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of

Michelle Lynne Banks

Candidate for the Degree

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_____
Dr. Kathleen Knight Abowitz, Co-Director

_____
Dr. Lucian A. Szlizewski, Co-Director

_____
Dr. Nathaniel Bryan, Graduate School Representative

ABSTRACT

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES TO SUPPORT ORAL LANGUAGE IN YOUNG LEARNERS

by

Michelle L. Banks

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children within a socio-cognitive constructivist paradigm. Through analysis of specific instructional practices within the social context of the classroom, this study examined the connections between creating intentional dialogue and interaction between teachers and children and the development of early literacy skills. The central research question was created to identify these instructional practices through participant observation and reflective dialogue. This qualitative, participant-observation study, using a qualitative, reflective inquiry approach to collect, reflect upon, and interpret the data, investigated the social interactions between teachers and students as they promote oral language development and ongoing literacy development that is impacted both culturally and linguistically. The study was conducted in the 2019-2020 school year at a suburban, public school district in kindergarten and first grade classrooms. The instructional strategies identified by this study were aimed at supporting the growth and development of oral language in five and six-year-olds. Four themes emerged: questioning, conversation, culture, and connection. These four themes, woven together, show specific and targeted instructional practices that teachers in early childhood classrooms use to develop oral language. Grounding the four themes were two theoretical underpinnings from the socio cognitive theoretical framework: modeling language and building on diverse strengths.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES TO SUPPORT ORAL LANGUAGE IN YOUNG
LEARNERS

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Michelle L. Banks

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Major Advisor: Dr. Lucian A. Szlizewski

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and friends. I am thankful for their ongoing support and encouragement over the three years of courses, research, and writing. In addition, I dedicate this to the amazing teachers of young children who work with intention and purpose each and every day.

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I would like to thank the six teachers who generously welcomed me into their classrooms and shared their heart for children with me. My time in your classroom communities continues to spur my passion for language and literacy.

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Chapter 1: The Problem

My love of language and the power of words in my personal and professional life has always intrigued me. It has driven me to study and learn a second language, live in Central America, teach in a language immersion program, and target my teaching career at working with five-year-old students who were developing a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. This love stems from the belief that the power of language rests in its social nature. It uniquely unites or divides people. It provides common understandings, creates community, and contributes to culture. The social nature of oral language development in an early childhood classroom and the role a teacher plays in that development is clearly depicted in *The Hundred Languages of Children, The Reggio Emelia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (Edwards, Forman, & Gandini, 1998), which described the role of the teacher as "a resource to whom he (the child) can go when he needs to borrow a gesture, a word" (p. 153). Creating experiences and opportunities for children to "borrow words" provides a picture of the social constructivist nature of this cognitive development in a child's growth and shows the opportunity educators have to create learning experiences that promote oral language skills.

My career in education began in 1993 at the Columbus Spanish Immersion Academy with Columbus Public Schools. It was there that I solidified my personal belief in the importance of oral language development in children's thinking, processing, and expressive nature. After my seven years with the Immersion program, I chose to stay home for eight years with my three young children, further developing my own understanding of how young children grow and develop their social skills and oral language abilities through conversation, dialogue, and processing.

In 2008, I returned to teaching kindergarten. As an early childhood educator, I continued to learn the purposeful technique of conversation and questioning, the need for intentional language development work, and the connection between supporting children's oral language expression and literacy development. After four years back in a kindergarten classroom, I became an Instructional Coach. This career shift provided me with the opportunity to help build capacity in teachers and staff in regard to best practices, student growth, and ongoing professional learning. In fact, the opportunity to see the power of words was most visible to me as I learned to coach colleagues as they identified, analyzed, and reflected on student growth and

achievement data. In 2014, I started with the Upper Arlington Schools first as a Literacy Coordinator and, most recently, as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

Throughout my career, I observed numerous colleagues, new teachers, and student teachers experiencing varying levels of success in creating kindergarten and first grade classrooms that encouraged and promoted oral language development opportunities for children. Those most successful in supporting emergent literacy skills, in my view, were those who understood the social nature of how young children learn language and develop modes of expression. They were able to create learning spaces that allowed children to interact and talk within the classroom community, supporting them with ongoing conversation and questioning techniques. With this in mind, I examined teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that promote, develop, and support oral language skills in young learners.

Background to the Study

As one component of the established values and principles of the Miami University Ed.D. program mission, my study was reflective of the belief that educators co-construct academic programs that meaningfully connect with the lived experiences of their students. Through interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, the study examined effective instructional practices as demonstrated and shared by teachers. This study attempted to co-construct an academic program that supported early literacy practices to increase oral language development in five and six-year-olds as experienced in kindergarten and first grade. Using the theoretical framework of socio-cognitive constructivism, which situated this study in a social context of the classroom, this research aligned with one of the department's principles: "leadership is an intellectual, moral, and craft practice situated in the cultural, political, and social contexts of institutions and societies" (Miami University Department of Educational Leadership, 2017, p. 5).

To address the background of the study, I reviewed previously reported analyses related to oral language development and emergent literacy in kindergarten and the early elementary school years (e.g., Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Smith & Dickinson, 1994; Snow, 1983; Heath, 1983). These studies demonstrate the importance of talk in classrooms, the patterns of oral language that develop during early childhood, and the development of literacy in early elementary classrooms.

In addition, the work of Bakhtin as described by Gilles and Pierce (2003) resonated with me in regard to the social nature of dialogue in oral language development. They suggested that

what we say "is deeply influenced by all the conversations, collaborations, and interactions we have had with others. Therefore, much of our learning depends on the network of 'voices' that have been in our lives" (Gilles & Pierce, 2003, p. 61). This idea of "voices" that have been a part of our lives reflects my belief in the central role of an early childhood educator in pouring language on children throughout the day, threading conversations, explorations, and analyses skillfully throughout their experiences.

Exploring this social nature of discourse led to the work of Halliday (as cited by Goodman, Haussler, & Strickland, 1981) who, at the Impact Conferences of 1979 and 1980, claimed that children build up resources as they develop and express meanings. He explained that the resources are two-way as the child both expresses meaning and decodes the meanings of others. I appreciated the way Halliday described this meaning-building as an interactive process that is supported by the social context of an environment children share with others who are significant in their experiences. What a fitting description this also is of the "voices" of early childhood educators helping a child create meaning and understanding in classroom environments.

Definition of the Problem

The complex nature of oral language development and the studies of its direct and indirect effects on reading make it challenging to understand its impact and the role it plays throughout a person's life. Language skills develop over time, and the importance of language learning is evident at an early stage in a child's development (Biemiller, 2006; Biemiller & Boote, 2006). Accordingly, Dickinson, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek (2010) suggested, "language-based theories of reading and reading disabilities must include both phonological processing and oral language abilities" (p. 307). They went on to promote instruction and intervention practices in "early childhood programs that build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge make lasting contributions to later language and comprehension abilities" (Dickinson et al., 2010, p. 307). As practitioners, we must be aware that the research regarding early literacy skills has mostly focused on decoding and code-based instruction, despite the fact that early literacy development is more than code-based instruction. Rather, "it is the integral connection of code, content, and language structure" (Dickinson et al., 2010 p. 308). My study is focused on this conclusion that literacy development is more than simply code-based instruction.

Definitions of Terms

These definitions attempt to clarify the meanings of words that were essential to the study.

- *Conceptual memos* capture the researcher's analysis of what she is seeing and, as such, they help to develop and determine codes and themes (Corbin, 2007).
- *Culture* in this study refers to viewing literacy development as culturally based (Langer,1986). Langer points to the work of educational philosopher, Vygotsky, where culture is seen as the product of human social activity and there is a need for people to learn the characteristics and symbols of the culture in order to navigate their world and grow in their literacy (Vygotsky, 1979).
- *Instructional practices* refer to specific teaching methods and strategies that guide interaction in the classroom and move students forward in their learning.
- *Oral language* refers to how a child develops through authentic interaction and dialogue with teachers, family members, and peers with the belief that learning is enhanced through talk (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016).
- *Pedagogical documentation* refers to a formative assessment approach that provides classroom teachers with the opportunity to adjust their instructional practices through self-reflection as determined by student needs, challenges, and strengths (Buldu, 2010).
- *Phonemic awareness* refers to a specific skill including manipulating individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words (Reading Rockets, 2020)
- *Phonological awareness* refers to a broad skill that involves identifying and manipulating units of oral language such as syllables, parts of words, rime (Reading Rockets, 2020).
- *Social constructivism* (Creswell, 2018) refers to how a person seeks meaning and understanding of the world they live in; it refers to a person's worldview, specifically their interpretation of their world.
- *Socio cognitive theory* (Bandura, 1986) is derived from the notion that people are capable of learning through observation, and this observational learning is modeled. Modeling includes conveying rules and influences which impact the observer's behavior as they extract meaning, assimilate information and practice employing the rule on their own.
- *Semantic knowledge* refers to understanding word meanings and vocabulary (Quality Learning, 2011).

- *Syntactic knowledge* includes knowing how to combine meaningful phrases and sentences (Quality Learning, 2011).
- *Word decoding* is the ability to apply letter-sound and letter pattern relationships to pronounce written words (Reading Rockets, 2020).

Rationale and Significance of the Study

My study examined teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children. Ultimately, I hope to support teachers of five and six-year-old children who strive to create classrooms where language is used to promote and develop meaning, self-reflection, and early literacy skills. As described in *Reading, Writing and Talk*, by Mariana Souto-Manning and Jessica Martell (2016), teachers who embrace the social and cultural nature of literacy development employ instructional practices that build from a "strength-based perspective, seeing diversities as integral and valuable to teaching and learning" (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016, p. 2). As the context for the focus of this study was found in the social and cultural nature of a classroom, my aim is to support teachers who wish to embrace and build upon this strength-based perspective of literacy development. I trust that the findings and outcomes of the study will assist other educators who wish to do the same.

Guiding/Research Question

My study examined teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children. The research question that guided the study was:

What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?

Through analysis of specific instructional practices within the social context of the classroom, my study examined the connections between creating intentional dialogue and interaction between teachers and children and the development of early literacy skills. My central research question was to identify these instructional practices through participant observation, pedagogical documentation, and reflective dialogue (as detailed in Chapter 3: Methodology).

Summary and Overview

In this chapter, I shared my personal passion for and commitment to supporting the oral language development in young learners. With this in mind, in this study, I examined teacher-

child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that promote, develop, and support oral language skills in young learners. Next, I provided a brief background to the study as a way to establish previously reported analyses related to oral language development and emergent literacy. In my definition of the problem, I point to the complex nature of oral language development and the importance of instructional practices to promote and support growth in five and six-year-olds. I then provided the definition of terms to clarify the meanings of words that were essential to the study. Following that in the rationale and significance of the study, I explain my aim to support teachers of five and six-year-old children who strive to create classrooms where language is used to promote and develop meaning, self-reflection, and early literacy skills. I conclude this chapter with the specific research question of the study: What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review of the researched literature related to my study, including the historical perspective of research surrounding oral language development. I then embedded these findings within a pedagogical model, as informed by a socio-cognitive theoretical framework to ground and guide my study. Next, in Chapter 3, I describe the methodology of the study. Through participant observation and focus group interviews, I aim to address the following primary research question: *What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?* Following, in Chapter 4, I provide research findings from my participant observation study, including four themes and two theoretical underpinnings which emerged from the collected data. In Chapter 5, I finish with a summary of findings, conclusions, recommendations and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This section contains a review of the researched literature related to my study. In addition to the Background to the Study from Chapter 1, I began with the historical perspective of research surrounding oral language development and its key, but often under-emphasized, role in promoting the development of early literacy skills. I then move toward more recent research, embedding these findings within a pedagogical model as informed by a socio-cognitive theoretical framework to ground and guide my study of impactful instructional practices in early childhood classrooms.

Historical Perspective

Existing research has largely pointed to the impact of phonological and phonemic awareness in young learners and future reading success (Dickinson McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). A child's ability to manipulate units of language and individual sounds are foundational skills in early literacy development. Pullen and Justice (2003) explain that, "a lack of this awareness may impede an individual's ability to acquire accurate and fluent word reading skills, and as such, is a primary source of difficulty for children with reading disabilities (Torgesen, Wagner, & Rashotte, 1997)." However, Pullen and Justice (2003) suggested that, in addition to phonological and print awareness, oral language was also a critical component in literacy development. They describe the significance of the connection between oral language and reading comprehension skills in later reading achievement. Also, in *Pathways Into Literacy: The Role of Early Oral Language Abilities and Family Risk for Dyslexia,* van Viersen et al. (2018) reported on a longitudinal study of the role of oral language in reading comprehension in children when they were between the ages of 4 and 12 years-old. In this article, van Viersen explains two pathways into literacy development, both of which lead to reading comprehension. The first path shows the impact oral language ability has on acquiring phonological awareness. The second path demonstrates the importance of oral language abilities on developing reading comprehension skills. Both of these studies, Pullen and Justice as well as Viersen et al, provided helpful information and data from existing research that support the critical nature of oral language and point to the need for further study regarding oral language skills and their impact on literacy.

In the 2005 article, *Pathways to Reading: The Role of Oral Language in the Transition to Reading,* the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD) described research regarding literacy skill development as yielding a complex mixture of findings. Many of the most-researched connections have been between phonological awareness/phonemic awareness and reading performance (Dickinson McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feinberg, & Poe, 2003; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson, & Foorman, 2004). Phonemic awareness refers to a specific skill including manipulating individual phonemes (sounds) in spoken words, and phonological awareness refers to a broad skill that involves identifying and manipulating units of oral language such as syllables, parts of words and rime (Reading Rockets, 2020). Both phonological and phonemic awareness are shown to be essential and foundational building blocks in literacy development. Other research pointed to processes such as letter naming, vocabulary, (e.g., Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001) and syntactic and semantic knowledge (e.g., Scarborough, 2001) as impacting reading development. Findings reveal that each of these skills may be influential at different times throughout a child's development. Storch and Whitehurst (2002, as cited in NICHD, 2005), for instance, found "the direct association between oral language skills, including vocabulary and accuracy of word decoding, disappeared after kindergarten but that oral language reemerged to significantly predict reading comprehension in third to fourth grade" (p. 429). Such complex findings pointed to the need for further research regarding the connections between language and reading.

Dickinson et al. (2010), suggested that "language-based theories of reading and reading disabilities must include both phonological processing and oral language abilities" (p. 306). They went on to promote instructional and intervention practices in early childhood programs that "build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge make lasting contributions to later language and comprehension abilities" (Dickinson et al., 2010, p. 307). Their research further supports the notion that early literacy skills are fostered by solid decoding skills and then further enhanced by vocabulary and language development.

In a case study of a kindergarten student, Fiano (2014) found that oral language development at school and home should be supported and enriched through purposeful opportunities for students to talk with their teachers and with one another. She suggested that classroom workstations be enhanced by student tasks and activities that promote conversation

and dialogue. Other implications of this study included scaffolding of curricular focus, such as vocabulary and word usage across home and school settings.

Gee (2001) summarized the importance of social and cognitive nuances in reading instruction and classroom interactions. At the basic level of recognizing the role of language, he suggested that, "our ways with words (oral or written) are of the same nature as our ways with ways of understanding and acting on the material and social world" (Gee, 2001, p. 717). Gee's perspective is one based in the theory of symbolic interactionism. This perspective points to Blumer's (1986) theory that meaning is developed through social interaction, in this case, within the context of the early childhood classroom. Blumer's assertion regarding meaning rests in three premises: people act on what they believe about the meaning of something; people create meaning through social interaction with others; people modify and make meaning as part of an interpretive process of interaction (Blumer, 1986). It is this perspective that Gee has when he supports the social nature of instruction and classroom dialogue.

Gee (2001) further illuminated the role language plays in children recognizing the potential of conversation and creating perspective. He described the importance of teacher-child interaction and dialogue as critical in creating these opportunities for development. Gee (2001) described how, in this type of dialogue,

> children come to see, from time to time, that others have taken a different perspective on what is being talked about than they themselves have. At a certain developmental level, children have the capacity to distance themselves from their own perspectives and (internally) simulate the perspectives the other person is taking, thereby coming to see how words and grammar come to express those perspectives. (p. 717)

In a very recent study reflecting on the impact of the teacher's language in early childhood classrooms, Farrow (2020) examined how the complexity of a teacher's syntax in a classroom instructional context might predict students' syntax and eventual vocabulary development, contributing to their overall literacy success. This study included looking at specific instructional times throughout the day when teachers and children interact: book reading, morning message and small groups. The study found that teachers did vary in their use of simplistic sentence structure to more complex, and that children learned more vocabulary in classrooms where teachers used more complex sentences in their instruction and classroom dialogue, specifically during morning message and small groups.

In addition, another recent study by Gamez et al. (2017), researchers examined a teacher's linguistic and social cues with the vocabulary skills of both English-only peers and Dual Language Learners. In this study, the social context of the classroom provided the cultural nature of language learning. The findings of this study revealed that the complexity of a teacher's syntax positively predicted growth in students' vocabulary from fall to spring measurement. This study suggests that the social nature of literacy development is supported in the classroom language environment where there is responsive language support and intentional word choice by teachers.

Also in 2017, Amorsen and Miller describe the importance of targeted early literacy practices in classrooms. They suggest that the teacher's role is to provide explicit instruction on oral language through by integrating teaching and learning strategies throughout the day. They point to both formal and informal learning of oral language as opportunities to model language, extend learning and give effective feedback to children (Amorsen and Miller, 2017). In their 2018 article, Walqui and Heritage remind teachers of the safe, nurturing cultural context necessary to promote oral language development. They implore teachers to "create a trusting classroom culture in which students feel that whatever level of language they can produce, their contributions will be valued" (Walqui and Heritage, 2018, p.19). This strength-based perspective that promotes inclusivity reflects the writings of Souto-Manning & Martell as well (2016).

In a study of 44 preschool classrooms, S.Q. Cabell et al. (2015) investigated teacher-child interaction and conversation. Their study indicated a correlation between teacher-child conversation with teacher elicitations and extensions in their language and a child's vocabulary acquisition. They point to the importance of multi-turn conversations with teachers and other students, looking to understand the pattern of responsive strategies used by teachers. They examined two specific patterns of strategies, distributed and concentrated: "a distributed pattern involved teachers using relatively few strategies within any single conversation and rather distributing them over a number of conversations, while a concentrated pattern involved teachers embedding numerous strategies within fewer conversations" (S.Q. Cabell et al, p. 81). This study further supports conversations to promote language growth in young children in the classroom environment.

In addition, Gilles and Pierce (2003) pointed to the key role of talk on curriculum as articulated by Barnes (1992) in his work, *From Communication to Curriculum*. They

investigated Barnes's idea and concluded that "the role of talk in the classroom is both a way for students to learn as well as a central window on what is learned" (Gilles & Pierce, 2003, p. 56). I viewed this two-way learning experience as reflective of the essence of oral language development and the opportunity in my study to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills.

Theoretical Framework

Using a pedagogical model, as informed by the theoretical research perspective of socio-cognitive constructivism, I examined teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that supported and promoted oral language skills in young readers. From a social constructivist perspective, an individual attempts to make meaning of their own world, attributing meaning and interpreting their world as they observe and respond to the world in which they live (Creswell, 2018). They are, simply put, constructing meaning as they watch and learn. Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory was derived from the notion that people were capable of learning through observation, and this observational learning was modeled. This modeling provided the opportunity for observers to take in the information, elicit the rules, and apply them in both similar and novel ways. Social cognitive theory posited an ongoing, emerging, and interactive process in which an observer could observe, reflect, and then apply their learning. Modeling includes conveying rules and influences which impact the observer's behavior as they extract meaning, assimilate information and practice employing the rule on their own (Bandura, 1986). My study connects the interpretive and iterative nature of social constructivism with the socio-cognitive theory of learning through observation and modeling.

Specifically, teacher talk can play a central role in modeling such experiences for children to develop and grow in their thinking, processing, and language skills. Smith and Dickinson (1994) spoke to the importance of teacher language in early literacy development. From a pedagogical lens, the power of language to convey and construct meaning is central in an early childhood classroom. The words a teacher chooses to use help create opportunity for discovery and understanding for a child. As described as a part of the socio cognitive theory of observe, reflect and apply, teachers provide modeling that allows for reflection, adjustment, and application on the part of the student. In addition, this notion of modeling can also be seen continued among students as well. Teachers often model language in both informal and formal ways, offering opportunities naturally in a classroom setting where students can then interact and

have conversations with each other that reflect the ongoing dialogue and cultural context they each contribute to the classroom.

Langer (1986) explained that a socio-cognitive view of literacy, "incorporates social practices, conceptions of reading and writing, and literacy as a way of thinking as more productive. Within this view, literacy is culturally based" (p. 14). She describes the effective practices of acknowledging and promoting thoughtful use of language and literate thinking, situated in the social context of the classroom culture. In defining this culture, Langer points to the work of social psychologist, Vygotsky, where culture is seen as the product of human social activity and there is a need for people to learn the characteristics and symbols of the culture in order to navigate their world and grow in their literacy (Vygotsky, 1979). Langer suggested that literacy learning is an interactive process and that "from a socio-cognitive perspective, effective literacy instruction is marked by new roles for teacher and students" (p. 16) that include social collaboration and communication. Examples of this might include creating opportunity in a kindergarten classroom to conference with small groups of children to model conversation as well as provide specific prompts for children to interact and dialogue together. Each child brings unique language-based experiences from their personal lives at home, in their childcare centers and in their communities that offer rich and dynamic opportunities for teachers to expand and grow in a classroom. In this way, classroom teachers can benefit from recognizing the social nature of literacy development and work to create instructional experiences to engage greater teacher-child interactions, conversations, and literacy opportunities.

In considering the social nature of literacy and learning, Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) called for educators to not only recognize the cultural relevance of literacy instruction in the classroom but described literacy development as both learning to read words, as well as reading worlds. They encouraged classroom teachers to create space for literacy instruction that is culturally competent and equitable (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). Acknowledging and embracing the opportunity for young children to develop their literacy skills through personal stories and cultural practices honors each child's diverse traditions and social natures. Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) explained, "teachers can develop ways of teaching that build on diverse children's strengths, leading to stronger understandings of learning processes and of how they are culturally and linguistically shaped," through listening, collaborating, and learning

alongside their young students (p. 16). Researching language and learning through this lens is an attempt to provide young learners with the opportunity to read both words and worlds.

Ethnographer, Shirley Brice Heath, too considers the social nature of literacy and learning and provides a window into the worlds of young children in two communities, as they learn to understand language as impacted by their homes and communities; in addition, her work describes the ways teachers learn their students' ways and then are able to use this understanding in the classroom (Heath, 1983). She describes three types of participation or stages of conversations that she observes among the young children in these two communities: Repetition stage, where child repeats and imitates; Repetition with Variation stage, where a child repeats some of an overheard conversation and then creates their own monologue that is similar in nature or topic; lastly, the Participating stage, where a child enters a conversation and contributes new topics. I found this intriguing in light of the social and developmental impact both family and community life have on a child's language learning. As children enter the doors of kindergarten and first grade, educators are challenged to embrace and build upon their strengths and needs. Critical to the description of the communities Heath depicts is the acknowledgement that as the ethnographer she worked to help classroom teachers become participant observers of their own classroom communities, enabling them to use their reflections to impact their language-rich classroom contexts as informed by their deeper understanding of the children in their classrooms.

The power of this practice supports the research of my study as I observed the interaction between teachers and students. They were keenly aware of who the children were in their classrooms, and they worked to incorporate that knowledge with empathy, understanding and appreciation of the strengths and needs of each child. As Heath (1983) described her work as intrusive in nature, assisting teachers in their self-reflection and application of those reflections, I too challenged the six teachers to reflect on what they knew and believed about the children in their classrooms. Our focus group provided an opportunity to deepen their thinking about the many strengths, abilities and cultural traditions children brought into their classrooms as language learners and community members of both their homes and school contexts.

Summary

With this in mind, from the socio-cognitive lens, the power of language to convey and construct meaning is central in an early childhood classroom. The words a teacher chooses to use help create opportunity for discovery and understanding for a child, leading to a greater impact

on literacy skill development. Langer (1986) argued, "reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, on the one hand, or using language to think about and act on the world, on the other" (p. 21). She suggested that a much broader perspective weaving social interaction, language, and cognition is necessary—offering a socio-cognitive constructivist framework as the viewpoint from which to research oral language and the impact on young readers (Langer, 1986). Dickinson et al. (2010), supported this suggestion, as they too pointed to "the integral connection of code, content, and language structure" (p. 308). This interweaving of cognitive development and social interaction emerged as significant and valuable for further review.

It is here-in this agreement that literacy development is more than simply code-based instruction, phonological awareness only-that my study focused. As a part of the analyses of research, I have determined that the social interactions between teachers and students as they promote oral language development and ongoing literacy development is impacted both culturally and linguistically. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children within a socio-cognitive constructivist paradigm. Through analysis of specific instructional practices within the social context of the classroom, my study examined the connections between creating intentional dialogue and interaction between teachers and children and the development of early literacy skills.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Hatch (2002) points to a variety of dimensions unique to qualitative research. Some of these unique characteristics include natural settings, participant perspectives, researcher as data gathering instrument, wholeness and complexity, subjectivity, emergent design, and reflexivity. With these dimensions in mind, a qualitative study best served as the method given my research aims. The early childhood classroom provided a natural setting in which I, as the researcher, played the role of the data gathering instrument as I used classroom observations and teacher focus groups.

Through participant observation and focus group interviews, I aimed to address the following primary research question: *What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?*

Using field notes, as well as conceptual memos, I documented ongoing interactions between teachers and students. According to Corbin (2007), conceptual memos are a type of notetaking that is much more analytical in nature than field notes (Corbin, 2007). Memos attempt to capture the researcher's analysis of what she is seeing and, as such, they help to develop and determine codes and themes. Similarly, the work of Darcy Fiano in her ethnographic case study of a kindergarten student's expressive oral language, used specific data sources that provided helpful models and examples for me in regard to my own study. Some of these data sources included participant observation, a researcher journal with descriptive narratives of the context of the observations, and interviews (Fiano, 2014).

In addition, these qualitative methods allowed me to observe this social context and to observe literacy learners inside the classroom setting. Given my aim to spend time in the classroom context to research the interaction between teachers and students, the emergent design nature of qualitative methods was ideal. Creswell (2018) suggested that, often in qualitative studies, the natural setting provides an environment in which the researcher can gather up-close information through authentic interaction and observation within context. As Hatch (2002) suggested, my study design changed and emerged as I was in classrooms researching, watching, and learning from the teachers and students. For example, insights and findings gained through observational memos and field notes evolved and changed as teachers reflected and dialogued as part of the focus group.

Another characteristic of qualitative research that fit well with my study included the inductive nature of moving from specifics to generalizations (Hatch, 2002). As the researcher, I gathered multiple forms of data, including observations, focus groups, memos, and field notes. This open-ended data allowed me to gather, reflect, make sense of, and then organize my findings. By moving from the specific to the whole inductively, I searched for patterns and themes that emerged from the specific pieces. I appreciate the way Creswell described a typical qualitative study to include the inductive work of building patterns and categories, looking for themes and organizing data. As the researcher then makes sense of this data, she looks for evidence to either support these themes or show the need for further research (Creswell, 2018). As Hatch describes, certain frames of analysis can be determined as the researcher analyzes the data. These frames provide help in determining the parts to be analyzed and have implications for the direction the study will go (Hatch, 2002).

In her article on the significance of focus groups, Kitzinger (1994) pointed to the conversation and common understanding that a small focus group provides; this is in contrast to individual interviews where it is simply the interviewer and the participant. This method of qualitative research creates an opportunity for the researcher to observe and "listen for" themes and patterns that emerge as focus group participants share, collaborate, and analyze their practices. For my study, this method allowed me to "'paint the picture,' of where, how, and from whom the data were collected" (Stalmeijer, Mcnaughton, & Van Mook, 2014, p. 14). This conversation also created space for a group of teachers to reflect on their own practices that lead to student growth and development in the classroom. This unique conversation provided my study with specific and focused data in regard to effective instructional practices.

I found the concept of pedagogical documentation, as a qualitative research method, interesting and useful. Buldu (2010) described this method in the context of kindergarten classrooms in his study of how pedagogical documentation can be used as a formative assessment technique for informing kindergarten teachers, parents, and students. This method included observations, transcriptions of classroom conversations, and collection of student work for analysis and reflection. This formative assessment approach provides classroom teachers with the opportunity to adjust their instructional practices as determined by student needs, challenges, and strengths (Buldu, 2010).

I found this method of pedagogical documentation relevant and useful to my study of teacher-student interaction and effective instructional practices in the classroom setting. The reflective nature of pedagogical documentation offered a practical way to include an important characteristic of effective instruction: metacognition. When asked to analyze, reflect on, and respond to their own instruction, teachers were acutely aware of the strengths and the inadequacies of their own practices. In this way, when paired with the reflective dialogue among focus groups of teachers, this method of pedagogical documentation and self-reflection challenged the teachers to respond. As a result of my study, I have developed a type of formative assessment tool for teachers to use as they work to employ effective instructional practices that support oral language development in their classrooms (See Appendix C).

Reflexivity was a critical aspect of the design of my qualitative study. This refers to the impact or potential impact that my own personal background and experiences may have on the study. It implies that my tendency to perhaps gravitate toward certain themes or categories is based on my own past experiences both educational and personal. I appreciated Creswell's (2018) suggestion to include a process of metacognition in regard to my own notetaking throughout the research. He advised to observe then reflect on the observation through the lens of my own experiences and how those might influence or impact my interpretations (Creswell, 2018).

Perhaps most helpful to me in planning this research was Hatch's (2002) suggestion that each researcher should design a qualitative study with a flexible structure that identifies the method of the study, along with a research paradigm that acknowledges assumptions and provides a foundation (Hatch, 2002). Hatch emphasized the importance of congruence between theory, methods, and frameworks, as he suggested that, if there is a bad fit between or among these, the logic of the design itself disintegrates (Hatch, 2002).

Description of the Qualitative Study

With this in mind, I conducted a participant observation study between teachers and students within a pedagogical model as informed by a socio-cognitive constructivist paradigm. This paradigm is often called social constructivism because it is based on associations others have on the world, and it allows for social interactions over time as people create meanings from each other. Social constructivism refers to how a person seeks meaning and understanding of the world they live in; it refers to a person's worldview, specifically their interpretation of their

world (Creswell, 2018). I identified these social interactions between teacher and students in the early childhood classroom as they promoted oral language development and ongoing literacy development, both of which were culturally and linguistically impacted.

In addition, by incorporating aspects of pedagogical documentation, I provide insight into practices that effective teachers use to support student growth and achievement. As noted in Bowne, Cutler, DeBates, Gilkerson & Stremmel (2010) pedagogical documentation is a qualitative, reflective inquiry approach that helps the researcher collect, reflect upon, and interpret data. In Appendix C, I have designed a Self-reflection Checklist of pedagogical documentation that might be used with classroom teachers who wish to further investigate their own practice for effective instruction that supports and promotes a language-building classroom. The checklist asks a teacher to consider a wide-range of personal and professional beliefs about who children are, how they learn language and how their words and actions in the classroom impact language development. My aim is to help teachers recognize and employ the intent and purposeful thinking necessary in creating and sustaining a classroom culture that supports a language-rich context.

In addition, I conducted a focus group that provided insightful and expanded thought in regard to making visible the thinking of teachers who employ effective instructional practices to support oral language in the classroom. It also created space for a group of teachers to reflect on their own practices which lead to student growth and development in the classroom. In considering the personal experience of the young learners in their classrooms and the chance to consider and draw on their unique strengths, this focus group conversation provided my study with specific and focused data on effective instructional practices (See Appendix A).

My study was conducted during the 2019-2020 school year at a suburban public-school district in 6 kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Each classroom had between 24 and 26 kindergarten and/or first grade students and one classroom teacher. Kindergarten was a full day program that ran Monday-Friday, during regular school hours.

Participants

Criteria for Selecting Participants

I selected as participants in this study kindergarten and first grade teachers in an Ohio, suburban, public, school district who have been rated as Skilled or Accomplished as determined by the Ohio Teacher Evaluation System (OTES). According to the Ohio Teacher Evaluation

System Model, an Accomplished teacher "is a leader and model in the classroom, school, and district, exceeding expectations for performance. The teacher consistently strives to improve his or her instructional and professional practice and contributes to the school or district" (Ohio Department of Education, 2020, n.p.). In addition, a Skilled teacher "consistently meets expectations for performance and fully demonstrates most or all competencies. This Skilled rating is the rigorous, expected performance level for most experienced teachers" (Ohio Department of Education, 2020, n.p.). By choosing to work with teachers who have obtained these ratings, I provided data that identified these teachers as effective in regard to instructional practices. I believe that focusing on these teachers provided rich data in relation to my research question (e.g., uncovering promising practices, approaches, and positive interaction patterns).

The following table (Table 1) shows some of the demographics and credentials of each of the six teachers in this study. The perspective and experience each of them brings to the classroom provides a glimpse into who they are and their commitment to creating language-rich classrooms where each young learner is supported, celebrated and challenged to grow. As seen below, the majority of the teachers live in the district where they teach. As embedded in the community, many of them are familiar with the families in the district and have the unique opportunity to know and support each child's experiences and strengths as they enter the classroom. As noted by Souto Manning (2016), it is critical for teachers to honor the personal stories and diverse traditions each child brings from their homes and communities. Children enter the kindergarten and first grade classroom with a wealth of learning as impacted by the culture of their homes, neighborhoods and childcare centers. The teachers in this study recognized the importance of acknowledging and promoting these traditions and their unique social context.

Table 1 – Demographic Information of the 6 Teachers

	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching in this district	Highest level of degree held	Lives in school district	Number of students in classroom, 2019-2020
Teacher 1	9	3	Master's	Yes	25
Teacher 2	9	3	Master's	Yes	24
Teacher 3	13	13	Master's	Yes	24
Teacher 4	9	9	Master's	No	26
Teacher 5	9	9	Master's	No	26
Teacher 6	14	14	Master's	Yes	26

Data Collection

In order to obtain intentional data for the research question posed, the following data collection methods were used: classroom observation, field notes, conceptual memos, and reflective dialogue with a focus group of teachers. This method of qualitative research created an opportunity for me as the researcher to observe and document themes and patterns that emerged as focus group participants shared, collaborated, analyzed, and reflected on their practices. Questions for the reflective dialogue used with focus groups were developed based on information gained from the early learning framework (Early Learning Advisory Group, 2008; see Appendix A). As part of the focus group interview protocol (see Appendix A), teachers had the opportunity to reflect and dialogue regarding the classroom observations. The design of the protocol was semi-structured to allow me to follow up on any interesting thoughts and ideas that emerged.

In order to analyze the data, I used an inductive approach, based on the constant comparative method of data analysis as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). As the participant-researcher, I worked between patterns and data to establish a set of themes to code. I used open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding allowed me to take the focus group reflections, the memos, and field notes and assign codes. After this, through axial coding, I considered the meaning of the data, looking for connections and eventually creating categories and themes based on the patterns and relationships. In addition, I followed the suggestion of a typological analysis to consider what kinds of information I was interested in as I

had designed both the research question itself, as well as creating the questions for the focus group (Hatch, 2002). Using the open codes that led to patterns, relationships, and themes, four themes emerged.

Each classroom observation and the focus group were recorded using a voice app or digital recording on my personal iPad. This allowed me to upload the recordings to a transcription website, Rev.com, which made it quite simple to transcribe the text for analysis. In addition, any field notes and memos captured during observations and the focus group were written in my journal and then summarized and uploaded into a Google doc I created to store codebook entries with evidence. All recordings, transcriptions, and documents were saved to my personal computer.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations of this study included addressing anonymity and confidentiality concerns. With this in mind, precautions were taken to maintain the anonymity of the study participants by removing identifying information; however, there is a slight risk that someone might attribute published quotes to one of the 6 teachers in the study. Due to the fact that the number of participants in this study is relatively limited there is an increased possibility that responses could be identified through demographic information. However, results are presented in a way that individuals will not be linked to sensitive opinions, and the name of the school district is not mentioned in any publication or presentation resulting from this study. In addition, multiple measures were in place to ensure ethical protection of the participants. First, permission to conduct the research study was submitted to and approved by Miami University's IRB committee. Next, permission slip forms and individual focus group consent forms were provided for all participants.

Limitations/Delimitations

This research study has a limitation that warrants note: the data analyzed in this study represent a small number of teachers (6) with a limited amount of time in each classroom (approx. 2-3 hours per classroom, one focus group reflection of approx. 2-3 hours). I acknowledge multiple classroom observations with a second follow-up focus group would have provided more data for analyzation, emergent themes and more strategies for instructional focus. Due to COVID-19, further observations and in-person reflections were shut down. However, check-ins through email, text and phone calls were completed.

While my classroom observations were somewhat limited in terms of time spent specifically during this research study, my professional experience in Kindergarten and First Grade classrooms extends from 1993 to the present. Across three school districts, both urban and suburban, I have served as a Spanish Immersion teacher, a Kindergarten and K/1st grade classroom teacher, a mentor for new Resident Educators, an Instructional Coach, a Literacy Coordinator and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Each of these opportunities have confirmed in me an ongoing passion for learning and literacy, a significant understanding of early child literacy development, as well as the desire to inspire this passion and understanding in both teachers and students.

Summary

My study was designed to examine teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children within a pedagogical framework as informed by a socio-cognitive constructivist paradigm. I hoped to identify these social interactions between teachers and students as they promote oral language development and ongoing literacy development as impacted both culturally and linguistically. Using a qualitative, reflective inquiry approach that collects, reflects upon, and interprets data, my study was conducted in the 2019-2020 school year at a suburban, public school district in 6 kindergarten and first grade classrooms.

Chapter 4: Research Findings

In this section, I provide research findings from my participant observation study, where I examined teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children. Through analysis of specific instructional practices within the social context of the classroom, my study examined the connections between creating intentional dialogue and interaction between teachers and children and oral language development and early literacy skills. My central research question was:

What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?

I designed the study to identify these instructional practices through participant observation and focus group reflective dialogue.

As I worked between patterns and data, a set of four themes emerged: *questioning*, *conversation*, *culture*, and *connection*. Each of these themes has unique instructional power to use with children as they observe, reflect, and respond. An additional continuous thread that was woven throughout the four themes was *intention*. My observations and reflections all truly connect to the intentionality either demonstrated or acknowledged that is necessary to provide ongoing, specific, thoughtful, and purposeful language development with five and six-year-olds. All six teachers had in mind a purpose or goal in using the language they chose with children. They designed questions and dialogue with specific aims in mind. This intentional word choice was evident throughout the four themes that emerged. With this in mind, I found a unique pedagogical model that emerged from the findings of my study, providing for me, a solid basis on which the themes and underpinnings of the study stand.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Themes

Grounding the four themes were two theoretical underpinnings from the pedagogical framework as informed by a socio-cognitive theory. As I described in Chapter 1, Bandura's social cognitive theory is derived from the notion that people are capable of learning through observation and this observational learning is modeled (Bandura, 1986). Thus, emerging as a part of this pedagogical model were the instructional practices of Modeling Language and Building on Diverse Strengths. By examining the codes within each of the four themes, considering the premise of a pedagogical model as informed by a socio-cognitive theory, and listening to the audio recordings of classroom observations and focus group reflections, I discovered the

commonality of instructional practices in regard to both intentionally modeling language to children and intentionally building on diverse strengths of children, whether in an informal or in a structured format in the classroom. As posited in the social cognitive theory, learning is an ongoing, emerging, and interactive process in which a learner can observe, reflect, and then apply the new information (Bandura, 1986). I found that the underpinnings of Modeling Language and Building on Diverse Strengths provided the pedagogical and theoretical lens through which I then saw the four themes. Tables 4 and 6 show examples of significant evidence I found of these two underpinnings grounded in theory, in the six different classroom observations and the focus group reflections. Table 2 lists the two theoretical underpinnings and the four themes.

Table 2 - Theoretical Underpinnings: Themes

Theoretical underpinnings	Themes	
Modeling Language	Questioning	Conversation
Building on Diverse Strengths	Culture	Connection

Modeling Language

Figure 1 depicts two of the themes and the instructional practices, Questioning and Conversation, under the theoretical underpinning of Modeling Language, as grounded in the pedagogical model as informed by the social cognitive theory.

Figure 1 – Theoretical Underpinnings: Modeling Language

Theoretical Underpinnig: **Modeling Language**	
Theme: Questioning	*Theme:* Conversation

Table 3 (below) describes what the teacher did and what the students did as the teacher modeled language through questioning and conversation. She provided opportunities for students to repeat phrases, questions, thoughts, and then reflect quickly and sometimes without realizing it. The child then assimilated the modeled language and finally applied it on their own. This table shows this interaction.

Table 3 - Modeling Language Teacher/Student Interaction

Teacher	Student
Modeling Language	Repeat
	Reflect
	Adjust
	Apply

Table 4 shows specific examples of modeling language from the classroom observations and my related reflections. To ensure each participant's identity was protected, I used a letter and number: T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6.

Table 4 - Modeling Language Observation & Reflection Example

Significant Observations	Related Reflections
T1 taught phonemic awareness lesson using a curricular resource. She had fun with sounds, took their names and helped them chop them into syllables. She modeled rhyming and had students use motions and syllables as well as counting. She weaved content, physical movement, and fun into this learning.	T1 took a critical element in developing language, phonemic awareness, and turned it into a game-like opportunity to model for five-year-olds. Students were given the opportunity to repeat rhyming word parts, reflect and respond, adjust or affirm their understanding, and then apply as they responded.
T6 taught a word work lesson to a small group of 4 kindergarten students. She used explicit instructions to practice vowel sounds. She moved at a quick pace, "I try, You try, I try, You try," as she gave students practice orally.	T6 saw the power of: listen, think, and repeat. She modeled the language and asked them to reflect and then apply. This created an almost chant-like rhythm to the learning. The students were engaged and active in response.

Theme: Questioning. The art of questioning is a critical practice in developing oral language in children. Through intentional word choice and language, teachers create metacognition in children and offer the opportunity to uncover their thinking. Teacher questioning includes opportunities for open-ended responses. Questions should promote thinking, not just lead a child toward a specific answer if the goal is to develop an idea, share thoughts, and/or practice language skills. During the focus group reflection, I asked about the difference between knowing where you want to take children in the conversation and yet not leading them too fast to a "right" or single answer. T1 explained:

I'm thinking about how other people who have great intentions ask a lot of leading questions, and it's kind of like they want a child (her) to perform with her answers. Can you imagine that situation with your kids? Leading her with the question, as opposed to giving her a sentence stem to then finish how she should choose. Imagine like in the courtroom, like leading the witness kind of thing, because then it puts pressure on her that like, they want me to say something. They must want me to say something that's right,

like what am I supposed to say? You kind of squash their willingness to participate in the conversation. They're put in that position.

T2 added:

> Yes, as opposed to being more open ended in the way you ask. I think open-ended is always great because sometimes they'll shock you. I mean, I think you can be so planned, but sometimes they'll just say something that's going to take your conversation someplace else, and if it's a great conversation, I mean being flexible as a teacher to embrace those moments and not be so stuck on what you think you wanted them to accomplish for that time.

T1 responded:

> Our instructional coach uses this a lot, "I wonder what would happen if," and that helps me as an adult, and I feel like posing a hypothetical can help getting kids somewhere but not pigeonhole them. You're not telling them, well what you've said is not what I'm looking for. You're just saying, I wonder if.

In addition to being open-ended in nature, effective questioning includes both validating and uncovering a child's thinking. Helping children have confidence that their ideas are valued and valid promotes the strength-based perspective that Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) described as integral in the classroom. Teachers use questions to prompt and engage a child's metacognition, helping them recognize their thoughts and ideas as meaningful. During a classroom observation, T5 prompted students:

> Are we ready to be thinkers? Believe you can do it right now. Be precise about listening to each other and agree or disagree and give a reason why using our special word. What word have you been practicing now? BECAUSE! The reason I pulled you to this table is because there have been a lot of different kinds counting, and I have seen a lot of agree and disagree. So, who can, while looking at this picture and this writing, just tell me some numbers you see? I don't want you to count the picture yet, but I want to tell you to tell me some numbers you see written by a kindergartener. Tell me what you're thinking. What could make this more clear? What could we add here?

The teachers have provided ways to help uncover the students' thinking through prompting and support. They question students, modeling language and providing opportunities to repeat, reflect, adjust, and apply.

In an observation, T4 questioned during morning meeting: "Why do you think? How did you feel? During Kindness week, how could you be nice?" T4 is stretching their thinking, making it visible to the child and to others as a model, and is validating their examples and personal responses. After asking a prompting question, T4 validates the students' thoughts by helping rephrase their attempts and stretches their thinking through further quick and intentional questions, drawing out their thoughts and helping make their ideas visible (ex. "Why, why not, how could you, show me what you are thinking about").

During a gathering time on the carpet, T1 had one student share a story or small moment with the class. It was an open-ended opportunity for the student to tell a story or share an experience. As the student shared orally, T1 scripted sentences on a poster. T1 repeated and summarized the student's thoughts to help clarify the story and reveal the heart of the student's message. The others in the class were then able to ask their own questions of the storyteller. Listening to five-year-olds develop a question, it was evident that there were instructional opportunities. T1 masterfully encouraged them to create their wonderings into a question, not a statement, an opinion, or a personal connection. This construct of modeling language through the use of questioning techniques was apparent throughout this sharing time: the teacher modeled and the students repeated, reflected, adjusted, and applied their ideas, giving them the chance to be heard and have their language validated. In addition, these practices were recognized in the focus group reflection. T5 explained:

> I almost feel like, at the grades we're at, K and One, you want them to have that confidence so young and not get squashed at an early age. We want them to keep all the questions they walk in our door with. When they're so little and then as they move throughout the grades, it's like you almost, like I want the questions to keep coming. They're so little, you know what I mean? Like of all the questions and ideas they come in with and then feel squashed as they go through the grades. I feel like it's this extra little job in the beginning of their schooling career to be built, to be validated, before they move on from us.

This sense of responsibility and opportunity were threaded throughout my observations and in the focus group reflections. These six teachers realized that a critical element on literacy development occurred during the early grades of kindergarten and first grade. They recognized

their role of intentionally weaving oral language through questioning into their daily interactions, instruction, and classroom dialogue as both unique and essential.

Theme: Conversation. The instructional power of conversation is leveraged in these six classrooms where multiple paths are developed for children to observe, reflect, and respond to dialogue. Children need these multiple entry points as they develop their abilities to express ideas, engage, and interact in conversations. These opportunities are informal and formal, as well as being both unstructured and structured. Conversation includes an oral exchange where teachers and students build relationships and express thinking. T1 explained:

> I think there are formal and informal ways that we do that. So, there's the social conversation that we have with kids during unstructured times. And then there's like a writing conference, which is a conversation where you're maybe expecting to draw something specific out of a kid by asking a question like, what are you working on? And then there's, how was your night last night? And on that one, you have no idea where it's going to go!

T2 explained:

> I think you have to teach them how to talk to each other. I'm really working on that with my class, trying to teach them how to communicate with each other, because they're so quick to just turn and talk about the question and then they look straight back at you because they're ready for your approval. So, I keep trying to teach them how to build on each other's thoughts and listen. I think, too, giving them time to think before and then even time just to talk with each other before you ask them to share and giving them that time to really think through what is it they're asking me and coming up with their response is important. Like before they talk to the whole group because that gives them all that chance to interact with each other.

T2 refers to the power of modeling language for five and six-year-olds through conversation. She is helping them practice creating a conversation with each other as peers, not just answering a question the teacher has posed. T2's example above points to an instructional practice of showing pairs of students how to listen to what their partner is saying, think about what they mean, and then respond to their thought before raising their hand to share something with the whole class. She is modeling the concept of powerful conversation to build deeper understandings through dialogue. T2 explained:

I feel like that's changed a lot for me over the past few years, where I will have them talk to each other a lot more first, because that gives them that chance to interact with each other. When you think about the ratio of how much interactive language you're getting, versus just that call and answer and almost like the wait time that comes with that. So it's like you're not going with just one or two kiddos' answers to something. You almost get some wider range of possibilities and not jumping to what you're trying to get at too soon so that there's more pathways that have taken you to, you know, whatever you're focusing on at the time.

Building on Diverse Strengths

Figure 2 (below) depicts two additional themes, Culture and Connection, under the theoretical underpinning of Building on Diverse Strengths, and the accompanying instructional practices as grounded in the pedagogical model as informed by the social cognitive theory.

Figure 2 – Theoretical Underpinnings: Building on Diverse Strengths

Theoretical Underpinning: **Building on Diverse Strengths**	
Theme: Culture	*Theme:* Connnection

Table 5 shows that, as the teacher built upon student strengths, she made them feel honored as a learner and helped them make connections to their own lives, as well as allowing them to move from the unknown to the known in regard to new learning. This socio-cognitive underpinning of building on diverse strengths confirms the suggestion of Souto-Manning and Martell (2016) to listen, collaborate, and learn alongside young students. My classroom observations were filled with opportunities that these six teachers created for young learners to make connections and experience having their thoughts and ideas honored.

Table 5 - Building on Diverse Strengths Teacher/Student Interaction

Teacher	Student
Building on Diverse Strengths	Feels celebrated and honored
	Makes connections
	Moves from unknown (new information) to the known (assimilate new with something they do know)

Table 6 shows specific examples of building on diverse strengths from the classroom observations and my related reflections. To ensure each participant's identity was protected I used a letter and number: T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6.

Table 6 - Building on Diverse Strengths Observations & Reflections

Significant Observations	Related Reflections
All six teachers held a morning meeting where students were given the opportunity to greet the teacher and each other in unique and specific ways. One example included T4 going around the carpet circle to say each child's name, having them return the greeting. T5 and T6 both had students singing greetings as well as doing a "turn and talk" on the carpet to build community and honor each child's desire to share something from their morning or evening before. T1 created an opportunity to have them share aloud their ideas. She asked them to, "find a partner. Sit knee to knee and heart to heart!"	The six teachers honored each child as they created time and space to greet each other and share. All of them included some type of routine that allowed students time to talk with each other. Some was structured and prompted directed conversation, other opportunities included a quick prompt to share something from their day so far with an elbow partner. Allowing young learners time to share what was on their mind was a powerful practice in each classroom. It promoted making connections and helping students move from the unknown to the known.
T1 said, "I watched your brain figure that out!" She supported a student's attempt to understand a phonics lesson. She helped her struggle through her description of the markings she made on her small white board where she had attempted to write a "trick word."	Teachers have the chance to create a culture of inclusivity and equity. Giving students the chance to think out loud in the classroom develops practice as well as confidence. Finding ways to provide both formal and informal dialogue supports and scaffolds this learning. Reinforcing their attempts and celebrating how they move from the unknown to the known is critical affirmation.

Theme: Culture. The notion that there are indeed effective instructional practices in supporting oral language in young learners must find its roots in believing each child is unique, capable, valuable, and truly belong on this journey of growth as a learner. This grounding belief

system includes the socio-cognitive lens of building on diverse strengths through classroom culture. Practices that develop out of this commitment were evident in these six classrooms where children were given opportunities to work from personal context of strengths toward learning new and novel ideas, skills, and concepts.

Language is a critical and defining element of culture. In order to build on the diverse strengths of the children and create a nurturing, supportive, and engaging learning environment, the culture of the classroom must include opportunities for children to express themselves, their own stories, their personal world through language. Language-building in the classroom is an extension of the developmental process that is happening naturally in young children (Amorsen and Miller, 2017). Teachers have the chance to create a culture of inclusivity and equity by building on their diverse strengths. Finding ways to honor each child and help them express themselves through a variety of means is done through intention and commitment to fostering ideas and building relationships. Giving students a voice in the classroom provides practice and develops confidence. The medium of expression might include a wide-range of possibilities, such as storytelling, dialogue, drawing, and coloring, to name a few. In the focus group, T5 explained:

> I almost just think in terms of their ideas and the way that they want to show it to you, we've been trying to do sketchbooks more throughout things and some kids will, I mean, some kids have been bringing me their sketchbook and can be like look at all these pictures of the moons orbiting the earth. I mean the things they are telling me that they're drawing, based off of what we've been learning, they are expressing in their way, in their own time. So, some kids will use the form or expression of their pictures, but then when they're coming to share it with either their friends or the teacher, all of the verbal vocabulary and some of the things we've been building come out in being able to talk about what's going on in their pictures. It's like there's tons of learning inside them, and it's not written down anywhere.

In a classroom with language-rich culture, students found ways to demonstrate their understanding and knowledge through multiple means. Young learners bring so much of their thinking and understanding into the formal world of school from their own homes, childcare settings, and communities. Teachers masterfully uncover their thinking, making it visible, and then connect it to new understandings. These instructional practices are intentional connections

from the known to the unknown, providing a scaffold for learning. Creating opportunities and giving students a voice in the classroom includes honoring the strengths of a child as they move from the known to the unknown. During the focus group, T4 explained:

> I think just having different ways to even express your knowledge and kind of honor the creativity that some kids would prefer—maybe to build it—you know? I mean, lately, I've had a kid who has just been making these massive structures of paper about what's going on in our room. And so just having different avenues for them to be able to share their learning that isn't necessarily written in a sentence.

In the examples above from T5 and T4, we see that often young learners are able to share their learning orally, once they have produced something such as a paper structure, a drawing, or a Lego creation, which may provide that spring board for them as they move from what they do understand and can express independently to applying that learning in multiple modes. As Souto-Manning (2016) remind teachers, "it is essential that children explore language functions orally so that they have the foundational knowledge to develop reading and writing" (p. 74). Allowing students to grow and develop these skills, building on their strengths, establishes a culturally-shaped, authentic learning environment.

A common practice among all six classrooms was the use of music. Students were highly engaged whenever music was used. It seemed to level the field for them as learners. They could listen and respond independently yet feel united as a learning community. Music encouraged their thinking, expression, and movement. It provided the opportunity to share content area information in a fun and engaging way. From instruction in specific item knowledge, such as phonic rules, to thematic support in science and social studies, to classroom management techniques, music was a foundational instructional staple with these young learners.

Theme: Connection. The fourth theme of connection implies that a link or transfer is made from one point of understanding to another. It implies that the child starts from a place of perhaps limited knowledge but moves toward a greater understanding. Teachers play a vital role in providing a culturally sensitive learning environment where meeting the child in the context of who they are as a learner is joined with the commitment to support the journey of learning they are on, serving often as the link or point of transfer. The instructional practice of connecting the unknown to the known, of validating current state with an eye on greater and deeper learning

begins with the acknowledgement as a teacher that we are co-constructers of understanding and that helping give context for young learners is critical.

The teachers' practices confirmed that they recognized that connections made, and context developed, can lead to a greater understanding by their students. They also saw that it allowed students to develop their thinking by moving from the known to the unknown or unfamiliar, validating the child's thinking and understanding. For example, T3 created context and meaning for children before she read a mentor text aloud. She shared what she was thinking about as a learning target for all of them to consider, "What is something the same and something different in the character's life and ours?" T3 then gave a full minute of wait time while children were thinking. She prompted them by encouraging them to look at the pages of the story for ideas to trigger their minds. In this example, T3 masterfully wove in the connections she was making and then led them to consider their own connection to the story—the conversation leading them to hitting the learning target she identified as she started the story. With these connections, students were able to move from their current understanding to new learning. During a classroom observation, T3 and students shared:

T3: Let's think. How is our life the same or different as the character in this book, *Carmela*?

S: Why don't they have the washer at their house the way we do now?

T3: That's a good question. Does anyone know anything about a laundromat? Have you heard about it?

S: Umm…you can wash clothes there.

S: Why can't they do it at home?

S: Maybe cuz' there's more washers there.

T3: Who can add on?

S: If you don't have one at your house, you can go to the laundromat.

T3: That's right. Not everyone has those at home. Some places in the world don't even have pipes to carry the water. Or maybe it's broken. These are very expensive machines.

T3 recognized that helping students, who almost all had washing machines in their homes, did not understand the context of the story without stopping to make intentional connections between the new information (unknown) and that with which they were familiar (known). T3 also honored a specific child in the room by giving them an opportunity to help create the

understanding in others. T3 was aware that this student came from a home where there was no washing machine and that this student did indeed know and connect to the idea of going to a laundromat. Without needing to acknowledge that aloud, she simply used questions and prompts to give this student a chance to make his thinking visible to the class, helping all of them grow in their understanding, and quietly honoring the fact that this student could connect to the context of the story.

T5 also provided connections for students as she used the power of questioning (the first theme) to link their current understanding with new information or learning opportunities. This example demonstrates the power of making connections that help young learners express their thinking. Her questions prompted further expression by the students, asking them to demonstrate, show, and make their ideas visible in both oral and written form. Her use of intentional vocabulary and connections to concepts learned recently in the classroom led to strong links for students to make. T5 questioned students during an observation:

> So, you counted six tools. Would you agree? So how could we know that you meant six tools here? Is there something you could add to show that it's six tools? How did you count them? By ones? Is there anything you could add to show us how you counted by ones? Do you have an idea? You're agreeing with her that there are six tools? You counted by ones. What do you think you could add to show that you could show me where you saw three and counted by ones?

Conclusion

I analyzed my field notes and focus group reflection data, which led to patterns, relationships, and themes. Using open and axial coding, four themes emerged: questioning, conversation, culture, connection. These four themes, woven together through intention, provide the answer to the research question as they show specific and targeted instructional practices that teachers in early childhood classrooms use to develop oral language in five and six-year olds.

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Discussion, and Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher-child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six-year-old children, within a pedagogical model as informed by a socio-cognitive constructivist paradigm. Through analysis of specific instructional practices within the social context of the classroom, this study examined the connections between creating intentional dialogue and interaction between teachers and children and the development of early literacy skills. The central research question was to identify these instructional practices through participant observation and reflective dialogue.

The instructional strategies identified by this study were aimed at supporting the growth and development of oral language in five and six-year-olds. The data analysis of this study resulted in the emergence of four themes: questioning, conversation, culture, and connection. These four themes, woven together through intention, show specific and targeted instructional practices that teachers in early childhood classrooms use to develop oral language. Grounding the four themes were two theoretical underpinnings—*modeling language* and *building on diverse strengths*—derived from a pedagogical model as informed by the socio-cognitive theoretical framework that holds that people are capable of learning through observation and this observational learning is modeled (Bandura, 1986).

Summary of Findings

The themes, theoretical underpinnings, and instructional practices discovered were directly relevant to the research question:

What instructional practices support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-old children?

The first two themes of *questioning* and *conversation* were both grounded in the practice of *modeling language*. All six teachers in this study intentionally created opportunities to model language through skillful questioning and purposeful conversation. They sought to identify and support a child's personal context of strengths to support them in learning new and novel ideas, skills and concepts. Teachers saw their role as both unique and essential, intentionally weaving oral language through questioning into their daily interactions, instruction, and classroom dialogue.

The first theme, questioning, included powerful questioning techniques to uncover a child's thinking, create opportunities to answer open-ended questions, stretch a child's thinking and ideas, and validate their language expression. Their questions helped to extend and deepen the conversations with children. They honored children as co-creators of language and meaning as they used questions to engage their thinking, as well as making their thinking visible.

The second theme, conversation, was discovered in all six classrooms where children had the opportunity, in multiple ways throughout their day, to talk to each other, listen to each other, and interact with their teacher(s). By design, the teachers provided instruction in how to listen, reflect, respond, and build upon ideas and interactions. Teachers recognized the value in this purposeful instruction and provided both formal and informal modeling throughout the day.

The next two themes of culture and connection were grounded in the practice of building on diverse strengths of the students. All six teachers fostered the students' oral language skills by creating an environment that was inclusive, responsive, and honored the child. Through intentionally building from the strengths of the children, the teachers in this study created connections that enhanced their thinking and developed their literacy skills and strategies.

The third theme, culture, stemmed from the teachers' beliefs that each child brings unique value to the classroom. The teachers in this study built relationships intentionally with each student. They validated their thinking, provided experiences for them to productively struggle, and were responsive to their needs. As they worked from a mindset that each child brought culturally shaped and richly diverse experiences into the classroom from their personal lives, the six teachers built on the opportunities to authentically learn from and alongside their students.

The fourth and final theme, connection, seemed to provide the validation and recognition by the teachers in this study of the essential role oral language plays in the development of children, helping them move from the known to the unknown. The intentional links that the teachers made with and for the children created multiple pathways for them to listen, reflect, assimilate, and respond throughout their day. Teachers used music, literature, storytelling, sentence prompts, and inquiry projects to develop and engage their young learners.

The pedagogical model that emerged, as informed by the socio-cognitive theory, provided a strong theoretical framework for the findings of this study. The theory was derived from the notion that people were capable of learning through observation and that this

observational learning was modeled (Bandura, 1986). In the pedagogical setting, this modeling takes on the social nature of interaction between teachers and students as well as between students and other students. In this study, the six teachers embodied the theoretical assumption that through their interactions, conversations, and intentional dialogue in the classroom, students are supported, nurtured and given the chance to grow. The teachers recognized the social nature of literacy development, honoring the child's abilities and strengths brought to school from their home and community; the teachers then worked to create instructional experiences that supported further oral language development. In addition, the socio-cognitive pedagogical theory supports the idea that literacy is culturally based, situated in the social context of the classroom where both teachers and students contribute to the unique and valuable culture and climate (Langer, 1986). All six teachers in this study provided authentic learning experiences for students as they embraced the powerful practice of inclusivity, building from their students' strengths.

Recommendations

This study analyzed the instructional practices that support and promote oral language development in five and six-year-olds. My research found there were specific practices that emerged as a pedagogical model in the six classrooms where teachers acted from a place of intention and purposefulness. They held strong beliefs, as demonstrated in their classroom practices, about the value of talk, the honoring of diverse strengths, and the commitment to modeling language. These six teachers masterfully wove authentic conversation and interaction with children into the routine of the day. Their intentionality and self-reflection created an atmosphere of inclusivity, engagement, and fun.

My recommendation based on this research study is to investigate how schools might provide professional learning for teachers to help develop a deeper understanding of the effective instructional practices discovered in this research. Based on the data analyzed in this research study, effective instructional practices include the themes of questioning, conversation, culture, and connection, as developed through modeling language and building on diverse strengths. Professional learning experiences for teachers should include opportunities that focus on the themes revealed by this study. Examples of these professional learning opportunities might include:

- Focus groups of teachers where they can listen to and learn from each other in regard to daily practices, belief systems, and routines to support language development in the classroom.
- Self-reflection opportunities, such as those described in pedagogical documentation, that would include teachers recording their practices and activities in the classroom, documenting their dialogue with students, and reflecting on them with other teachers and perhaps instructional coaches, if possible.
- Self-reflection guided through the Self-Reflection Checklist for pedagogical documentation I created to support teachers of young children (see Appendix C), with small groups of teachers gathering for ongoing conversation and dialogue.
- Observation of other teachers of five and six-year-olds to gain insight into the climate of the classroom and the instruction that takes place in supporting and promoting language development.

Limitations to these conclusions and recommendations include acknowledging that in order to implement the suggestions I made for professional learning, teachers would need to agree to engage in self-reflection, peer observation and documentation of their learning. Embracing new instructional practices is a deeply personal choice that teachers must make daily as they plan responsive teaching lessons in their classrooms. In addition, a possible limitation to the study includes the recognition that thematic conclusions made in this study could be stronger if given more time to perhaps create a case study in which a group of students are given a type of baseline assessment of oral language, spend a school year in a classroom where these effective instructional practices are used and then given a post-assessment to monitor their oral language growth.

Suggestions for Future Research

The focus of this study was on the instructional practices that support and promote oral language development in young learners, from a socio-cognitive view. To further explore the impact of developing strong oral language skills outside the socio-cognitive view, this study might be researched more specifically in regard to the science of reading. The correlation between these oral language skills and children developing strong reading abilities merits further attention. As stated in the background and historical perspective of this study, much of the research done in regard to learning to read has been in the area of phonological awareness and

phonics. The critical nature of oral language development, as discussed in this research study, warrants the further investigation of its role alongside phonological awareness and phonics in, for example, the simple view of reading. In this view, researchers explain the specific skills and strategies students need to decode and comprehend text. A study done in this context would further support the importance of oral language but from an innately different perspective, more technical in nature, than the social cognitive model.

Conclusion

This research study has confirmed in me that the power of language is its social nature— it provides common understandings, creates community, and contributes to culture. The findings of this study revealed this social nature of oral language development in an early childhood classroom and the essential role a teacher plays in that development. As we reflect on these findings in the local context of my school district, my aim is to provide support for teachers who desire to learn the purposeful techniques of conversation and questioning, the need for intentional language development work, and the connection between supporting children's oral language expression and literacy development.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions for teacher participants:

How do I invite children into conversation?

How might I extend and deepen conversations with children?

How does my language reflect children as co–constructors of knowledge?

How do my questions reflect children as creators of language and meaning?

How do I honor a child's expressions of communication and language?

Do I offer opportunities for children to communicate in various modes?

How might I intentionally listen to all modes of a child's expression? How might this shift our conversation?

Do I offer opportunities for oral storytelling, personal narratives?

What opportunities are there for children to hear poems, rhymes, songs and stories? Do they reflect the culture of the children in my classroom?

Do children have the opportunity to talk to each other? Do children have the opportunity to listen to each other? How might I design both?

Appendix B

Individual Focus Group Consent Form

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to take part in a qualitative research study to examine teacher–child interactions and dialogue to identify instructional practices that support and promote oral language skills in five and six–year–old children. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

Procedures: As part of this study, you are asked to allow the researcher to observe and record in your classroom during the 2019–2020 school year. The purpose of the observation is to identify social interactions between teacher and students as they promote oral language development and ongoing literacy development as impacted both culturally and linguistically. In addition, you are asked to participate in a focus group to provide opportunity for reflective dialogue and pedagogical documentation.

Risks/Benefits: Precautions will be taken to maintain your anonymity as a study participant by removing identifying information; however, you should be aware that there is a slight risk that someone might attribute published quotes to you.

Confidentiality: Your responses will be confidential; but the number of participants in this study is relatively limited which increases the possibility that your responses could be identified through demographic information. Results will be presented in a way that individuals will not be linked to sensitive opinions. The name of the school district will not be mentioned in any publication or presentation resulting from this study. Research records will be kept in a locked file in a locked office and digital research records will be kept on a password protected computer.

Voluntary Participation: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You do not need to participate. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. You may elect not to answer any question that you do not want to answer.

Contact and Questions: If you have any questions about this research study, you can contact Michelle Banks using the information below. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as research participant, you may contact Miami University's Office for the Advancement of Research and Scholarship at humansubjects@MiamiOH.edu or 513–529–3600.

Researcher: Michelle Banks 614–560–3418 or mbanks@uaschools.org

Appendix C

Self–reflection Checklist for pedagogical documentation

___ I believe that each child brings unique and valuable strengths as a learner.

___ I believe that language is a critical and defining element of classroom culture.

___ I work to identify a child's personal context of strengths to support them as they learn new and novel ideas, skills and concepts.

___ I believe that language–building in the classroom is an extension of the developmental process that is happening naturally in a five and six–year–old.

___ I intentionally provide opportunities for children to express themselves, their own stories, and their personal world through language.

___ I offer multiple means of expression medium of language expression such as storytelling, dialogue, drawing, coloring, etc.

___ I believe I, as the teacher, play a vital role as a connection for a child, a link, through my instructional practices of connecting the known to the unknown.

___ I believe that I help validate a child's thinking and understanding through these intentional connections.

___ I believe that as a co–constructer of understanding, my practices help give context for young learners that is critical to language development.

___ I believe that conversation includes an oral exchange where teachers and students build relationships and express their thinking.

___ I design multiple paths for children to observe, reflect and respond to conversation.

___ I believe children need multiple entry points as they develop their ability to express ideas, engage and interact in conversations.

___ I provide opportunities that are informal and formal, as well as being both unstructured and structured.

___ I believe that the art of questioning is a critical practice in developing oral language in children.

___ Through intentional word choice and language, I help create metacognition in children and the opportunity to uncover their thinking.

___ My questions promote thinking and include opportunities for open–ended responses.

___ The questions I ask model language and provide opportunities for children to repeat, reflect, adjust and apply.

___ My unique and essential role is to intentionally weave oral language through questioning into the children's daily interactions, instruction and classroom dialogue.