CHAPTER 2

A Comprehensive Approach to Building Oral Language in Preschool

PREREQUISITES FOR LITERACY

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GUIDING QUESTIONS

- How can teachers facilitate preschool children's language development?
- More specifically, how can teachers build children's vocabulary and sense of story, both of which will aid in later reading comprehension?
- How can teachers get parents involved in their children's acquisition of literacy if those parents are not necessarily very advanced in their own literacy skills?

OVERVIEW OF THE TOPIC

Preschool classrooms present a crucial opportunity for children to develop their oral language skills, especially those children coming from an impoverished background. A child's receptive vocabulary and ability to produce a narrative, among other oral skills, upon entrance to kindergarten predicts their fourth-, seventh-, and 10th-grade reading comprehension (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007). Because of such documented stability, preschool teachers are uniquely poised to change the trajectory of a child's academic success. Fortunately, we are in a position to offer research-based suggestions about how this can be achieved.

IMPORTANT THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH BASE

Children begin literacy by developing oral language (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Numerous aspects of oral language development have been found to predict literacy skill (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Children acquire language by exposure to child-directed talk, and the more of this they receive, the larger their vocabularies (Hart & Risley, 1995; Hurtado, Marchman, & Fernald, 2008; Huttenlocher, Haight, Bryk, Seltzer, & Lyons, 1991; Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010). Other aspects of oral language also are acquired by children interacting one-on-one with adults; in particular the extent to which a child's narration is elaborated by parents predicts the quality of children's narratives (Fivush, Reese, & Haden, 2006).

What children need is input that is responsive to them (Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001). That is, children will not learn very much, if any, language from watching even supposedly educational television. Instead, they need to hear positive discussion of real objects or events that interest them. They benefit from hearing various kinds of talk, especially when that talk is contingent upon something they themselves say or indicate (McCabe, Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, Cates, Golinkoff, et al., 2013/under review). In America, children whose parents speak a language other than English benefit from having their parents speak the language that the parents are most comfortable with and fluent in, as well as from exposure to English in the first several years of life (Kovelman, Baker, & Petitto, 2008).

Unfortunately, not all children have parents who converse with them in such a positive, nurturing way (Hart & Risley, 1995); children from impoverished backgrounds hear a great deal less talk directed to them, as well as proportionately more negatively tinged commands—kinds of input that are less than optimal for language development.

And despite the promise of preschool—a place where oral language can be bolstered for less fortunate children so that they will enter kindergarten equipped to successfully begin to learn how to read (Snow et al., 1998)—many studies have documented what can only be termed missed opportunities in classrooms (see Dickinson, McCabe, & Clark-Chiarelli, 2004; McCabe, Boccia, Bennett, Lyman, & Hagen, 2010, for review). The importance of talking individually to children about things that interest them gets put aside in the interest of maintaining order in the classroom or more formal instruction in the alphabet or numbers or no talk at all.

To bring children up to speed verbally is no simple task. The truth is that there are many aspects of oral language that are critical prerequisites for literacy acquisition: phonological awareness, vocabulary, syntax, and narrative discourse; the notion that all these facets of oral language should be attended to is a tenet of the Comprehensive Language Approach (CLA) to early literacy (Dickinson, McCabe, Anastasopoulos, Peisner-Feingerg, & Poe, 2003). The CLA believes that too many

researchers and practitioners have focused on fostering phonological awareness in preschoolers to the exclusion of other equally important aspects of oral language such as vocabulary and narrative and that such unequal emphasis does not serve children well. The CLA has been supported by a large national study (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2005). Ideally, teachers will focus on all these oral skills in addition to print-related skills more typically associated with literacy. Adding to this challenge is the additional fact that even under optimal circumstances, there are more children than adults in the classroom. This imbalance of children and adults means that for each child to receive enough input responsive to his or her interests, a clear and consistent focus on the importance of such talk needs to be implemented.

A number of programs have had documented success in building aspects of children's language and literacy skills. When adults read interactively with children while asking and inviting questions, a practice known as *dialogic reading*, children's expressive and receptive vocabulary are significantly expanded (Arnold & Whitehurst, 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). Dialogic reading is listed as the most effective intervention for building oral language in early childhood education by the What Works Clearinghouse (*http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/topic.aspx?tid=13*).

Another study found that *joint writing* significantly outperforms joint reading and control instruction in facilitating phonological awareness, word writing, orthographic awareness, and letter knowledge even in children as young as 3 to 4 years of age (Aram & Biron, 2004). The joint writing program involved a variety of games and creative activities that encouraged letter knowledge, phonological awareness, and emergent writing activities with children ages 3 to 5 years. Children were taught to recognize their own written names and written names of friends, word segmentation, letter names, and letter–sound correspondences. For example, in a lesson about a month into the program, children were alternately asked to do such things as pick out the first letters of their names from stickers or magnetic letters or to write the first letter of their name with crayons. That session ended with each child saying his or her name, the first syllable of the name, the first letter, and goodbye (e.g., "My name is Maria, my name starts with *ma*, with the letter *M*, goodbye"). In the present intervention—which involves slightly older children (4 years instead of 3)—teachers would say things like, "See *S* makes the /s/ sound (in memory story, Appendix 2.1). *S* begins the words *ssso, ssshiny*, and *sssstory* right here and here and here [pointing to the words in question]."

Elaborating a child's narrative by asking a child more questions improves the ability to tell a narrative. That is, in past research, we randomly assigned low-income mothers to a condition in which we explained the importance of following up on what children talked about. Children whose mothers received this intervention improved their receptive vocabulary and narrative ability compared to a control group of children whose mothers did not receive the intervention (Peterson, Jesso,

& McCabe, 1999). In fact, a review of extensive research has documented the considerable positive impact elaborating a child's narrative has on a wide variety of linguistic, cognitive, and socioemotional development (Fivush et al., 2006). Elaborating narrative, like joint writing, has been found by one group of researchers to be even more effective than dialogic reading in improving children's narrative ability and reading comprehension (Reese, Leyva, Sparks, & Grolnick, 2006). When 4- to 5-year-old children *recounted educational activities*, their expressive and receptive language improved (Riley, Burrell, & McCallum, 2004).

Having 6- to 7-year-old children *dictate a story* in response to a picture prompt significantly increased the level of development of their story structure and use of spatial–temporal-setting elements (Pontecorvo & Zucchermaglio, 1989). Sulzby (1981) analyzed the dictated stories of kindergartners and found that these varied from stories they told in a number of ways; dictated stories can be an important aspect of developing emergent literacy such that children learn the link between their own words and print. Justice, Pullen, and Pence (2008) found that although preschool children seldom pay attention to print in various types of storybook reading, *explicit referencing of print* is one way to significantly increase such attention. In the course of taking dictation of a child's narrative, it is very natural to refer to print (e.g., "See, this is where I wrote your name. And this is where I wrote *jewelry*").

BRINGING THIS KNOWLEDGE TO THE EARLY LITERACY CLASSROOM

Description of the Preschool Program

To meet the challenges of facilitating children's oral language development, as well as their emergent literacy skills, I developed a method of talking with children that combined all of the aspects of oral language found to effectively predict children's literacy accomplishments with print-related skills: The Remembering, Writing, Reading program (RWR).

Congruent with the CLA, our RWR intervention combined aspects of numerous effective programs: (1) dialogic reading; (2) joint writing; (3) elaborating personal narratives; (4) recounting educational and other activities; (5) taking dictation of a narrative while explicitly referencing print related to children's own words ("Slow down, I need more time to write down all you said—see?"); (6) bolstering receptive vocabulary; and (7) engaging in emergent literacy skills such as letter recognition, directionality of writing, and the relationship of speech to text. The RWR approach builds on the Language Experience Approach (LEA) to reading instruction (Stauffer, 1970). Despite many variations, the essential LEA concept remains: to teach a child with limited language effectively, one should use the student's own vocabulary and narrative structure to create reading materials that that student can comprehend

(Dixon & Nessel, 1983). The LEA has been particularly recommended for ELL (English language learning) students (e.g., Peregoy & Boyle, 2001), as it makes use of the English vocabulary the students have already acquired in order to ensure that they will understand a passage after working to decode it.

The form for implementing RWR is in Appendix 2.1 at the end of the chapter. At the first session, a teacher tells a child a brief personal narrative (e.g., "See this Band-Aid? I was peeling an apple last night, and I slipped, and I cut my finger. Did anything like that ever happen to you?"). This narrative sets the exchange up as a conversation rather than a testlike situation and has been found to be very effective in getting children to narrate (Peterson & McCabe, 1983). Children are encouraged to draw or look at photos of various locations in the area (e.g., a park) that might trigger a memory.

Oral into Written Language: Emergent Literacy Skills

When the child begins to narrate, the teacher begins to write down what the child is saying, repeating the child's words in the process. This echoing ensures that the child understands he or she is being listened to and buys the teacher time to print the child's words. While teachers are advised to use the exact words that the child said, some changes will invariably occur (e.g., pronunciations get clarified, words are sometimes forgotten). Such minor changes are not important and did not, will not compromise the efficacy of RWR. In fact, correcting a child's grammar is sometimes advisable: For example, a teacher might say, "You wented outside? OK, I'll write 'I went outside.' "

Elaborating Narrative

If the child stops narrating, teachers are encouraged to ask open-ended follow-up questions such as "*Who* else was there?" "*What* did you order at the restaurant?" "*When* did this happen?" "*Where* does your grandma live?" "*How* fast did you run yesterday?" "*Why* do you think that little boy hit his sister?" "*What* do you think your brother felt when you said he couldn't play with you?" The goal is to get the child to extend his or her narrative.

While it is good practice to ask such open-ended questions to begin with, children with relatively little language and/or relatively little English may need more structured questions. If the child can't answer a general question, then follow up with specific, yes/no questions such as "Was your father with you too?"

Introducing Vocabulary

Sometimes a child will struggle in the midst of reminiscing, saying something like "I almost drowned but I was wearing the orange thing." That would be an optimal

time to introduce a vocabulary word related to what the child is interested in discussing: "Oh, you almost drowned but you were wearing a *life jacket*?" Other times, as in the example in Appendix 2.1, teachers may find that the best time to introduce a word to a child is at the end of the narrative. In Appendix 2.1, the teacher said, "Your parents were generous, weren't they? Do you know what *generous* means? No? It means *giving*. Your parents gave you lots of things." Teachers should note the vocabulary item they introduced on the form.

Interactive (or Dialogic) Reading (or Rereading) of Child's Narrative

After the child has finished the narrative, the teacher proceeds to read what he or she wrote aloud to the child. The teacher can make corrections if the child desires. The teacher can also ask some more elaborative questions and add to the written narrative if the child responds.

In future sessions, teachers reread the child's narrative, noting the date of the rereading, reminding the child of the vocabulary word, and asking additional elaborative questions. The goal is to have a total of four rereadings (five readings in all) of the narrative, five repetitions of the vocabulary word.

Emergent Literacy: The Alphabet

Teachers can also extend the session by pointing out a couple of letters (e.g., *J* and *S* in the example in Appendix 2.1). The teacher can say something like "See this word here—it is *jewelry*. *Jewelry* begins with a *J*. The letter *J* makes the /j/ sound." To cover the complete alphabet for each child requires that teachers keep track of what letters they introduce. To simplify this process, teachers may well want to call attention to letters in sequence and simply keep track by looking at the child's previous dictation sheets. If there is no word that begins with the letter in question, teachers may want to introduce a vocabulary word appropriate to the child's dictation that begins with the letter in question—for example: "Did the pink jacket Barbie was wearing have a zipper? *Zipper* starts with *Z*—see [teacher points to where he or she has written *zipper* on the page] the *Z* right here in the word *zipper*?"

Results of a Study Implementing RWR

This program was implemented in a public preschool that served low-income, primarily English ELL children. Children were pretested in the fall and posttested in the spring on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn & Dunn, 1997) and oral narrative skill. The progress of these children after a year of RWR was compared with that of comparable children in other public preschools who simply received the standard preschool curriculum of the school district. In the course of the school

year (roughly October through May), children received on average of twenty-six 20-minute one-on-one RWR dictation sessions.

Children in the RWR intervention gained significantly more in terms of receptive vocabulary and narrative skill over the course of their preschool year compared to nonintervention children. What is more, vocabulary scores of intervention children at the outset of the RWR intervention were significantly below those of the normative population, but by the end of the intervention year, children's vocabulary scores were not significantly different from the normative average. That is, the high-risk children in this study were set to succeed in literacy skill in kindergarten and thereafter.

Tracking Progress

Teachers are encouraged to include narratives in a portfolio folder for each child. In Figure 2.1, I offer the system we use to assess narratives (adapted from McCabe & Rollins, 1994). The narrative in Appendix 2.1 is classified as a chronological narrative. Knowing that, a teacher would know that what is missing is a main point; a good follow-up question on a future rereading would be "What was your favorite part of the fair?" By the end of their fourth year, children should be telling narratives that consist of more than three events, as does the narrative in Appendix 2.1.

Appendix 2.2 at the end of the chapter gives a more detailed description of different forms of narrative. Research (Peterson & McCabe, 1983) has established that by age 4, children typically tell a leapfrog narrative, consisting of at least three actions, but often jumping around in chronology and leaving out important actions. By 5, children should be telling end-at-the-high-point narratives, which chronologically sequence several actions but end prematurely at the climax, or emotional high point. By 6, children should tell a classic narrative that is like an end-at-the-high-point narrative but goes on to resolve the situation.

Teachers can easily determine the structure of a child's narrative by asking a series of questions (see Figure 2.1), continuing down to the next question if they answer yes, or right to find the structure of the narrative if they answer no. A portfolio of dictated stories from each child could document that the child went from telling a two-event narrative in September to, say, a leapfrog narrative in March—clear progress.

Figure 2.2 is a dictated narrative produced by a child to a volunteer university student who was an art major. This was part of a project done at a homeless shelter. The art student, in addition to asking the elaborative questions recommended above, superimposed the drawing the child did while hearing her prior narrative read aloud to her. (The art student combined pictures and narratives by a number of

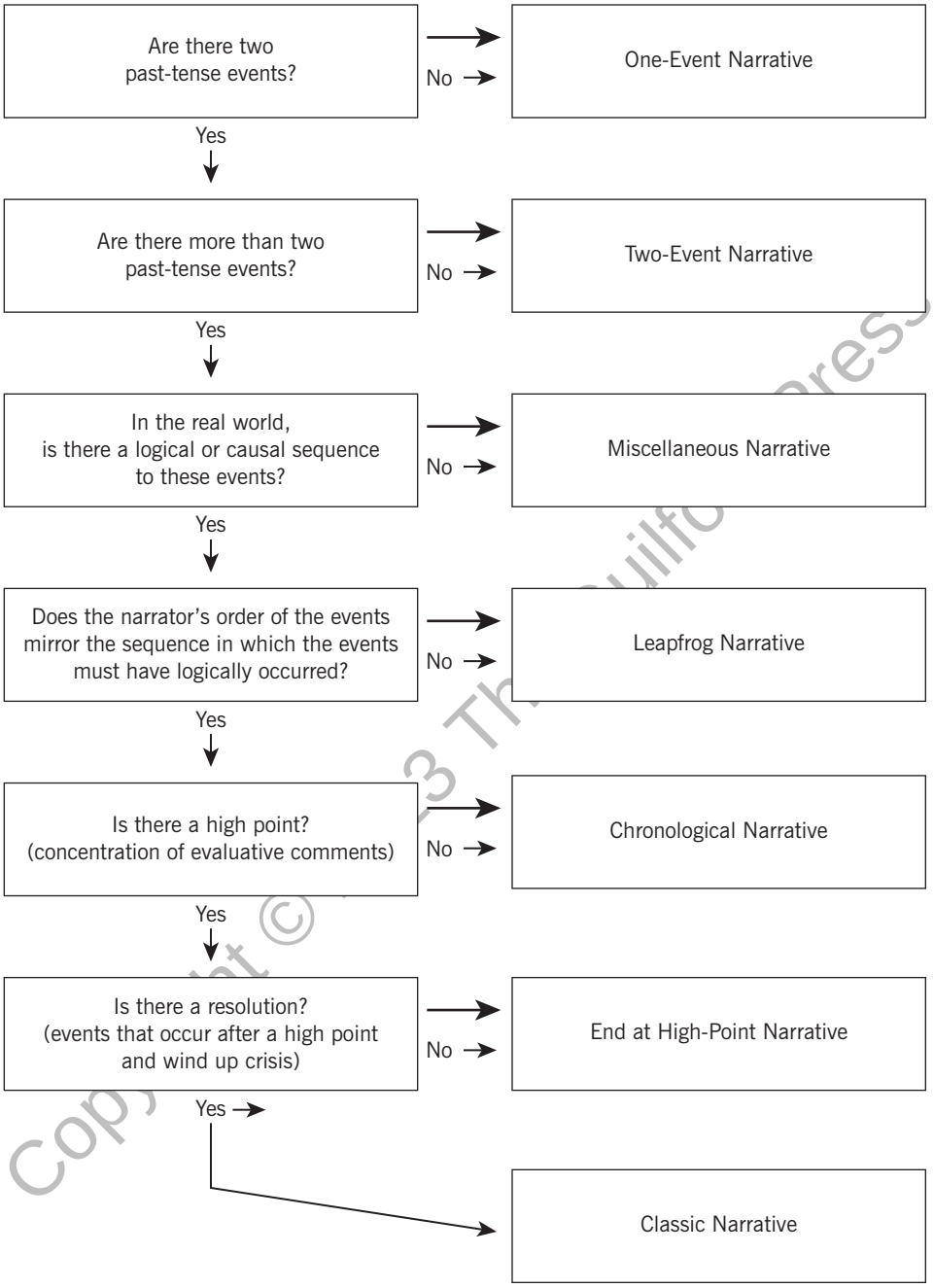

FIGURE 2.1. High-point analysis. Reprinted with permission from Figure 2, Questions for scoring narrative structure: The North-American–Caucasian–English-speaking model, from the article "Assessment of Preschool Narrative Skills," by A. McCabe and P. R. Rollins, published in *American Journal of Speech–Language Pathology, 3*, 45–56. © Copyright 1994. American Speech–Language–Hearing Association. All rights reserved.

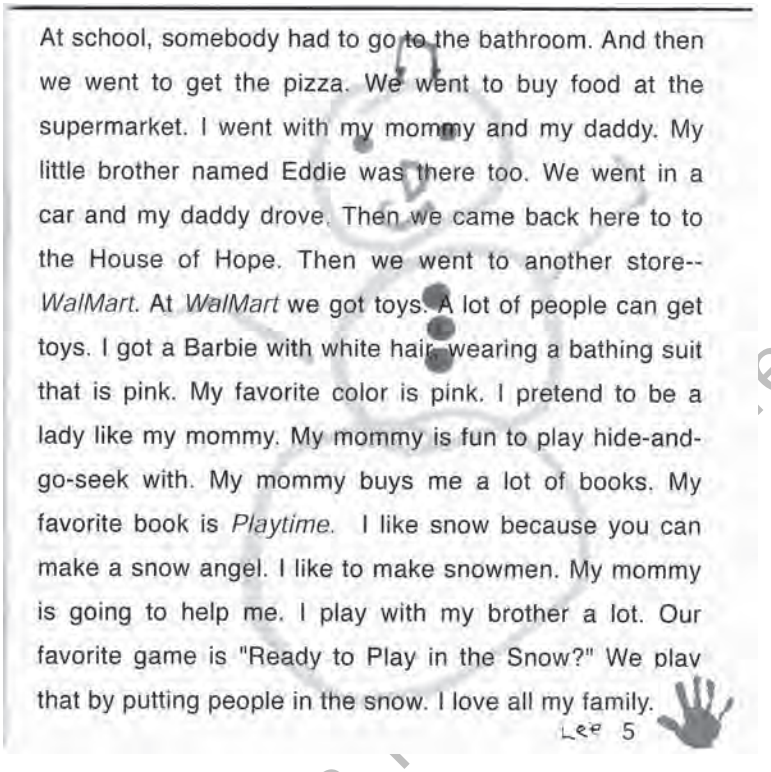
At school, somebody had to go to the bathroom. And then we went to get the pizza. We went to buy food at the supermarket. I went with my mommy and my daddy. My little brother named Eddie was there too. We went in a car and my daddy drove. Then we came back here to to the House of Hope. Then we went to another store-- *WalMart*. At *WalMart* we got toys. A lot of people can get toys. I got a Barbie with white hair wearing a bathing suit that is pink. My favorite color is pink. I pretend to be a lady like my mommy. My mommy is fun to play hide-and-go-seek with. My mommy buys me a lot of books. My favorite book is *Playtime*. I like snow because you can make a snow angel. I like to make snowmen. My mommy is going to help me. I play with my brother a lot. Our favorite game is "Ready to Play in the Snow?" We play that by putting people in the snow. I love all my family.
Lee 5

FIGURE 2.2. Sample dictation of child's narrative.

other children in the homeless shelter into a book that was given to each contributing child.) In the course of several sessions with the art student, the child elaborated her narrative and the result is a chronological narrative in that it consists of more than two events that mirrored a possibly logical sequence of events. No one event in that sequence of 10—(1) going to the bathroom, (2) going for pizza, (3) went to buy food, (4) went with parents, (5) went in car, (6) daddy drove, (7) came back to HOH, (8) went to another store, (9) got toys, and (10) got a Barbie—was more heavily evaluated than another. Instead, future elaborative interactions with the art student resulted in the child talking about some of her favorite things.

The Rich Get Richer

One challenge for teachers who commit to a classroom rich in oral language is that the more verbal children often are able to grab the conversation and get even more interactive feedback. Teachers need to notice the too-quiet children and single them out for perhaps even more dictations than their more talkative peers.

Parent Outreach Program

Many educators recommend trying to increase parent involvement in their child's education. Almost everyone tries to increase the frequency of parents reading to children. When parents are educated, this works wonderfully. However, many low-income and/or immigrant parents struggle with literacy themselves and/or cannot find many books in the language they are most comfortable reading. One mother I know, a Portuguese–English bilingual with minimum education and literacy skills, dutifully tried to read books with her child as the child's first-grade teacher had recommended. She confessed to me, however, that this was very stressful, that she and her daughter wound up shouting at each other every time. Such fraught literacy experiences quite probably do more harm than good. Thus, a program that simply attempts to increase the frequency and quality of parent–child *talk* to improve the child's abilities has important potential.

Fortunately, we have a program that has been demonstrated to improve children's receptive vocabulary and narrative production skills (Peterson et al., 1999). Low-income mothers of preschoolers (average age 3 years, 7 months) were randomly assigned to either an intervention or a control condition. Mothers who were involved in the intervention were shown transcripts of exemplary narrative conversations that we had collected from parents of excellent narrators in a prior project (McCabe & Peterson, 1991). Mothers in the intervention project took turns reading these exemplary conversations aloud to a partner who read the child's part. We emphasized the following points (Peterson et al., 1999):

1. Talk to your child frequently and consistently about past experiences.
2. Spend a lot of time talking about each topic.
3. Ask plenty of "wh" questions (*who, what, when, where, how, why*) and fewer "yes/no" questions (e.g., "Was Grandpa wearing a red coat?"). As part of this, ask questions about the context or setting of the events, especially where and when they took place.
4. Listen carefully to what your child is saying, and encourage elaboration.
5. Encourage your child to say more than one sentence at a time by using back-channel responses (e.g., "I see" or "Really?") or simply repeating what your child has just said.
6. Follow your child's lead. That is, talk about what your child wants to talk about.

Finally, we reminded parents every month of the importance of reminiscing with their children about past events.

At the end of 1 year, children in the comparison group had significantly greater increases in their receptive vocabulary compared with those in the control group. A

year later, their children's narrative skills had increased significantly more than the control group children's skills.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE

Naomi Simpson is a teacher in a Head Start classroom in a working-class neighborhood in the Northeast. She attended a workshop in which I presented some of the ideas we have discussed here. When I returned to her classroom 2 weeks later, I was delighted to see dozens of dictated narratives hanging at child eye level from the bathroom all the way to the door. That way, she said, she could read a child's narrative when they were waiting in line for any reason. The children had already started to anticipate this ritual and to enjoy listening to each other's narratives.

Naomi said that she had become so interested in the way children talked about the things that had happened to them, that she had taken to engaging them in conversations during lunch. She would often get ideas from those conversations about what the children saw as newsworthy happenings in their lives, things she would ask them to elaborate on when they sat down at the "Memory" table to do dictation.

How could she pull off 20-minute one-on-one conversations with children? She thought of several times that would work for her classroom. One was early drop-off times or late pickup times, when there would be just one child present. Also, about twice a week another aide would lead children in exercise time in the gym. Because she reasoned that the children got plenty of exercise every day at recess, she decided that occasionally missing this time in the cause of furthering literacy was acceptable. She also trained her aide and parent volunteers to take dictation at the Memory table, so that that could be a choice and she could supervise other choice times.

Naomi kept careful records of each child's times at the Memory table, so that each child was ensured of access to this rich opportunity. She also implemented the parent outreach program by talking about it on Parents' Night. She followed up by sending home a list of the instructions given above, which she also repeated in the monthly parent newsletter. In every newsletter thereafter, she reminded parents of the importance of talking with their children at length about what happened to them. Every day, she sent home a slip of paper with several events that had happened during the school day: "Today, ask your child about the storyteller who came in. And about the snowman we all built." Finally, when she saw parents at drop-off or pickup, she would think of individual prompts: "Alice had an interesting experience at lunch today. You should ask her about it." Parents' curiosity was piqued, which increased their participation in the program.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has described two methods of building a child's sense of story and vocabulary, among other oral language skills, that have been found to be effective in past research. By implementing RWR at school and engaging parents in reminiscing with their children about past experiences, teachers can facilitate all aspects of oral language and print knowledge that have been found to predict literacy acquisition and eventual reading comprehension. Recall that children's oral language skills *upon entrance to kindergarten*—especially their narrative skill and vocabulary—predict Head Start children's fourth-, seventh-, and 10th-grade reading comprehension (Snow et al., 2007) and that children's skills remained constant from kindergarten throughout high school (Dickinson et al., 2004). By focusing consistently and emphatically on enriching all of the oral language skills that predict subsequent literacy skill, preschool teachers are poised to enable even high-risk children to succeed.

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