential (Beck et al., 2013).

In order to address these questions, field notes were taken to record the specific language used by teachers. Direct quotes were recorded in order to capture the exact nature of the language used. Although gestures and other nonverbal communication form an integral portion of the interactions that occur, the focus here was specifically the language exchanges that occurred. The data were coded by hand rather than computer. The coding took place once all data were collected.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential consideration in research quality. According to Yin (2011), trustworthiness involves transparency and is enhanced by explicitly and methodically describing the procedures, decisions, and challenges faced along the way. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are all components of trustworthiness that must be considered. Each of these will be discussed in terms of how they relate to the present study.

Credibility or internal validity refers to the extent to which the findings match reality (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016). In a credible study, care is taken to ensure that the data is properly collected and interpreted to so that it accurately represents the topic of study (Yin, 2011). One strategy to ensure creditability is adequate engagement in data collection. The data and the emergent findings must feel saturated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In other words, the researcher begins to see the same things over and over. In this study, I conducted detailed observations in each of the classrooms twice during free play time. Each observation took a full hour. In one classroom the data felt insufficient; therefore an additional observation was added.

Reflexivity or the researcher's position as an influence on the study is another component of creditability (Yin, 2011). Investigators must reveal their biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research. This enables the reader to better understand how the researcher arrived at the particular interpretation of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In qualitative research, goal is not to eliminate the researcher's beliefs and perceptions, rather it is to understand how the researcher's values and expectations

shaped the conduct and conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, I approached the research from the perspective of a child care center director and early childhood education college instructor. It is important to state this explicitly so that the findings can be considered in light of the my perspective.

External validity, or transferability, refers to the extent to which the findings may be applied to other situations. One strategy that may be used to enhance transferability is the use of "rich, thick descriptions" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 256). In conducting and reporting the research, detailed descriptions were recorded. For example, detailed information was provided about the background of each site, teacher demographic information, size of group, and classroom environment. The field notes taken during the observation had sufficient detail to capture as much information as possible about the interactions.

Typical or model category sampling is used to describe how typical the program or event is compared with others in the same class (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the research sites selected were those typical of independently-funded child care. For example, observations were conducted at programs licensed by the local state's Department of Early Education and Care, in preschool classrooms staffed with Department of Early Education and Care certified teachers. Classrooms had group sizes of 15 to 20 children.

Dependability in qualitative research focuses on the extent to which the processes and procedures used in analyzing data can be tracked (Lodico et al., 2010). In this study, a detailed description of the methods used in collecting and analyzing data was provided

to ensure that all of the processes used can be tracked. The original data will be kept on file for five years so that it may be reviewed if needed.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed or corroborated by others. One technique that was used to establish confirmability is maintaining a detailed record of all of the procedures used in conducting the research. In addition, the data were checked and rechecked to confirm that they were collected and analyzed according to plan.

Ethical Procedures

The trustworthiness of a study depends in part upon the researcher conducting it in the most ethical way possible (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All participants are to be treated in an ethical manner, both during the research activities and later in the reporting of the findings. This is accomplished by establishing and following procedures at every step in the process.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviews research proposals to ensure that the rights of the participants are protected. IRB approval number 06-05-18-0449413 was obtained prior to any classroom observation. The IRB is concerned with the treatment of all human subjects, but particularly with the protection of vulnerable populations such as children. Although this study focused on teachers rather than young children, it took place in a setting with children present. Thus, care was taken to ensure that the study did not harm them in any way.

The NAEYC code of ethical conduct outlines a number of principles and ideals that guide ethical practice in the field of early childhood education and care.

Professionals in all roles are called upon to respect the "dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague)" and "recognize that children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust and respect" (NAEYC, 2005, p.1). Throughout this study, I kept these principles in mind in all interactions and observations with children and adults. For example, all participants were informed about the nature and goals of the study, and confidentiality was carefully maintained.

A letter was sent to the directors of suitable child care centers to invite the participation of their preschool teachers. The programs were provided with detailed information describing the purpose as well as the specific activities of the study. The director was asked to sign a letter of agreement and the teachers an informed consent form. As suggested by Lodico et al. (2010), the informed consent form detailed the procedures and risks associated with the study as well as the voluntary nature of the study and their right to withdraw at any time.

A face to face meeting was held with each participant in order to establish a working relationship and explain the nature of the study. All participants were informed that this study was being conducted as part of my requirements as a doctoral student and unrelated to my work as a program director and college faculty member. All were informed that participation was completely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. In addition, the families of the children in the classrooms were informed about the study. During the observations themselves, care was taken not to disrupt the program activities.

The names of the early childhood programs and the teachers observed have been kept confidential. Instead, pseudonyms were used in referring to participants. In discussing the setting, all identifying details were eliminated from the report. In addition, the specific communities where the observations occurred were not named. To ensure the confidentiality and protection of data, all field notes have been stored in a locked file cabinet when not being reviewed for the purpose of this study. These records will be maintained for five years following the completion of the study and then will be destroyed. All data stored on a computer have been password protected.

Conducting research within an early childhood program brings with it some unique ethical considerations. For example, when discovering reasonable cause to suspect that a child is experiencing abuse or neglect, it must be reported to the appropriate authorities. All study participants were informed of this prior to the first observation, and a protocol was developed with each site director. The target state's Department of Children and Families would have been notified in the unlikely event of suspected child abuse or neglect, and the Department of Early Education and Care would have been notified as well in the case of institutional abuse.

Summary

A qualitative study design was selected to examine the teacher-child interactions that occurred during free play time in a independently-funded early childhood program. This approach was chosen because qualitative research is descriptive, occurs within a naturalistic setting, focuses on the process, and is inductive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The research questions introduced in Chapter 1 were investigated using classroom

observation and analysis A number of measures were in place to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner. In Chapter 4, I will describe the implementation and results of this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine language interactions between preschool teachers and children based on the parameters determined by Hart and Risley (1995) and characteristics of interactions assessed by the CLASS. The following research questions served as the focus of this study and were used to examine the data.

RQ1: How does teacher language in a preschool classroom include affirmative and prohibitive speech during free play?

RQ2: In what ways does teacher language in a preschool classroom support back and forth exchanges between teachers and children during free play?

RQ3: How do preschool teachers use complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during free play?

This chapter describes the participant recruitment process, settings for the observations, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Research questions were used to analyze the data and organize the findings. In addition, in this chapter, I will discuss the trustworthiness of the data.

Setting

Recruitment took the form of emails and phone calls I made to full day childcare programs listed in the Department of Early Education and Care database in the state that is the location of this study. In addition, I posted information on regional childcare administration social media discussion boards inviting early childhood centers to share information about the study with their staff. This process yielded three directors who signed letters of cooperation as community research partners and distributed information

about the study to their preschool teaching staff. I submitted these letters of cooperation to the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received approval (# 06-05-18-0449413) prior to the commencement of research. All early childhood programs were locally owned and operated independent centers that serve children ranging from infancy through school age in a northeast state. These early childhood programs provide year-round full day early care and education services.

Six preschool teachers volunteered to participate in the study. P1 and P2 worked at one center, P3 worked at another, and P4, P5, and P6 worked at a third early childhood center. P4 and P5 were team teachers within the same classroom. All participants were female. All were full time teachers and have been employed at their centers for at least 2 years. Of the six teachers, one held a master's degree, two held bachelor's degrees, two held associate's degrees, and one had completed some college but not a degree program. Preschool teaching experience ranged from 2 to 15 years (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Teacher	Education Level	Preschool Teaching Experience
P1	Bachelor's degree	5 years
P2	Some college	15 years
P3	Master's degree	3 years
P4	Associates degree	8 years
P5	Bachelor's degree	2 years
P6	Associates degree	13 years

Six preschool teachers were observed as they interacted with children during free play time. Two of the preschool teachers (P1 and P6) were observed teaching younger preschool aged children (approximately 2.75 to 3.5 years). The other four teachers (P2, P3, P4, and P5) were observed with older preschoolers (approximately 3.5 to 5 years old).

Data Collection

I observed all six participants for approximately two hours each as they interacted with children during free play. All observations took place between September 14, 2018 and November 26, 2018. The observations were scheduled on dates and times mutually agreeable for the participants and myself (see Table 2).

Table 2

Observation Dates

Teacher	Observation 1	Observation 2	Observation 3
Participant 1	October 15	November 12	
Participant 2	October 12	October 16	
Participant 3	September 14	September 28	November 9
Participant 4	November 1	November 2	November 26
Participant 5	October 3	November 2	
Participant 6	September 28	November 2	

The times of observations varied based upon the daily schedules of each classroom. In two cases, teachers worked as part of a teaching team with between 14 and 16 children. In all other cases, one teacher was working alone with 10 or fewer children. In one center, I changed classrooms as the subject of my observation left the room for a meal break. I returned to the original classroom at a later date to complete the observation. I had to return to the center to observe P3 for a third time in order to observe two hours of free play in her classroom. The observational protocol included in Appendix A was used to ensure that observation procedures were followed properly. I kept field notes to record language interactions that occurred between teachers and children during free play.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an inductive process, meaning a multitude of small bits of information are collected and combined and organized to form more broad and general conclusions (Lodico et al., 2010). In this case, small bits of information consisted of handwritten field notes from each observation. Initially, I read through my field notes to get a general sense of the data. The observation notes consisted largely of direct quotes from teachers, which I categorized by research question.

I then made notes according to the three research questions. For example, as I considered RQ1, I divided the paper into columns for affirmations and prohibitions. I wrote down direct quotes from the teachers that fit into each category. On a separate sheet of paper, I wrote down reflective notes or ideas and interpretations of interactions. I counted the number of statements that clearly fit into the category of affirmation or prohibition. I reviewed the definitions of affirmations and prohibitions and then returned to the field notes to reexamine my classification of teacher utterances. I repeated this process multiple times to ensure that I had included all affirmations and prohibitive statements.

For RQ2, I read my field notes and counted back and forth exchanges that occurred between teachers and children. I wrote down examples of extended conversations. Again, I wrote down my reflections on a separate sheet of paper. I repeated this process to ensure that I had included all affirmations and prohibitive statements.

To organize data concerning RQ3, I read my field notes and made lists of complex vocabulary used by teachers in each observation. Words included in the 100 most frequently used English words were eliminated. According to Beck et al. (2013), tier one words are those typically used in oral language, tier three words tend to be rare words that even an avid reader may not encounter in a lifetime. Tier two words are wide ranging and are of high utility for literate language users. I listed words that seemed to fit the definition of tier two and tier three vocabulary words. In addition, I made note of themes related to vocabulary such discussion of terms in multiple languages or alternative meanings of familiar words.

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine language interactions between preschool teachers and children during free playtime in full day preschool classrooms. I collected data in the form of field notes from classroom observation. In the following pages, I present the findings organized by the three research questions.

RQ1 Results

RQ1 was: How does teacher language in a preschool classroom include affirmative and prohibitive speech during free play? Hart and Risley (1995) defined prohibitions as statements of explicit disapproval such as “I hate you” and “that’s wrong,” and imperatives such a “don’t,” “stop,” or “shut up.” According to Hart and Risley (1995), affirmatives included expressions of explicit approval such as “that’s right” and “I love you,” as well as utterances immediately following a child’s utterance expanding and extending the content of the child’s statement.

I examined my field notes and identified statements that were explicitly affirmative or prohibitive. I classified statements that included words such as “No” and “don’t” that explicitly told a child to cease an undesired behavior as prohibitive. I classified statements as affirmative that contained phrases such as “great job” and “you did it.” Although my focus was on teacher language, factors like voice tone, facial expressions, and the children’s reaction to the language all contributed to this classification.

Overall, affirmations far exceeded prohibitions during the observations. All six participants made affirmative statements. For example, P1 stated, “You did the right thing, you know just what to do,” and P3 said, “Great job, you did it. You should be so proud of yourselves.” During clean-up time, P6 recognized a small group effort with “Nice teamwork boys!” P5 used phrases such as “Nice job” and “Awesome” in response to children’s compliance. P2 and P4 affirmed children’s correct information with statements such as “You are right” and “Yes, a blizzard is a storm with snow.”

Although all participants made affirmative statements, the specific nature of their language varied. For example, during one observation P5 assisted children in making a hand print gift for the families. Much of her language consisted of commands such as “Come here. I’m going to put paint on your hand for mommy and daddy. Spread your fingers and press down. Go wash your hands. Let me separate your fingers a little bit. Let’s try that again. Open wide, separate. All right girl, good job go wash.” Although she praised the students using phrases such “good job” and “awesome,” specific meaningful feedback was not offered.

P3 stated, “You’ve got this buddy, I know you have practicing on your own” and “Laurie, you have been doing a great job since I had that little talk with you this morning. I am super-duper proud of you.” One child successfully used a paper punch independently after multiple attempts and considerable teacher assistance. She responded by saying, “Great job, you did it.” During another observation, she asked, “Why am I so proud of Matthew and Sophie?” Both children responded by saying, “I didn’t cry.” These statements acknowledged children’s progress and improvement over time towards individual goals. She stated, “Everyone is working on something.” It appeared that in most, but not all cases, the teacher had selected the goals.

P6 encouraged a child to put on a dress in the dramatic play area by giving clues such as “the tag goes where?” Once the child had successfully put on the dress she said, “You did it, yellow is your color! Go look in the mirror.” As a little girl used the pretend tools, she stated, “Maybe the next time Ms. Tricia needs an Allen wrench to fix the tables you can help her.” All of these statements provided affirmation of specific actions and emphasized the children’s competence.

P2 and P4 acknowledged and expanded upon children’s responses. For example, a child approached P4 and stated, “Parker and Carter’s names are the same.” P4 responded by saying, “Yes, they end with the same sound. What do they start with?”

P2 used the most directly prohibitive statements, all specifically related to health and safety. For example, she stated, “They shouldn’t be near your eyes” in reference to thumbtacks that were used for classroom activity. When children became involved in a physical altercation, she stated, “No, we will not be hitting, or you will need to go to

another area." In these cases, a potentially dangerous situation needed immediate intervention to prevent harm. When asked, "Can we take off our coats?" she replied, "No, it's still chilly in the morning." Although danger was not immediately present in this instance, the temperature was cool enough to warrant her response.

In several cases, teachers made prohibitive statements followed by instructions for an alternative child behavior. This tended to be the case when children needed assistance with social problem solving. For example, P3 stated, "We don't tattle tale, we solve problems. Don't go to the teacher unless you need the teacher's help." Similarly, P1 stated, "You don't have to yell and grab, just tell him." P5 approached a conflict by saying, "What's going on? You do not need to yell like that. There are other ways to solve that." When a child became visibly upset, P4 asked, "What's wrong? Did he knock your castle down? Can you say 'please don't knock my castle down?'" In this situation, the teacher did not make a prohibitive statement herself. Rather, she encouraged the child to tell the classmate what was bothering them.

In a few cases, the teachers responded to potentially problematic situations by encouraging children to see the results of the actions themselves. For example, P6 stated, "Look what happens when you do that with the puzzle. The pieces have to sit within the rectangle." P1 asked, "Is pushing working or is it making the person next to you mad?" In both cases, the children adjusted their actions accordingly. Here is an example of longer exchange between a child and P3.

Child: "Can I go in block area?"

P3: "I don't know. Can you?"

Child: “What?”

P3: “How many friends are in block area?”

Child: “Three.”

P3: “How many friends can go there?”

Child: “Three.”

P3: “Can you play there then?”

Child: “No”

Following the exchange, the child began to play in an area different from the block area. In all of these situations, the teachers used a calm, neutral voice tone, which may have contributed to the children’s willingness to comply. In addition, these interactions supported the child in understanding the effects of their actions and their capacity to make decisions to address problems.

In another observation, P6 stated, “We have to clean our wall.” The child asked “Why?” P6 explained, “Because someone drove a car on it.” The emphasis is on explaining the problem and the steps needed to correct it, rather than admonishing the child for the problematic behavior.

In the following conversation, P3 asked with a neutral tone:

P3: “Did you hear me”

Child: “Yes”

P3: “What did I say?”

Child: “Give one to her.”

P3: “No, I don’t think you heard me. Go use the potty.”

Child: (inaudible)

P3: “It’s not a choice; we all have to go to the bathroom before we go outside.” P3 initiated the interaction with a question. The teachers’ voice tone, words, and body language conveyed the message that she assumed the child had not heard the initial instruction. It in no way communicated that she felt the child intended to ignore the direction.

When a child’s voice level rose, P6 asked, “Why are you yelling? Walk over to her please.” The child complied with the instructions. The teacher’s positive facial expression and calm voice tone seemed to contribute to the child’s willingness to comply with the instructions.

In several cases, participants avoided making a prohibitive statement by describing alternative behavior. For example, P4 suggested, “You could say to Olivia, ‘You could share with me’” and “You don’t want him to get trapped. You could wait a few minutes.” As she modeled cleaning up puzzle pieces, she stated, “I am putting the pieces in carefully so that they do not bend and bow. Then we would not be able to use the puzzle any more. We will have to show our other friends how to put it away. It will be an experiment to see if they can clean up.” The children responded to these statements by adjusting their behavior to meet the classroom expectations. This approach seemed to encourage the children to take ownership of their behavior and the resulting outcomes.

Overall, affirmations exceeded prohibitions during the observations. In total 36 statements appeared to be clearly affirmations and 13 were clearly prohibitions. As mentioned previously, most directly prohibitive statements related to health and safety

issues that required immediate attention in order to prevent harm. I classified statements that were not specifically affirmations or prohibitions as neutral statements. Neutral speech included all other forms of language including questions, instructions, and matter of fact observations. The majority of the teacher-child language interactions were not explicitly affirmative or prohibitive. For example, one observation of Participant 2 yielded two explicit affirmations, three explicit prohibitions, and 60 that did not explicitly fit into either category.

RQ2 Results

RQ2 was: In what ways does teacher language in a preschool classroom support back and forth exchanges between teachers and children during free play? The observations varied considerably in terms of the amount of back and forth language exchanges that occurred between teachers and children. The following paragraphs contain some specific examples of conversations that occurred between teachers and children.

P6 was observed twice while teaching younger preschoolers. During the first observation, which occurred early in the school year, P6 was the only adult present with a group of seven young preschoolers. During this observation, few extended conversations occurred. The longest conversation that occurred took place when one child approached her with a torn book.

The conversation proceeded as follows:

Child: “Somebody ripped the book right here.”

P6: “I’ll have to get some tape.”

Child: “Who ripped it?”

P6: ‘I don’t know. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe someone went to turn the page and tore the page. Let’s set that one here. I’ll fix it later.”

During the second observation, a few months later, P6 was working alongside another teacher in a class of 12 children. In this observation, she spent at least 25 minutes in the dramatic play area engaging with children while her coworker circulated throughout the room. She had extended individual conversations with six children related to the materials that they were playing with. Topics included carpentry, family, police, firefighters, and doctor and veterinarian play. For example:

P6: “Hi Amy. What are you doing?”

Child: (inaudible)

P6: “Where’s the daddy?”

Child: (holds up a play fire fighter figure)

P6: “I know what a fire fighter does. He’s a firefighter, that’s his job.”

Child: “I am going to work. Bye bye, I am going” She moved the firefighter figure away and continued to play with a toy house.

P6: “Look at all of those beds. There are a lot of people that live in that house.”

Child: (inaudible)

P6: “One, two, three, four babies.”

The child put a baby in bed. She brought the fire fighter figure back and said “Bye, bye.”

P6: “He’s going to work.”

This conversation was typical of her interactions during this play session.

P1 also engaged in several conversations with her students. For example, while sitting at a table with several children she initiated the following conversation:

P1: “So this weekend, I am going to a bridal shower. What will I do there?”

Children do not respond.

P1: “Bridal means that someone is getting married. It’s at a golf club.”

Child: “You need a bathing suit. You will get wet.”

P1: “Shower implies getting wet.”

Child: “Miss Pam, you need to take off your clothes.”

P1: “But there will be lots of people there. I thought people took showers by themselves. The invitation said there will be brunch. What is brunch?”

Child: “A drink”

P1: “Oh there’ll be drinks.”

The conversation continued until a child changed the topic by asking, “Why don’t we have cheese?” In this case, P1 started the conversation by asking a question and allowing time for the children to respond. There was not a sense of urgency to get to the correct answer immediately.

Back and forth exchanges were limited during the observation of P5, as demonstrated in the handprint activity described in the results of RQ1. Once the handprint activity began, P5’s speech was characterized by commands such as, “Come here. I’m going to put paint on your hand for mommy and daddy,” and, “Spread your

fingers and press down," without a break between commands for the child to respond. She delivered a string of eight such commands without a pause. These instructions and the teacher's manner did not invite the child to provide a verbal response. Rather the focus seemed to be on completing the task quickly and efficiently. The children generally complied silently.

P2 engaged a child in an extended dialogue by initiating discussion about a topic meaningful to her. The conversation proceeded as follows:

P2: "Did you see George's giant pumpkins at the Barrett Hill Farm"

Child: "He came in fourth place. George's pumpkin."

P2: "Yes, he grew it all by himself."

Child: (inaudible)

P2: "There is a giant squash too. It was $100."

Child: "Did you buy it?"

P2: "No, I have $26 left in my farm share."

Another extended interaction occurred between P2 and her students when a child's toy slid under a classroom shelf. Four students became involved in an extended process of getting the toy out from under the shelf.

Child: "It went under there."

P2: "What went under there? The apple?" (lays down to look) "Get a flashlight."

Child: "Got it."

P2: "There's a Lego. Maybe Coda can get it. Try to get it out. I couldn't reach it."

Child: “Can you reach it?”

P2: “Wesley, maybe you can reach it as you have the longest arms. Maybe Coda can hold the flashlight and Wesley can reach it.”

Child: “I see it.”

P2: “You see it. Can you reach it?”

Child: “I have long arms.”

P2: “You have long arms. How are you going to get it? The broom won’t fit under. How are you going to get it?”

Children bring over items such as spoons and paper towel rolls. The dialogue continues as follows:

P2: “Is it working Mia? I don’t think that will work as it is too little.” [Children continue to bring over items.]

P2: “I’m going to get it. I just have to figure it out. Maybe bring over a ruler. Let’s see if this works it’s little and it’s sturdy. I need a light. We got it!”

An example of a conversation between P4 and a child while playing with a Mr. Potato Head toy continued much longer than many of the conversations I observed:

P4: “What does a face have? Two eyes, one nose, two ears”

Child: “I have five cheeks.”

P4: “Do you have five cheeks?”

Child: “My potato head does not have feet.”

P4: He’s a very happy potato head.”

Child: (inaudible)

P4: “Do you want a blue nose or a black nose?”

Child: “Blue. They are different.”

P4: “Do we have the same noses?

Child: “No.”

P4: “That makes us different. What do we have inside? Do we have skeletons?”

Child: “Yes.”

P4: “Skeletons are bones. We have muscles and bones. What carries the oxygen to different parts of our body?”

Child: “Blood.”

The conversation ended when the timer signaled the children to switch activity areas. In this classroom, a timer sounded every ten minutes. When the timer went off, all children met on the rug and selected a different area to play in. This seemed to be disruptive to the flow of conversation. For example,

Child: “I made a ship.”

P4: “What happens when the wind blows?”

Child: (inaudible)

P4: “The ship could tip over so they have to work together to make sure it doesn’t tip.”

Child: “What about the oar?”

The conversation ended here when the timer sounded.

During the observations of P3, conversation length tended to be rather limited, and focused on ensuring that everyone used the bathroom before outdoor play. For

example, “Mike, can you go in the bathroom to check who is inside?” and “Okay, thank you. Can you use the bathroom please?” When a child stated, “I don’t need the bathroom,” P3 responded by saying. “It’s not a choice. We all need to go to the bathroom because we are going outside. We cannot come in once we are outside.” In addition, “Larry be ready. I can hear the soap. Jack is almost done.” Again, the focus seemed to be on completing the task quickly and efficiently.

On the other hand, P3 did have several conversations focusing on interests of herself and the children. For example,

P3: “Lucy, do you ride your horse at your farm? What’s her name?”

Child: “It’s not a girl. It’s a boy.”

P3: “What’s his name?”

Child: “Freddy”

P3: “What is your brother’s horse’s name?”

Child: “Freddy”

P3: “You just have one horse?”

Another example of a conversation that P3 had with an individual child is this one:

Child: “I bet your dog likes Paw Patrol.”

P3: “No, he likes watching movies.”

Child: “Funny ones, scary ones, all kinds?”

It is noteworthy that in this case, the child initiated the topic for discussion. Another example of a child-initiated conversation with P3 began with a child asking, “Do you have your walkie talkie?” Similarly, a conversation with Participant 1 began with a child

stating “Remember last night I got a new backpack.” This led into a discussion of different types of camouflage.

Overall, the length of teacher-child conversations varied considerably. Variations existed both between teachers and between different observations of the same teacher. The nature of the activities happening within the classroom seemed to influence the extent to which a teacher’s language supported back and forth exchanges. Transitions such as having children switch activities or sending children to the bathroom seemed to limit the length of conversations that occurred.

RQ3 Results

RQ3 was: How do preschool teachers use complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during free play? There was considerable variation in the extent to which the preschool teachers used complex vocabulary in their interactions with children during the observations. The following pages provide examples of the vocabulary used in the classroom. Words that appear to fit the definition of tier two vocabulary words are italicized. I did not observe the use of any words so rare that they truly fit the definition of tier three vocabulary words. Because the children were very young, vocabulary that may seem quite simple to an adult seemed to fit the definition of complex vocabulary. Terms such as “sensory table” are not included here as they are common words in an early childhood setting.

In a few instances, teachers used the materials available in the play area as an opportunity for vocabulary development. For example, as children played with building materials, P5 took advantage of an opportunity to explain what a *level* is. Similarly, P6

engaged in discussion related to the props available in dramatic play. Specifically, she explained that a *carpenter* might use *safety goggles* to protect his or her eyes. In addition, she explained that a *veterinarian* is a doctor for animals. These words seem to fit the definition of tier two vocabulary because they are complex but not so rare that an educated individual is unlikely to encounter them.

P1 used a tier 2 vocabulary word in contest when she stated that shower *implies* getting wet. *Implies* fits the definition of a tier two word as it is a high utility term that is likely encountered in a variety of contexts. Other words used that are applicable in a variety of contexts include *construct* (used by P4) and *protect* (used by P6).

Teachers used seasonal topics and classroom props related to the region and children's experiences to introduce new vocabulary. For example, P2 discussed a pumpkin grown by a family in the program. She stated that it was displayed at a local farm and had won fourth place in a pumpkin competition. She continued to talk about other vegetables and their prices. In addition, she spoke about the balance in her *farm share*. During one observation, Participant 1 had cranberries available in her classroom and incorporated the word *bog* in her conversation. These discussions focused on terminology relevant to local agriculture. Although the words *farm* and *share* are quite simplistic when considered individually, together they express a concept that is quite specific to the local community. In addition, I would consider *bog* to fit the definition of a tier two-vocabulary word, as it is not so common that it occurs in frequent daily communication, but not so rare that it is limited to reading and discussion of highly specialized topics. As Cabel et al. (2014) stated, these conversations are examples of

opportunities to support vocabulary development by expanding children's repertoire of semantically related words.

P4 and P2 used specific vocabulary and explained subtle differences in meaning between words. For example, P4 explained the difference between snow and a *blizzard*. P2 described a cool morning that required jackets using the term *chilly* to describe a cool morning that required jackets be worn. Again, I would consider these to be examples of tier two vocabulary because of their specificity. These terms enable one to express a more precise description of the weather.

P4 incorporated a large number of science vocabulary words as she played with potato head figures with a child. The conversation began with a relatively simple discussion about whether Mr. Potato Head should have a blue or black nose. The teacher expanded on the conversation to discuss how bodies were alike and different. *Skeletons*, *muscles* and the role of *blood* in transporting *oxygen* were all included in the conversation. This conversation not only included specific vocabulary related to the human body, but also the term *transport*, which may be applied in a variety of contexts. This is one of the qualities of a high utility tier two word. Participating in multiturn conversations such as this, provide an important framework in which children may increase their vocabularies (Cabell et al., 2014)

P1 and P4 took advantage of opportunities to introduce alternate meanings of common words. For example, P1 shared with her students that she was going to a *bridal shower* over the weekend and asked them for their ideas about what she would do there. She went on explain that *bridal* refers to someone getting married, and that the event

would take place at a golf club. One of the children stated, "You need a bathing suit you might get wet." Another child replied, "Ms. P, you need to take off your clothes." P1 replied, "But they'll be lots of people there. I thought people took showers by themselves."

Similarly, P4 described Picasso as an artist who *broke all the rules*. She went on to explain that this did not mean that he broke classroom rules by "hurting kids or breaking toys," but that he painted differently than most artists. She took advantage of an opportunity to introduce the idea of expressions with multiple meanings to the children.

P3 shared that a cookie that one of the children had was one of her favorites growing up in India. She shared the word for it in Hindi language and asked if a child knew what it was called in Cape Verde. Although this example does not specifically focus on the use of complex English vocabulary, the participant successfully took advantage of an opportunity to build on language development.

In cases where complex vocabulary was limited, it appeared that the teachers' focus was on task completion. For example, in one of the observations of P4 and P5, P5 focused on making handprint gifts for the families. In addition, during one of the observations, P3 focused on creating classroom materials such as a new choice board. Another observation in which the use of complex vocabulary seemed quite limited was the observation of P6 working alone. Much of her attention was devoted to assisting children with toileting and guiding behavior.

The two teachers of younger preschoolers used notably different language while guiding students to push up their sleeves. P1 stated, "This *fabric* [tier two] is 100%

cotton. It *absorbs* [tier two] water. You'll want to roll up your sleeves." In a similar situation, P6 said, "I'll put your sleeves up so they don't get wet." P1 incorporated the terms *fabric* and *absorb*, described the fabric and encouraged the child to roll up his sleeves himself. In contrast, P6 simply stated that she was going to put up his sleeves. Table 3 illustrates teachers' use of complex vocabulary.

Table 3

Complex Vocabulary

Teacher	Observation 1	Observation 2
Participant 1	signal, recycling, camouflage, bridal shower, invitation, frustrating, cauldron implies	fabric, 100 percent, bog, harvest, fish biscuits, astronauts, absorbs, disaster, responsible
Participant 2	slippery, chilly, gloomy, farm share, tape dispenser, meteorologist, librarian	Mountain
Participant 3	walkie talkie, names cookie in Indian language	Confusing
Participant 4	khakis, fabric, blizzard pickling, chlorophyll, rotation, hibernate	construct, ship, Picasso, skeletons, muscles, oxygen, blood, leaning, appartment building, mold, pattern, oar, experiment, bow, "broke all the rules"
Participant 5	level	Separate
Participant 6	obstacle course, t-rex, raptor	voicemail, safety googles, protect, carpenter, veterinarian, circus,

Overall, the use of complex vocabulary varied considerably among the observations. Variation occurred both between participants as well as between multiple

observations of the same participant. Two participants, P1 and P4, seemed to use more complex vocabulary than the others did. For example, P1 used nine words or phrases considered complex vocabulary in one observation and eight in the other. P4 used 15 in one observation and seven in the other. P3 and P5 used the least with a total of two and three each. In total, teachers used 61 words or phrases that fit the definition of complex vocabulary during the observations.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

According to Yin (2011), trustworthiness requires transparency and is increased by explicitly and methodically describing the procedures, decisions, and challenges that occurred during the research. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are all components of qualitative research trustworthiness that must be considered. Each of these will be discussed here in relationship to the present study.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), internal validity or credibility is the extent to which the findings represent reality. As planned, I observed each teacher for two hours. I conducted additional observations of P3 and P5 to ensure a sufficient amount of data was collected. I followed the observation protocol carefully. Throughout the process, I was mindful of reflexivity or the impact of the researcher on the study. I was careful to remain unobtrusive during my observations and maintain a neutral facial expression. In addition, my field notes consisted of direct quotes and factual descriptions of what occurred in the classroom. I recorded notes of interpretation, opinion and feelings about the content of the observations separately.

Typical or model category sampling was used in hopes of selecting preschool teachers and classrooms that are fairly typical of those experienced by children. As planned, all observations were conducted in early childhood programs licensed by the Department of Early Education and Care in the state that was the location of this study. I presume, given the voluntary nature of the study and the fact that center directors approved participation of each teacher in the study that the directors believed these teachers and classrooms were positive representations of their centers, and so were indicative of typical or exemplary, but not poor, quality in the estimation of center directors. In addition, classroom group sizes were smaller than expected. P3's classroom was specifically designed for up to 10 students; the largest number of children in the classrooms I observed was 16, in a classroom with two teachers. In the state where the study was conducted, the required teacher-child ratio in a full day preschool is one teacher for 10 children or two teachers for 20 children. The maximum permissible group size is 20 in the state in which the study was conducted.

Dependability concerns the extent to which the procedures and process used for data collection and analysis may be tracked. (Lodico et al., 2010). For example, detailed records of research activities were kept so that the process may be later reviewed. In addition, the original field notes as well as all consent forms will be kept on file for five years so that they may be reviewed.

Confirmability pertains to the extent to which others could confirm or corroborate the research. In order to enhance confirmability, I maintained detailed records of research activities. For example, I maintained hard copies of all of my observation field notes as

well as reflective field notes. The observation notes contain direct quotes in order to accurately capture the conversations that occurred between teachers and children. I checked the data multiple times to ensure that it was collected and analyzed according to plan.

Transferability concerns the extent to which the findings may be applied to other situations. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the investigator has the responsibility to provide data sufficient in detail to allow the reader to determine the applicability of the research to other settings. In order to enhance transferability, I included rich thick descriptions of the interactions as well as the sites and participant demographics. Careful selection of sampling strategy also enhances transferability. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used typical or model category sampling in effort to select teachers and classrooms that were representative of those experienced by the average preschooler.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings for each of this study's research questions as well as a discussion of the trustworthiness of the research. Concerning RQ1, I found that affirmations exceeded prohibitions during the observations, but the majority of teacher language was neither explicitly affirmative nor prohibitive. The majority of distinctly prohibitive statements addressed health and safety concerns that required immediate attention. Several affirmative statements acknowledged children's efforts and successes, providing specific feedback and encouragement. In several situations, participants approached potential behavioral challenges with a neutral tone, which seemed to diffuse

the problem and encourage children to resolve the matter themselves. The teachers approached the interactions in a matter-of -fact manner that did not communicate a sense of approval or disapproval.

In response to RQ2, I found that the length of conversations between teachers and children varied considerably. This variation appeared to relate to the nature of the classroom activities at the time. Concerning RQ3, I also found considerable variation in the use of complex vocabulary. The use of complex vocabulary differed both between participants and between multiple observations of the same participants. In Chapter 5, I will interpret these findings and discuss implications for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine teacher and child language-based interactions within full day independently-funded childcare centers. The classroom language environment was investigated within the context of classroom interactions during free play. The characteristics of the language environment experienced by preschoolers in independently-funded child care were studied through direct observation using the method used by Hart and Risley (1995).

I conducted the study in a northeastern state in the United States. I identified sites for the study by contacting full day early childhood programs listed in the Department of Early Education and Care database as well as posting information about the study on social media. Three center directors agreed to share information about the study with their teaching staff. Six preschool teachers agreed to participate in the study. They were observed during free playtime in their classrooms for 2 hours each. In this chapter, I will present my interpretation of the findings and discuss some limitations of this study. In addition, I will discuss recommendations for future research and implications for positive social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The work of Hart and Risley (1995), who found significant differences in quality and quality of language experienced by children in their home environments, formed the conceptual framework for this study. Differences found within language environments experienced by children during this study confirm variations also exist within the preschool setting. A number of factors, including structural characteristics of classrooms

as well as personal characteristics of teachers, appeared to influence the nature of the language interactions that occurred between children and teachers. Results pertained to three key areas of teacher language exchange, including affirmations and prohibitions, back-and-forth exchanges, and complex vocabulary.

Affirmations and Prohibitions

According to Hart and Risley (1995), prohibitions consist of statements of explicit disapproval such as "I hate you" and "that's wrong" and imperatives such a "don't," "stop," or "shut up." Hart and Risley (1995) defined affirmatives as statements including expressions of explicit approval such as "that's right" and "I love you," as well as utterances immediately following a child's utterance expanding and extending the content of the child's statement. Hart and Risley (1995) found that parents who conversed with children at a high rate communicated to their children prohibitions at a rate of five per hour, and low language parents gave prohibitions at a rate of 11 per hour. In the case of low language parents, the prohibitions appeared to be even more pronounced because the other forms of language were less plentiful.

Rates of prohibitions in observed classrooms were much less than what Hart and Risley observed. In fact, the hour-long observation with the most directly prohibitive statements had three. This finding confirms that of a national Head Start study revealing that ratings in the Emotional Support dimension of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) were high 6.10 (Teachstone, 2014). In their study of 63 German preschool classrooms, Von Suchodoletz et al. (2014) found that most classrooms scored low on the negative climate dimension of the CLASS.

A number of factors could have contributed to the lower frequency of prohibitions. The observations took place within classroom environments specifically designed for children, free of safety hazards that might inspire prohibitions within the home environment. In addition, classroom settings were populated with a relatively large group of similarly-aged children who could play and interact among themselves using a plentiful collection of toys and educational materials. Hart and Risley (1995) found that the rate of prohibitions in home settings was reduced by the "number and diversity of strategies they could call on for anticipating, distracting, redirecting and persuading their children" (p. 56). They described an example of a parent who had a drawer of safe utensils accessible to her child as she washed dishes in order keep the child engaged and safe from harm. Similarly, safe and engaging materials within children's reach filled preschool classrooms.

All teachers have had at least some formal professional development focusing on supporting children's growth and learning. Additionally, in the state that is the focus of this study, all childcare centers are required to develop and train their staff in a child guidance policy. The classrooms in which P3, P4, P5, and P6 worked all contained posters and materials related to the Pyramid Model positive behavioral intervention and support framework. I concluded that because these materials were present, the teachers had at least some training regarding this model. This training would add to teachers' repertoire of strategies for encouraging appropriate behavior in the classroom setting. I expect that all professional development experiences influenced the manner in which the

teachers interacted with children during observations. According to Hemmeter et al. (2016), professional development in pyramid model implementation was associated with a more positive climate in preschool classrooms.

In the classroom setting, teachers' primary responsibility is the care and education of young children. This differs from a home environment in which parents care for children while simultaneously engaging in other activities, including but not limited to cooking, cleaning, and interacting with other adults. Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers issued fewer prohibitions within early childhood classrooms than parents did in home settings. Most classrooms score higher on the emotional support dimension of the CLASS than other dimensions assessed by this tool.

All participants made affirmative statements, but the specific nature of their language varied. For example, during one observation, P5 assisted children in making a handprint gift for the families. During this time, most of her language consisted of commands such as: "Come here. I'm going to put paint on your hand for mommy and daddy." She praised the children using phrases including, "All right girl, good job go wash, and good job" and "awesome." She did not provide specific meaningful feedback to the children. During this activity, most of her language consisted of adult task language, because the primary focus appeared to be giving directions.

In contrast, P6 assisted a child in putting on a dress in the dramatic play area by giving hints such as "the tag goes where?" After he had successfully put on the dress, she said, "You did it, yellow is your color! Go look in the mirror." As a little girl played with the pretend tools, she said, "Maybe the next time Ms. Tricia needs an Allen wrench to fix

the tables you can help her." Each of these statements provided recognition of specific child -initiated actions and pointed out the children's competence. The feedback was specific and individual to each child. This confirms that emotional support is a relative strength of most classrooms. Furthermore, this conversation also demonstrates the type of scaffolding and feedback included in the instructional support domain of the CLASS.

P3 seemed to have a distinct style of affirmative statements. She congratulated individual children on their successes in terms of progress towards individual goals. However, it appeared that in most cases she had selected the goals. For example, she said: "You've got this buddy, I know you have practicing on your own," and "Laurie, you have been doing a great job since I had that little talk with you this morning. I am super-duper proud of you." During another observation, she asked, "Why am I so proud of Matthew and Sophie?" Both children responded by saying, "I didn't cry." These statements acknowledged children's progress and improvement over time towards individual goals, but the statements included a reference to a previous issue. She stated, "Everyone is working on something." It appeared that in most but not all cases, the teacher had selected the goals.

In contrast, when one child successfully used a paper punch independently after multiple attempts and considerable teacher assistance, P6 responded by saying, "Great job, you did it." This case differed in that the child had walked over to a table of art supplies and initiated the paper punch activity. Similarly, P1 stated, "You did the right thing, you know just what to do." Statements such as these affirm the child's sense of confidence and competence. According to Curby, Downer, and Booren (2014),

emotionally supportive behaviors have positive associations with later positive engagement with teachers, tasks, and peers

P2 used the most directly prohibitive statements, all of which specifically related to health and safety. For example, she stated, “They shouldn’t be near your eyes,” referring to thumb tacks that were used for classroom activity. When children became involved in a physical altercation, she stated, “No we will not be hitting, or you will need to go to another area.” In each these cases, a potentially dangerous situation required prompt attention to prevent harm. This seemed to mirror the view of one participant in Aras (2016) who described her primary responsibility as a teacher during playtime as preventing harm.

Overall, in considering RQ1, I found that the majority of teacher language was neither explicitly affirmative nor prohibitive. Rather, the majority of the teachers’ speech consisted of statements about the classroom activities, questions, and instructions. In several instances, a neutral approach was used to address potentially problematic situations. For example, P1 asked, “Is pushing working or is it making the person next to you mad?” She made this statement in a calm voice tone with a neutral facial expression. This approach seemed to facilitate the child’s evaluation of the problem and adjustment of behavior. This seemed to place the focus of control with the child. This problem solving approach is also indicative of the Pyramid Model positive behavioral intervention and support framework (Hemmeter et al., 2015).

Hart and Risely did not specifically use the term *neutral* for statements that were neither explicitly affirmative or prohibitive. However, in considering the rate of

prohibitions made, they noted that when parents spoke less overall, prohibitive statements became a more prominent part of the child's experience. It is also noteworthy that Hart and Risley (1995) conducted observations with children three years old and younger. This was at the younger end of the observations conducted in this study.

Back and Forth Exchanges

Responsive interactions with educators are central to teaching within the zone of proximal development (Hart & Risley, 1995). Bi-directional conversations in which children and adults engage in back and forth discussions with multiple exchanges is exemplary in the CLASS instructional support dimension. Responsiveness also includes the extent to which the child controls the nature of the interaction (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Hart and Risley (1995) considered the level of parental responsiveness or the extent to which children had control over the course of the interactions. This included instances in which the child initiated the conversation topic, which was within the child's capacity for understanding and whether the subject was interesting for the child. Although time for extended conversation was limited during the observations of P3, a few child initiated discussions occurred. For example, one discussion began with a child asking if the teacher had walkie talkies. Another child-initiated conversation by asking if the teacher's dog liked Paw Patrol. Children initiated both of these topics based on their interests.

Meacham et al. (2016) found that during dramatic play, teachers engaged in more topic initiating conversations than extensions of a child-initiated topic. I found this to be the case in some, but not all of my observations. P6 engaged in in extended conversation

with one child in the dramatic play area. It was interesting to note the in some cases, the child initiated the topic via actions rather than words. For example, she held up a fire fighter toy for the teacher to see. The teacher took the child's lead and used the toys that the child was using as tools for building the conversation. Another of P6's interactions began with a child waving at her. This play period aligned with the findings of Ratcliff et al. (2017), who concluded that one on one experiences and dramatic play present more situations in which teachers engage in extended conversations with children.

In contrast to Chen and de Groot Kim's (201) finding that teachers used the fewest interaction promoting strategies during meal time, P1 initiated a lively conversation with a small group of children at the snack table about the meaning of the term "bridal shower." She encouraged the children to make their own predictions about the meaning of this term. The children enthusiastically spoke about the need for a bathing suit and taking off clothing to shower. Similarly, P2 initiated a conversation about a farm share with a child. Although the teacher initiated the topic, the child responded enthusiastically. Perhaps this was because the teacher selected the topic based upon her background knowledge of the child. These conversations confirmed Meacham et al.'s (2016) finding that teachers engaged in more topic initiating conversations than extensions of child initiated topics. However, the children's active engagement in these conversations contrasted the findings of Meacham et al (2016), who concluded that children were more responsive when they initiated the topic.

Aras (2016) found that although teachers recognized the value of adult involvement in play, their intentional involvement was disrupted by children requiring

assistance or tasks such as planning or attendance taking. The present study confirmed this. Specifically, P3 and P6 spent much time facilitating toileting. P3's classroom did not contain a bathroom. Therefore, she had to coordinate her students' use of a shared hallway bathroom with another class. In the first observation of P6, she was working alone with a group of young preschoolers who appeared to be in the midst of toilet training and required considerable assistance. In addition, P3 devoted considerable time to preparing classroom materials while the children engaged in free play.

Von Suchodoletz et al. (2014) found that the quality of teacher child interactions improved when the teacher-child ratio was reduced through the addition of another adult. I found this to be the case in some, but not all of my observations. This is similar to the findings of Soderstrom, Grauer, Dufault, and McDivitt (2018), who found a complex relationship between the adult child ration in child care centers and quality of language interactions. For example, in one observation of P6, she was working alone with a group of seven preschoolers. During this hour, she spent considerable time managing the children's activities and addressing their toileting needs. In contrast, during the second observation she was working with 12 children alongside another adult. During this observation, she engaged in several extended conversations in the dramatic play area. As stated earlier, P3 spent much time organizing classroom materials and facilitating toileting. On the other hand, P1 and P2 also worked alone and were able to engage with the children throughout. Both of their classrooms contained easily accessible bathrooms. In addition, the group of children in P1's classroom appeared to be quite familiar with the setting as well as independent in their toileting.

In the classroom of P4 and P5, a timer signaled children to switch activity areas every 10 minutes. This resulted in missed opportunities for extended conversation. For example, a discussion about a ship and the effect of the wind ended abruptly when the timer sounded. When the timer sounded, the children were told to end their activity and meet on the rug to choose another activity. This classroom seems to confirm Ratcliff et al. (2017)'s finding that the most frequent type of language used by teachers was adult task language focused on giving directions rather than extending conversation.

In the same classroom, the nature of the activities at times detracted from opportunities for rich reciprocal interactions. During one observation, the children were directed to complete a hand print craft as a family gift. P5's speech consisted of commands such "Come here. I'm going to put paint on your hand for mommy and daddy," and, "Spread your fingers and press down," without a break between commands for the child to respond. As described earlier, a string of eight such commands were delivered without a pause. As Cabell et al. (2015) stated, there is a great deal of talk in classrooms that was not part of conversations, such as children's statements that received no response and also prolonged periods of instruction. This clearly was an example of the latter. The children generally complied silently. During this activity, there was no opportunity for reciprocal interactions. This also confirms the findings of Meacham et al. (2016) who found that children's engagement was much greater when they initiated a topic. In this activity, children initiated neither the topic nor the experience. As she was leading this craft throughout the free choice period, P5 missed many opportunities to engage in children's play. These missed opportunities had the potential for far greater

benefit to the children's development and learning. This confirmed the work of Sawyer et al. (2018) and Ratcliff et al. (2017), who found that both teachers and assistant teachers used language for giving directions far more than for any other purpose.

Pianta et al. (2016) considered a number of aspects of program quality including structural elements such as teacher qualifications and ratio, classroom environment, teacher child interactions and aggregate rating measures such as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems. They concluded that teacher-child interactions are the most crucial indicator of quality. I agree that teacher-child interactions are of paramount importance in the children's experience. However, my observations revealed that a number of factors, such as the design of the physical facility and the structure of activities, have a significant influence on the nature of the interactions that occur. Therefore, attending to these features has the potential to increase opportunities for back and forth exchanges.

Complex Vocabulary

A rich vocabulary broadens a child's understanding of the world, supports the mastery of new concepts and ideas, and encourages the enjoyment of language (Beck et al. 2013). Because of its great potential to enhance learning, vocabulary deserves ample focus within the preschool classroom. For young children, early word learning primarily occurs through oral language (Beck et al., 2013). Therefore, it is logical to examine the language exchanges that occur between teachers and students in the preschool classroom carefully. According to the three tier framework outlined by Beck et al. (2013), tier one words are those typically used in oral language, tier two words are high frequency, high

utility words that are used in a variety of academic contexts, tier three consists of words so rare that they may never be encountered by the average reader during a lifetime.

Neuman and Wright (2014) found that purposefully planned learning situations with multiple exposures to words in context are most effective for developing children's vocabulary. As she played with children using materials such as Ms. Potato Head, P4 infused her conversation with science vocabulary words such as *muscles, blood,* and *skeleton*. As they played, she took advantage of the opportunity to incorporate vocabulary introduced in other contexts. As Ratcliff et al. (2017) stated, dramatic play experiences provided opportunities for teachers to extend conversations and build children's understandings.

One instance of teachers using notably different language occurred when guiding students to push up their sleeves. P1 stated, "This *fabric* [tier two] is 100% cotton. It *absorbs* [tier two] water. You'll want to roll up your sleeves." In contrast, P6 said, "I'll put your sleeves up so they don't get wet." P1 included the terms *fabric* and *absorb*, described the fabric and encouraged the child to roll up his sleeves himself. On the other hand, P6 simply stated that she was going to put up his sleeves. P1's choice of words illustrates the type of high quality language described by Barnes and Dickinson (2017) that includes precise language as well as the relationship between interrelated words. Conversely, P6 conveyed the same message without taking advantage of a teachable moment to introduce new vocabulary. As Browne et al (2016) found, there is great variation in the amount of vocabulary information provided to children. They concluded

that when the teachers focused on teaching content, they provided rich conceptual information that fostered language development.

Other aspects of vocabulary development seemed noteworthy in the present study. For example, P1 and P4 took advantage of opportunities to engage children in conversations about the multiple meanings of common words. Specifically, Participant 1 engaged children in a lengthy discussion about the meaning of the term *"bridal shower.*" Participant 4 described Picasso as an artist who *broke all the rules*. As the English language includes many words with multiple meanings, I believe these exchanges to be significant opportunities for language development. As Barnes and Dickinson (2016) stated, it is beneficial for teachers to understand how words are related to each other and represent concepts.

P3 pointed out that one of the children had a cookie that was one of her favorites growing up in India. She shared the word for it in Hindi language and asked if a child knew what it was called in Cape Verde. Taking the opportunity to discuss multiple languages serves as an opportunity to build children's linguistic awareness and understanding. I consider this another example of a teacher helping children to understand about language and the notion of multiple languages.

As noted in the previous section, in some cases activities such as toileting or completing a handprint craft appeared to hinder teacher-child language interactions. Similarly, organizational strategies such as the use of a timer to signal children to change activities limited extended teacher-child conversations. This lack of time for conversation seemed to result in missed opportunity for the use of complex vocabulary as well. In

these cases, the classroom activities seemed to detract from rather than enhance learning. This demonstrates the importance of considering quality measures such as the Classroom Organization domain of the CLASS (Pianta et. al., 2008).

Neuman et al. (2017) found that parents and teachers from low-income communities used less varied and less complex vocabulary than did teachers from working class communities. Variation was found in the teachers' use of complex vocabulary, although I am unclear that it is related to income. I found that differences in vocabulary were connected to structural features of the classroom environment. Von Suchodoletz et al. (2014) found that the quality of teacher child interactions improved when the teacher-child ratio was reduced through the addition of another adult. This appeared to be true in the case of P6, but not in the other observations. Barnes and Dickinson (2017) found that teachers used the least complex language during small group time. Although not included in this study, it would be interesting to compare the type of vocabulary used during different portions of the school day.

Limitations of the Study

As I stated in Chapter 1, my extensive experience with full day independently funded early education and care settings in the state in which the study is conducted created a possible bias. Although I was not familiar with the specific centers and teachers involved in the study, I still may have entered the settings with preconceptions about what I was going to encounter. This is especially true of the second observation of each participant, as an impression of the classroom had been formed during the previous visit. In order to address this, I carefully followed an observational protocol and took care to

distinguish between my observations and interpretations of them. The Walden University IRB did not approve the use of a recording device; therefore, the language interactions were recorded exclusively via written field notes. The process of hand writing field notes brings with it limitations. Although, I accurately tried to record all conversations, I recognize that some language exchanges were missed or misinterpreted. The use of a recording device would enhance the accuracy of documentation of the language exchanges.

Recommendations

Findings from this study contribute to the body of research on the variations that exist in teacher-child language interactions. However, there is far more to be learned about interactions between teachers and preschoolers. Responsive interactions during early childhood have been associated with greater academic and cognitive achievement and fewer outward-directed problems during elementary school and adolescence (Pianta, 2016). Therefore, this topic warrants further study. Because this study considered the interactions that occurred during a brief period during the course of the program day, observations spanning a longer time and a range of classroom activities could provide a richer understanding of the interactions that occur throughout the day. The use of a recording device may help accurately capture the details of the language interactions that occur.

The present study did not examine the variations in interactions experienced by individual children within each classroom. I recommend further research that considers both the overall quality of interactions in the classroom as well as the specific interactions

between individual children and the teacher. As pointed out by Curby et al. (2014) and Sawyer et al. (2018), this would help to build an understanding of each child's experience within the classroom setting.

In addition, I believe it would be beneficial to further study the details of interactions related to each research question. The analysis of each of these research questions seemed to raise more questions that could provide more insights into the interactions that occur during play time in a typical preschool classroom. Furthermore, it would be informative to dive deeper, investigating the reasons for the differences that exist in the interactions as well as the nature of the interactions themselves.

I believe that it would be informative to study the preservice and in service training of teachers to identify strategies to more effectively support teachers in developing the skills needed to optimize the quality of their interactions with children. I recommend research considering both classroom interactions and the personal and professional characteristics of teachers. Similarly, I recommend examining the teachers' beliefs about teacher-child language interactions during free play. Methodologically, interviewing teachers about their beliefs about interactions as well as their understanding of language strategies could yield insights that would help to better understand the reasons for some of the differences that exist among teacher child interactions.

Implications

This study of the language interactions that occur between teachers and children has implications for social change, because prior research has demonstrated that language interactions experienced by children during early childhood impact their future

educational success (Anasari & Pianta, 2018; Anderson & Phillips, 2017; Lee, 2019) Therefore, improving the quality of the interactions that occur within an early childhood classroom has the potential for social change for the program, teacher and individual child.

The findings of this study offer a number of organizational implications for early childhood program administrators. For example, in designing classroom space, I recommend that program administrators consider the way in which physical features such as conveniently located classroom bathrooms support quality interactions. A considerable portion of Participant 3's language focused on facilitating bathroom use. Perhaps if there was a bathroom located within her classroom, the children could be more independent in toileting, allowing her to focus more on instructional conversations with her students. Previous research often considers structural elements such as teacher qualifications and daily schedule, classroom environment including furnishings, equipment and learning materials, teacher-student interactions, or an aggregate of all three in defining child care quality (Pianta et al., 2016). Considering the interrelationships between these and other factors may help to develop a better understanding of how to provide quality programming for preschoolers.

In scheduling, it is important for administrators to consider the potential interaction implications of the amount of preparation time available to teachers. In addition, I think it is important for administrators and teachers to consider the way that classroom management techniques, such as the way children switch activity areas during free play, might affect language exchange. Similarly, the findings of this study point to a

need for educators and administrators to carefully consider the daily program activities and their effect on the interactions that occur. For example, the previously described handprint activity seemed to detract from opportunities for language development. The Classroom Organization domain of the class provides insights into how to ensure classrooms function best and provide the most opportunities for learning. (Pianta et al., 2008).

The variations that exist within teacher-child language interactions also point to a need for targeted professional development. As Chen and de Groot Kim (2014) and Sawyer et al. (2018) concluded, holding a Bachelor's degree in education did not ensure that a teacher successfully engaged their students in high quality language interactions. Program administrators and teachers can use assessment tools such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System to monitor and assess the quality of interactions that occur in order consider ongoing process as well as the impact of professional development. Carefully designing professional development opportunities for preservice and in service teachers designed to enhance interaction skills is vital for maximizing the benefits of preschool program attendance. Teachers could benefit from enhanced preservice and in service training specifically on implementing strategies to enhance children's language development such as extending conversations with children and improving the quality of feedback (Burchinal et al., 2016; Phillips, Austin, & Whitebrook, 2016; Sawyer et. al. 2018). As Chen and de Groot Kim (2014) pointed out, teachers must understand both what teaching strategies benefit children's language development and how to apply these strategies in the classroom.

Conclusion

Teacher-child language interactions have the potential to have a powerful effect on a child's development. In this study, I explored the language interactions between six teachers and their students during free playtime in independently funded preschool classrooms. Specifically, I considered the balance of affirmations and prohibitions, the back and forth exchanges that occurred, and the use of complex vocabulary. Overall, there were more explicitly affirmative than prohibitive statements. In addition, several teachers effectively used neutral statements in order to encourage children to independently evaluate and respond to challenges faced during the day. The frequency and content of back and forth exchanges or feedback loops, varied greatly among the observations. It appeared that both personal characteristics of the teachers as well as structural features of the program contributed to these differences. Lastly, I considered the use of complex vocabulary in the classroom. Again, there were marked differences among the types of vocabulary used by teachers. Continued research is needed to build on the knowledge base in these areas and identify strategies by which teachers might enhance language interactions experienced by children enrolled in preschool programs.

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Appendix A: Observational Protocol

Participant: Setting:

Observer: Patricia Plummer-Wilson
Role of Observer: Nonparticipant Observer of teacher child interactions occurring during free play
Date & Time: Length of Observation: Approximately 1 hour

Observational Checklist
____ Letter of agreement obtained from the center director.
____ Informed consent obtained from the participant teacher.
____ Remember that my observational role is as a nonparticipant.
____ Means to record field notes available.
____ Setting entered slowly and unobtrusively.
____ Descriptive and reflective notes written.
____ Extensive detail and direct quotes included within field notes.
____ Thank participants and director for access to the site. Schedule next observation.

Descriptive Field Notes (general)	Reflective Field Notes

(continued)

Examples of affirmative and prohibitive speech and complex vocabulary.	Number of back and forth exchanges per conversation	Reflective Field Notes