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Parents' Perceptions about an Early Childhood Program:  
Analysis of Parents' Focus Group Discussions

A DISSERTATION

submitted by

Natalie Ann Zakarian

In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Dr. Valora Washington, Committee Chair

LESLEY UNIVERSITY  
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Lesley University  
Ph.D. Program in Educational Studies

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## **Abstract**

This study focuses on identifying the primary concerns parents have at school entry for their children. The investigation is a qualitative analysis of data derived from a series of ten parent focus group sessions conducted in a large northeastern school district. The ten sessions were conducted over a period of four months for a total of twenty hours of data. Regular members of the focus group included four parents who had 4 and 5 year old children in an early childhood literacy program, a volunteer community member in the program and the researcher. Each session was audio taped then transcribed verbatim to facilitate understanding of the developing topics of interest. The original question for the participants was meant to prompt parents to discuss activities embedded in the curriculum that they perceived as facilitating growth in their children. The study took an immediate turn from the original research question when one of the parents rephrased the question and changed the perspective from which the program would be viewed. Concerns related to the needs of school entry became more important. These concerns clustered around child and academic development and how each unfolds in the early literacy program. The primary research question became, "Do these two dimensions of learning, the developmental and the academic, sit comfortably together or are there conflicts between them from the parents' perspectives?" The study found three conflicts. The first is the configuration of time and task in the classroom. Academic work is very advanced and children engage in many different tasks. Parents do not have a clear understanding of this and it causes tension. The second element is behavior. When their children do not follow classroom protocol, parents would like their children to discuss and resolve the matter quickly with the teacher. They become apprehensive when this does not happen. The

third element concerns the desire to plan an event that would begin a dialogue with teachers around common goals. Although the school gives tacit approval, it is difficult to find time to work on plans with the administration and this contributes to the tension parents feel.

## Dedication

To the students, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, sisters, teachers, principals and administrators I met along the way.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a study of the primary concerns parents have at school entry for their children. The investigation is a qualitative analysis of data derived from a series of ten parent focus group sessions conducted in a large northeastern school district. Using the tools of discourse analysis (Tannen, 2005; Ribeiro & Hoyle, 2002; Gee, 2005) it examines the discussions parents have regarding school entry. The primary research question that evolved from the study is, “Do two dimensions of learning, the developmental and the academic, sit comfortably together in an early childhood literacy program or are there conflicts between them from the parents’ perspectives?”

In regard to the format of the dissertation, it has the following sections. Chapter Two is the review of the literature. It focuses on the works of Montessori (1917), Piaget (1953) and Vygotsky (1986) and the development of very young children (2-6 years old). Their works are discussed as they relate to the development of maturational processes that prepare the very young child to enter the classroom of an early childhood literacy program. Chapter Three discusses the methodology and describes the research environment I created with my ethnography that supports the study, a series of ten 2-hour focus group conversations with parents. It also discusses the analytical tools I use in the discourse analysis. Chapter Four is the analysis of conversational data gathered from the ten focus group sessions. It is a micro-analysis and follows the development of the conversation as it goes through three stages -- *from the expression of apprehension about the program to probing the understanding of their children’s reactions to the program to*

*an investigation of alternative ways to construct the classroom experience.* An introduction to the analysis of each section and a synthesis of each analysis underline major points. Chapter Five is an integrative analysis that examines the major theme of the parent focus group discussion: support for the intellectual, physical and emotional growth of their children. It relates how three mothers who participated in the discussion approach and deal with the situation. Included is a discussion of language development in children up to five years of age to highlight concerns the mothers have about the program. Chapter Six addresses conclusions that emerge from the study including findings, implications, and recommendations. Findings and implications deal with concerns that emerge from the core theme of the parent focus group discussion, the growth of their children. Concerns relate to child development and academic development and how each unfolds in the early childhood literacy program. Findings show that there is a conflict between these two aspects of learning (the developmental and academic) from the parents' perspectives. Central to this conflict is the balance of these two aspects of growth in the child. The recommendation suggests a possible way to observe and measure the child's efforts to balance developmental and academic learning as he engages in the classroom experience. This measurement is the "Good Enough" environmental provision checklist; it is a different way of orienting a perception toward how a child is integrating with the curriculum and with his or her personal development.

The initial core idea for my research and the basis for my research design was the desire to understand how this school district, which was moving toward being more responsive with parents, was carrying out this initiative. A focus on the implementation of the early childhood literacy program seemed the ideal situation on which to focus my



study. Given the administrative commitment to restructuring the school climate to be more inclusive and involved with parents, this study was founded on the assumption that a dialogue could form between parents and teachers based on initial enthusiasm for the program.

The initial research question, “How do you get your children ready every day to participate in the early childhood literacy program?” was seen as a good way to begin the initial three sessions of the focus group. Focus group dialogue would also focus on how parents perceived the scope and breadth of the literacy curriculum. This topic would broaden in the remaining six focus group sessions.

I used several strategies to prepare for the focus groups. I spent several hours discussing the curriculum with the well-trained early childhood education coach for the five teachers who taught the four year old preschool classes at the Mercer<sup>1</sup> School. I also read the five curriculum sections that covered the entire year in order to understand the nature of activities that were built into the curriculum and the patterns of behavior it was trying to develop.

The original research question was purposefully topical in nature. It was an introductory question to give me an opportunity to hear parents discuss the activities embedded in the curriculum which they may not know in detail but which I assumed they were acquainted with from discussions with their children about what they did in class every day. In the first three sessions, it became clear that the school had not informed parents about the curriculum; in addition, responses from their children about what they did in the classroom indicated to them that their interactions with the teacher were not robust. This worried the parents and motivated them to turn the direction of the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a fictitious name. All names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

conversation into inquiry about the relationship between child development and education. My assumption that the focus group discussion could begin with the topic of parents attending to school readiness that included an effort to work with teachers to support the curriculum had proven incorrect. Parents did not have access to the factual contents of the curriculum and they did not have access to discussions with teachers about their interpretation of and implementation of the curriculum.

As this information developed in the first three sessions, I became interested in and intrigued by the way the parents were discussing their relationships with their children and their expectations and hopes for them through the program.

### **Prior Work Experience in the District**

As a volunteer teacher in this district for 15 years I had become very interested in the involvement of parents in the education process. This was due to the way I approached teaching. My style developed as the result of listening to and responding to the children in the classroom. My role in the schools where I taught was to review the material they had already seen. I would listen to what children would tell me about what they were doing in the classroom before we started the formal learning time together. I found that conversing with them about learning gave me the opportunity to hear them articulate what they thought was important. During these conversations where they would speak from their point of view, I noticed that they would lean into the conversation. Their words would become more descriptive and their sentences would become more interesting. The child would change in front of my eyes from one who was timid to someone with depth and self awareness. I wanted to meet the parents of these children who could be so engaging.

At my request and with the approval of principals in two different schools, an elementary and a middle school, I met with parents to discuss their children with them. They were valuable resources of information and knowledge about their children. They knew their child's temperament and how their child engaged in activities with a personal sense of expression. As I talked with parents and related to observations they made about distinct characteristics in their children, I felt that I understood the nature of their child. This sensitivity made it possible for me to speak at ease with parents when I wanted to discuss specific written papers. I would discuss with them what adjustments could be made to help the child work even better with the material.

This was my level of engagement and experience with the school district on which I built the study. It was focused on parents supporting the curriculum. When the parents in the focus group turned the direction of the conversation around to their perspective, they gave me the opportunity to converse with them at a deeper level of understanding about their children.

The parents' concern that their children should be able to mature developmentally in a formal educational setting led me to investigate the work of three theorists and practitioners. Chapter Two, the Literature Review, examines in depth the works of Montessori (1917), Piaget (1953) and Vygotsky (1986) and their contributions to our understanding of how children are able to extend and enhance their intellectual, physical and emotional growth in the early years of their education.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

The literature review examines the work of three developmental and learning theorists and practitioners, Montessori (1917), Piaget (1953) and Vygotsky (1986). The examination is extensive as these theorists discuss matters that address the concerns parents have about child development. Parents would like to know how the early childhood literacy program could extend their children's intellectual growth (reasoning and meaning making skills), their physical growth (sensori-motor skills), and the growth of their personal sense of expression and orientation to learning (temperament).

To underline the importance of a good enough environment to facilitate growth and why there should be a good enough environmental provision to guarantee that the conditions for development enumerated by Montessori (1917), Piaget (1953) and Vygotsky (1986) are present in the learning environment, the work of child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott (1965) is included in the discussion. Good enough conditions offer opportunities to engage with the environment using sensori-motor skills to help form sensory impressions. Such impressions lead to observations that distinguish characteristics and assist in forming judgments about the abstract qualities objects have in the perceptual plane (Montessori, 1917). It includes watching and guiding children become oriented to new and perhaps unfamiliar situations. It means facilitating the ability

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to adapt by being innovative. Piaget (1953) describes this as the “discovery of new means through active experimentation.” Lastly, it is the opportunity to progress systematically in the communication of ideas with an adult. In direct conversation, the child takes those thoughts that are exchanged with an adult and processes them internally, developing the mental capacity to form individualized configurations of personal expression (Vygotsky, 1986).

The second part of the literature review examines and discusses literacy development in a formal educational context for 4 and 5 year old children. It discusses the physical nature of the child and the demands placed on the child to break the writing code, the challenges this presents to the child, and different points of view of how to approach the introduction to reading and writing with the very young child.

### **Montessori**

The premise of Montessori’s (1917) theories and experimental methods with 3-6 year old children rests on the fact that children at the age of 3 are coming to the end of their transition into the language of their culture. It is at this age that children are beginning to develop logical-semantic relations in their thinking. They begin this activity as an exchange within interpersonal contexts. They impart information not already known to the addressed and they also ask for information. Children are now beginning to organize objects in their environment into common sense taxonomies. They are learning to use the relational clause, i.e., “Is a monkey an animal?” By the age of 4, children are using conditional language (if) and causals (because, so). Why questions now are used to exchange information and some abstract terms are now being understood. The functional domains that children are working through in these activities are the heuristic

(explorative) and the personal (expressions of awareness in distinction to their environment) (Halliday, 2004).

With such a capacity to learn, Montessori (1917) constructed her experiments around the phenomenon of the child's concentrated attention on objects of interest in the environment. The observance of a 3 year old child whose attention could not be dislodged from placing a series of solid cylinders into corresponding slots catalyzed Montessori (1917) to develop her theories and methods. Montessori (1917) hypothesized that the child placed and displaced these cylinders 40 times consecutively as the result of making mistakes. As she solved the problem, she became more interested in the task. She tried the experiment again and again to make sure she did it correctly. From this example it is clear that there are two components in the environment that polarize attention – the object that attracts the child to the point he or she wants to explore it and the possibility of making mistakes in the handling of the object that keeps the child engaged to figure out how to untangle the problem. In this way, the child distinguishes and classifies abstract attributes such as forms, textures, size, color, sound, etc.

The purpose of these activities is to form qualities of comparison and judgment in the mind of the child. It is the teacher who determines what is necessary and sufficient in the classroom that would awaken such a response from the child. It is the teacher who facilitates this process of development. In the conversational data analysis that follows it is apparent that parents in the focus group have a keen interest in understanding this phenomenon in the classroom.

During the process of comprehending abstraction there is a second state that is most important. This is the quiet time after the active encounter with the object. It is

during this quiet segment that the child's personality is unified and strengthened through psycho-sensory behavior. In Montessori's (1917) theory, this is the normal beginning of the inner life of children. The sense of calmness that comes after the animated burst to explore the object Montessori (1917) labels a "spiritual phenomenon." She notes that this phenomenon accompanies the development of the child in such a manner that it is accessible to research. Montessori (1917) is explicit regarding the importance of this spiritual dimension and its relationship to the development of the perseverance of the will "to do." It is the resolve that comes with reflection about what the child has done that allows the intellectual dimensions of the child to mature.

Winnicott (1965) echoes this observation. The child is born with inherited tendencies toward integration of the personality in body and mind. A prominent activity is the integration towards object relating which gradually becomes a matter of interpersonal relationships. With the help of a sensitive teacher the animated nature of children comes out in the construction of their wills as they put in motion complex internal activities of comparison and judgment. The work of gaining maturity is put in motion by their ability to make decisions. When successful they become expansive. Montessori (1917) observed that when a child finishes a task he or she will often run to a teacher to say, "Come and see!"

This expansiveness comes from a sense of their spiritual growth – a consciousness that they have acquired a new power of perception that enables them to recognize a difference in a particular dimension. Their running to the teacher with this news gives expression to and amplifies their personalities. It is this kind of animation that promotes growth and maturity. The conversational data documents that parents in the focus group

are seeking the development of these qualities in their children from their engagement with the early literacy program. Bowlby (1988), a contemporary of Winnicott states that the facilitating environment helps the child form a sense of security, a belief in environmental reliability so he can get on with his growth in the development of interpersonal relationships.

Montessori (1917) has another specific long term goal in giving children these opportunities to become active and animated. If children at the age of 3 and 4 are not acquiring the ability to interact with objects in the perceptual field to make comparisons and judgments that allow them to form decisions they will not be able to synthesize ideas and the higher work of the intelligence becomes impossible.

### **Piaget**

Of particular importance in the work of Piaget (1953) to this literature review is his experiments with children 18-28 months of age. Children this age have not yet acquired the speech of their culture; however, they are moving into referential meaning, meaning as both doing and understanding (Halliday, 2004). Piaget's (1953) work is with children 18-28 months old who are younger than the children (3-6 years old) Montessori (1917) works with in her investigations. Together their studies substantiate that the growth of intellectual development flows endlessly when adults show an interest in what children do.

A child being cared for well enough builds up within himself or herself a belief in environmental reality. Maturational processes depend for their becoming actual in the child, and actual at the appropriate moments, on a good enough environmental provision (Winnicott, 1965). While Piaget may not have had Winnicott's words uppermost in his



mind when he devised the two experiments discussed below for his son and daughter, they illustrate how an observant adult can craft an environment that allows the child to will the body to engage with it and to construct representation and invention. In the modern classroom with its learning centers, representation and invention are key to creating knowledge. These examples may give some insight into the imagery parents in the focus group may have about their children in the classroom. In addition, they raise thoughtful considerations about “what are we taking away from this population of learners” when we set up learning work stations but do not implement their true value which I discuss in my data analysis.

In an experiment with his son at the age of 28 months, Piaget (1953) puts the child in a situation where the object he sees and wants demands an unforeseen and particular adaptation. The child has to innovate. Piaget (1953) characterizes innovation as the “discovery of new means through active experimentation.” The searching for innovation is not controlled by the facts of the situation but by the mental combination of maneuvers that will succeed or fail.

To invent is to combine the mental representation of several sensori-motor maneuvers and the combination of invention and representation must be able to give rise to a true resolution of the problem (Piaget, 1953). This is systemic intelligence. It is similar to Montessori’s (1917) definition of intelligence to be able to form decisions based on the will to compare and judge.

In this particular experiment, Piaget (1953) puts a crust of bread on a table too far away for the child to reach. He puts a stick between the child and the object. However, the child grasps the stick in the middle making it too short to reach the object. The child

then reaches again with the outstretched hand. However, he does not spend too much time on this activity and picks up the stick from one end and draws the crust to him.

In the second example, an experiment with his daughter when she was 28 months, Piaget (1953) puts a chain in a box with a slit smaller than the slit of a box in a previous experiment. In that experiment, the child was able to insert her finger and pull out the chain. In the current experiment, using her body to make symbolic representations of how she would solve the problem, the child looks at the slit with great attention. She mimics the widening of the slit by opening and shutting her mouth three times, each time wider than the other. After a moment of reflection, she puts her finger in the slit and pulls to enlarge the opening. Due to her inability to think out the situation in words or with clear visual images, she uses a simple motor indication to signify her thinking out the situation (Piaget, 1953).

This example gives insight into the way children work with physical and sensory components of representative schema and invention. The previous schema of being able to put the hand through the slit gives meaning to the present situation and directs the search for a resolution. The child uses this fact when she creates a new iteration of an earlier schema. It is this mental combination of schemata that produces successful invention and the accommodation of the schemata to the present situation. These terms are defined in chapter 3.

Piaget (1953) and Montessori (1917) document in their experiments that it is the observant and caring adult who gives the child enough time to form sensory perceptions so order and clarity can be achieved. In this self directed way, children classify objects in the perceptual field. Arranging their ideas in such a manner gives a stable equilibrium to

their internal personality (Montessori, 1917). The National Research Council (2000), evoking the ideas of the good enough environmental provision, states that in child centered education it is the adult who takes responsibility for placing the child in environmental circumstances that will provoke active construction of new understanding. Montessori (1917) and Piaget (1953) demonstrate methods of working with the natural tendencies of children to further their intellectual potential. To sustain this work, the task of the adult would appear to be to provide the good enough environmental provision.

### **Vygotsky**

Culture and consciousness are the areas of inquiry for Vygotsky (1986). As his thesis, Vygotsky suggests that socially meaningful activity may serve as the generator of consciousness, i.e., the development of the mind. He suggests that individual consciousness builds from the outside with relations with others. This is substantiated by the work of Halliday (2004). A child begins to move from speaking an incipient version (proto-language) of his cultural language to a more precise form of his cultural language between the ages of 19-26 months. This is due to the fact that the child wants to interact with those in his immediate environment (Halliday, 2004). According to Vygotsky (1986), higher mental functioning is mediated through interpersonal communication. Interpersonal relations transform the cultural development of the child through intrapersonal processes (inner speech).

Vygotsky (1986) is interested in the development of language as it relates to the development of thought. He distinguishes two forms of thought: spontaneous concepts that emerge from the child's own reflections of everyday occurrences and scientific concepts that originate in the highly structured and specialized activity of classroom

instruction that imposes on the child logically defined concepts. Vygotsky (1986) makes the distinction between a child's pre-intellectual speech and non-verbal thought, and verbal thought and intellectual speech. Through the unity of an inter-functional system, the child is able to progress from categorizing the physical characteristics of objects to creating more mature forms of classifications based on conceptual thinking. Vygotsky (1986) argues that spontaneous concepts in working their way upward toward greater abstractness clear a path for scientific concepts in their downward development toward greater concreteness. Piaget (1953) and Montessori (1917) demonstrate with their experiments how the child progresses from the concrete to the abstract.

Like Piaget (1953) and Montessori (1917) the engagement of the adult with the child is important in Vygotsky's theories especially in the encouragement of spontaneous concept formation as this forms the pre-condition for a more highly developed conversation with the teacher. Vygotsky (1986) argues that progress in concept formation achieved by a child in cooperation with an adult would be a more sensitive gauge of a child's intellectual capabilities than an objective test of the child's skills. In the more direct contact situation with the adult, the child would have an opportunity to organize his empirically formed but perhaps disorganized spontaneous concepts by having contact with the logic of adult reasoning.

It is the facilitating environment that helps a child form ideas and it is the adult within the environment who is the primary facilitator. The importance of the adult influence cannot be overemphasized. The working models the child constructs regarding important adults in his life and their ways of communicating and behaving towards him together with the complementary models of himself interacting with them are built during

the first few years of life. It is postulated that they soon become established as influential cognitive structures (Main, Kaplan & Cassidy as cited in Bowlby, 1988).

It is the processing of the inter-psychological relationship with the adult that makes a difference for the child. Vygotsky (1986) proposes that through inner speech the inter-psychological relationship becomes the intra-psychological, individualized mental function. Within this process, culturally sanctioned symbolic systems are remodeled into individual thought. In the process, the transition from external communication to inner dialogue reshapes these expressions and makes them communicable in a linguistic form.

How Vygotsky would apply his ideas to the early literacy classroom is clear. From an empirical investigation of text, letter formation, sound to text and other abstract qualities of literacy, the child would enter into an inter-psychological relationship with the teacher to systemize these spontaneous and sometimes disorganized concepts into a more coherent whole. The different ways children learn in the early literacy classroom is discussed in the next section of the literature review. (For a comparison of the ideas of Vygotsky, Montessori and Piaget on the development of literacy in children, please see Appendix E.)

### **The Very Early Years – The Speech Code**

Children begin early literacy programs at the age of 4. One of their first tasks in literacy development is a sensori-motor one to transform sound to text. To achieve this, children must use their powers of sound comprehension that helped them learn the speech code to now help them break the code of printed text. The way the senses engage with speech is not quite the same as with printed matter. In speech, definable segments of sound (the phonetic representation) do not correspond to segments at the phoneme level.

The sound of a phoneme may vary noticeably as a function of context, i.e., the /b/ in *bat*, *tub* and *trouble* is slightly different in each position (Snow, 2006). A child could identify by sound each word but most probably could not, as an emerging learner of components, be able to identify the /b/ in each word.

The challenge for the child is to recode the sounds and recover the phoneme. This requires considerable reorganization of internal structure. The speech code provides for parallel processing of successive phonemes enabling the listener to perceive strings of phonemes more rapidly than if he were using an alphabet to arrange the phonemes serially (Liberman, Cooper, Shankweiler & Studdert-Kennedy, 1967). Features belonging to successive phonemes in a word overlap in time. The conversion of these overlapping events into sound uses a complex encoding system where the transmission of phonemic information is retained in cues that are imprinted on a single aspect of the acoustic signal (Liberman et al, 1967). If this were not so, the temporal resolving power of the ear would be overwhelmed. At the age of 4, the child is being asked to deconstruct the sounds of words and recover the phoneme.

### **Phonemic Awareness**

Keeping a focus on sound is important when working with children as young as 4 and 5 as being able to hear the sequence of sounds has shown to be a precursor of success in reading (Coltheart, 1983). In addition, categorizing words according to their constituent sounds corresponds to a growing awareness of learning to use the alphabet in reading and spelling (Bradley & Bryant, 1983).

The central concern for educators is that children who do poorly on sound skills in the first year of schooling are likely to continue this trend. Clay as cited in Juel (1988)

found in her work that many six year old children who were not making good progress learning to read could not hear sound sequences in words.

Educators believe that phonemic awareness and a grasp of the alphabetic principle are crucial to the long term development of an ever increasing understanding of the meaning that print conveys. Juel (1988) found that six year old children living in the United States who have not absorbed the alphabetic principle are poor readers as deciphering an alphabetic language requires phonemic awareness since print decoding depends on mapping phonemes to graphemes (sound to letter).

The likelihood that these children will develop literacy skills to a satisfactory level is slight if progress in phonemic awareness and sound to letter awareness is not produced in the short term. The Bradley & Bryant (1983) study discussed below demonstrates how an explicit teaching and learning approach could be used to help children achieve phonemic awareness and from that grasp a sense of the alphabetic principle

### **Achieving Phonemic Awareness through Explicit Sound Categorization Instruction**

Bradley & Bryant (1983) conducted a study of 65 four and five year old children who scored low on sound categorization in a previous study they had conducted with children who had to identify the word in a set of four that did not share a common phoneme. The 65 children were divided into four groups. Training involved 40 individual sessions for each group spread over two years. With the aid of colored pictures of familiar objects children were taught that the same word shared common beginning (*hen*, *hat*), middle (*hen*, *pet*) and end (*hen*, *man*) sounds with other words and thus the sounds in this word could be categorized in different ways.

Group I received training with the colored pictures. Group II in addition was taught, with the help of plastic letters, how each common sound was represented by a letter of the alphabet. Group III was taught in as many sessions and with the same pictures using conceptual categories. Children were taught that the same word could be classified in different ways (hen, bat are animals) (hen, pig are farm animals). Group IV received no training. Group II succeeded better than Group I in reading and particularly in spelling suggesting that training in sound categorization is more effective when it involves an explicit connection with the alphabet. Group I was ahead of Group III by 3-4 months on standardized tests of reading and spelling suggesting a causal relationship between sound categorization and reading and spelling (Bradley & Bryant, 1983).

### **Constructing Meaning with Symbols and Words**

Juel (1988) came to the conclusion that comprehension should be woven into phonemic learning. Comprehension is the process by which the meanings of words are integrated into sentences and text structures. It is a skill good readers have. Giving children the opportunity to internalize this learning would suggest that Vygotsky's (1986) methods could be applied. This would include conversing with children about phonemic awareness and giving them the opportunity to generate creative thoughts about the subject matter.

Snow (2006) states that the best approach to help children acquire good literacy outcomes is through a combination of working with them on the component structure of language regarding phonemic awareness and an understanding of the alphabetic principle together with working with them on reading comprehension and meaning construction. There is concern with the type of instruction currently given to children lagging behind in



reading and writing that they are the ones who are most likely to be provided the purely mechanical aspects of phonemic awareness that fails to emphasize meaning and the personal connection to the work (Snow, 2006).

Thus, it is important to keep all aspects of literacy together when designing programs. This includes allowing children time to internalize the mechanics that associate sound with written symbols and giving them the opportunity to make mistakes as they progress in making meaning with symbols, a skill that is indigenous to the human species. Such a skillful relationship with children would suggest implementation of the good enough environmental provision to keep it on a steady course.

The use of signs is a distinctive characteristic of human learning (Halliday, 1993). Signs evolve as we explore our sense of self to the environment. They help us to understand the contradiction between what is perceived as going on out there and what is perceived as going on in here. As early as five months of age the child is acting symbolically. The child lifts her head when there is a noise. The mother responds and says, “Yes, those are pigeons” At this very young age, symbolic acts are clearly addressed to a person and caregivers track and monitor their meaning (Halliday, 1993).

### **Writing: A New Sign System for Children**

For the young child, writing is a new form of the semiotic<sup>2</sup> (Halliday, 1993). Yet very young children are aware of the purpose of writing before they write with the distinct signs approved by their culture. Clay (1975) observed that children often wrote messages with the intent to communicate long before they formed letters. Young children

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<sup>2</sup> Semiotics is the study of sign processes (semiosis), or signification and communication, signs and symbols, both individually and grouped into sign systems. A sign is the basic unit of language; a sign is composed of the signifier and the signified (deSaussure). I use this term (semiotic) broadly to indicate communication of meaning through symbols and signs.

frequently scribble, draw pictures, and make marks that look a lot like letters. When they see there is a relationship between language that is spoken and language that is written they start to experiment to determine which of their markings actually represent ideas.

In the work of Ferreiro (1990) very young children develop theories about the nature and function of the writing system. These are real constructions that frequently seem strange to an adult way of thinking. According to Ferreiro (1990) there are four stages of development. In the first stage, the child searches for criteria to distinguish between writing and drawing. At the second level of development children consider a set of written strings to discover which criteria are good ones to represent differences in meaning. This level precedes any knowledge of the relationship between the sound pattern of the word and the written representation (Ferreiro, 1990). At the third level of development children gain phonological awareness of the written representation. They develop the syllabic hypothesis. Some letters stand for syllables and syllables are put in a one-to-one correspondence to the sound of a word (first for first). The fourth and final level of development is the alphabetic hypothesis that the similarity of sound implies similarity of letter and a difference in sound implies different letters (Ferreiro, 1990).

That children develop a system of ideas regarding the writing system supports the general principles of Piaget's theory of assimilation. The writing schemas that children develop act as assimilation schemas through which information is interpreted permitting children to make sense of their encounters with print and print users (Ferreiro, 1990).

Children always check their schemas to the print they see around them and constantly manipulate how they have to represent sound through their letters. Children go through a process of discovering additional information that includes new information

that invalidates their scheme necessitating that they must engage in a difficult and sometimes painful process of modifying it. At certain crucial points children feel compelled to reorganize their systems redefining some of these elements as they become part of a new system (Ferreiro, 1990).

### **The Delicate Balancing Act of the Facilitating Environment**

Ferreiro (1990) and Clay (1975) approach working with young children in a developmental and implicit way. Their approach contrasts sharply to the explicit and focused training children are given in the Bradley & Bryant study (1983). This contrast highlights the dilemma that teachers face as they try to structure the school day for very young children. They want to make sure each child is moving in the direction of gaining phonemic awareness from the middle of K2 to the middle of first grade. This is a technical skill that can be and should be acquired within a certain amount of time.

Thus, the teacher is in a situation where he or she has to think carefully about the balance of these two dynamics (the explicit and implicit approach to teaching phonemic awareness) in terms of curriculum long-term goals and how to navigate that balance with each child. The important consideration is helping children through the development of technical skills without separating them from the construction of meaning.

The discussion of research methods in the following chapter explains how my ethnographic methods created the research environment that supported the design of the study that was finally implemented. Although the original question was altered to suit the needs of the parents, the change facilitated the opportunity to listen to the day-to-day concerns parents have with the program. The chapter gives a full description of the

ethnographic project and the analytical tools that are used to examine the conversational data that emerged from it.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

This chapter discusses the research methods I used to conduct my research. It includes a discussion of the research environment I created through my ethnography and the discourse tools I used to analyze the data I gathered from the focus group conversations. The ethnographic project I created was a long conversation, ten 2-hour focus group sessions, with parents who had children in the early childhood literacy program. The intent of the research was to gather information from parents about how they get their children ready for school every day to participate in the program. The goal was to highlight their perspectives so they would gain confidence to speak with teachers about enhancements to the curriculum that would make it more accessible to them and promote a stronger engagement with the teacher to support the child.

#### **Motivation for the Study**

I had a specific reason for creating the long conversation and wanting to shape it as a participatory action research project. Action research has as its essence the intent to change something, to solve some kind of problem by taking action (Glesne, 1998). My intent was to encourage change in the communication dynamics between parents and teachers. A conversation I listened to of a child I tutored talking with her father triggered the research question and motivated me to create the study. I wanted to document how well these parents do engage with their children and how well they are preparing them for school. The story about Kenyana and her father illustrates the point of engagement.

Kenyana was a second grader and a year behind in her literacy studies. To remedy the situation, her parents enrolled her in a better school which meant she had to travel cross town every day. For several weeks she and I worked with exercises that were designed to help her master reading and writing. One late afternoon her father lingered when he came to take her home. He joined in a conversation with Kenya about their fishing expeditions. All of a sudden Kenya became very animated. She was speaking in complex clauses and using multi-syllabic words. It was evident she was a very bright little girl. It should have been possible for me to mention to the father the possibility of putting Kenya in an accelerated program so her language skills could facilitate her grasp of the more technical aspects of literacy development.

However, it was my observation that her father did not have a close relationship with the school. Since Kenya showed the more expansive side of herself with people she felt comfortable with I thought it would be doubtful she would show these same traits with people who didn't know her, yet would be trying to come to a decision about giving her a chance to be in an accelerated situation. Thus, I said nothing to the father but I felt there must be a way to document in an official way how parents like Kenya's father are engaging with their children and how it affects the willingness of their child to want to engage with the schooling experience. If these findings were presented in a research study there was the possibility educators would see the valuable information that is missing about the spontaneous learning activities parents, about whom we know very little, have with their children. This knowledge might encourage educators to think about the value of forming meaningful relationships that would give them a fuller

understanding of the children they teach. A long conversation with parents would allow me to do this research.

### **Ethnographic Methods that Created and Maintained the Research Environment**

My first task for preparing the research site was to find an ongoing initiative in the school system that needed the engagement of families and teachers to be successful. This turned out to be the early childhood literacy program. I made my initial contact with the director of the program in May 2006. He informed me he thought the program would not be robust unless parents worked with and supported the program. That meant there was a need to coordinate this activity between the home and the school. I knew from background reading that the school system had recently instituted the position of coordinator of family and school relations. I was given an introduction to the central office manager of these coordinators. We met in early July 2006. She explained to me that all the coordinators had previous experience working with the community surrounding the schools in which they were situated. She expressed great confidence in their work.

It was late in the school year so it was not until late September 2006 that I contacted her again. I asked if I could meet with individual coordinators to discuss their work and whether the possibility existed to work at the school with a group of parents who had children in the early childhood literacy program. In early October 2006 I met the coordinator at the Mercer<sup>3</sup> School. Upon meeting him, I chose the Mercer School as the field site as he informed me in the initial conversation that the school was committed to strengthening its relationships with families. He was closely connected to the community as a resident and previously as a community worker in a youth program. I saw him as a

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<sup>3</sup> This is a fictitious name. All names in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

caring person about the school and I thought he would care about my project. Events would bear me out in this conclusion. The coordinator said he would take care of the details of putting my focus group on the official school agenda and that is what he did.

The original proposal approved by the Assistant Superintendent for Family and School Relations had two phases. The first phase was anticipated to go from March 2007 through June 2007. It would include a group of parents with children in K1<sup>4</sup>, K2 and first grade who would discuss their activities with their children who are learning to read and write. Phase II would be carried out from October 2007 through May 2008. It would include families from Phase I and members from the Early Childhood Learning Program who were writing the curriculum. Families would describe how they accessed the curriculum and interacted with it and developers would discuss the thought and planning that went into the curriculum. The goal was to create a synthesis of ideas about optimum engagement with the curriculum.

The design made a good fit with the parameters of Participatory Action Research (PAR). At its core, PAR has as its intent to take action to solve some kind of problem. Discussion generates multiple viewpoints about the situation from people who have a vested interest in the process of change. This is followed by an action phase which involves planning, implementation and evaluation. The researcher works with others as agents of change (Glesne, 1998). My initially accepted proposal had aspects of PAR. It was designed to take action to solve a particular problem (greater input of parents into curriculum design) and generate multiple viewpoints about the situation (Phase II discussion). It did not include the third phase, planning, implementation and evaluation. The original proposal was also accepted by the principal of the Mercer School.

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<sup>4</sup> Children enter the Early Childhood Literacy Program at age 4 and attend K1; they advance to K2 at age 5.



However, the process of establishing the research site did not go as quickly as I had anticipated. In the interim the design was changed to accommodate the needs of the school and the period of time I had in which to carry out the study. Several months had elapsed since our last conversation so the two phase approach was abandoned and we went ahead with the first phase of the project. In August 2007 the coordinator and I began discussing the names of parents he thought would be interested in the project. I spoke with about ten mothers from late August 2007 through October 2007. The delaying factor for the start of the focus group was trying to find a time at which everyone could attend. I kept a list of everyone I was contacting and would call them again to keep their enthusiasm intact as the issue of meeting time was being resolved. Just two of the mothers who were contacted through this process joined the group. Another mother recruited by the coordinator joined and another mother joined starting with the second focus group session. She had been invited by one of the mothers in the group.

The process of getting to know the mothers evolved as the sessions continued. In between meetings, I would phone the mothers and have a casual conversation. I wanted to give them the opportunity to give me their personal impressions of the discussion and to let them know I felt they were a critical part of it.

All focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim before the next session occurred. Discussions were planned for 90 minutes but they ran for 120 minutes or two hours. I would spend eight hours every week transcribing a session and then I would read it, hearing their voices as I read it. The transcript gave me a vivid recall of the topics exchanged, the way individual participants addressed each other and the way I engaged in the conversation. By listening to what would draw parents off topic from the main

discussion of the early childhood literacy program, I was able to hold the ground regarding the type of topics that was discussed. I kept the talk focused on school and academic topics; personal topics were expressed only as they related to this subject matter. Yet, I allowed natural conversational data to develop from the meaningful conversation the parents constructed and this is the strength of ethnographic and discourse methods.

Although I was not able to implement the second phase of the study, the focus on action was still on my mind and it was on the mind of the coordinator. He mentioned to me in late December 2007 that he wanted to see some results from the focus group pertaining to greater parent involvement in the early childhood literacy program. I had all the transcriptions from my tapes so I put together a nine-page document that outlined the goals of the program for each grade level, K1, K2 and first grade, with quotes from members of the focus group that expressed strengths of the program but also acknowledged some difficulties. Parents said there were two conversations going on in the school. Teachers were focused on the academic aspects of the program and the parents were focused on the developmental aspects of the program especially the need to integrate social-emotional development into the academic curriculum. I also researched what other schools were doing and added a recommendation that members of the focus group visit two schools that had smaller classrooms in the primary grades. The coordinator wrote me an e-mail response saying the document was excellent. It gave him a focus on which to create an action plan for the school.

However, the thinking about an action agenda produced a sharp upset in the coordinator toward me. The mothers were planning to bring in an expert who would

discuss ways to integrate social-emotional development. It would be an inclusive presentation. Teachers would be invited to attend and other parents with children in the early grades would be invited. Plans were made to video tape the talk so parents who could not attend would be able to see and hear the speaker.

At the sixth focus group meeting in late January 2007, the coordinator came and said he wanted to merge this event into a coffee hour that was held every month with parents and a social worker who talked about children's health. The parents replied that this was going to be an open event including the teachers so it would not fit into a mid-morning time period. The coordinator persisted and said that it did not matter how it was constructed because the focus group was going to be over in a couple of weeks. At that point, I voiced my objection that what the focus group was developing went beyond the format of the coffee hour. At that point, the coordinator became angry and said anything the focus group did was for everyone, including the mothers who came to the coffee hour.

Later, as I was typing the transcript from this session, I realized that the coordinator was dealing with two sets of parents. There were parents who came to the coffee hour to discuss topics about health and nutrition and there were the focus group parents who were building a system of ideas about early childhood learning and development. Not being part of our conversations, he had not acquired an appreciation of the underlying reasons why the mothers would want to create this event as they did. There was not enough time in his schedule to discuss how and why their ideas had developed and why they were important to them.

Although the focus group continued to talk about the speaker, I did not participate with enthusiasm as I had in the past. I showed more interest in parents investigating other schools that were creating innovative approaches to classroom size and learning. When the coordinator came to the next meeting, I affirmed that his goals for the school were important to me. Gradually, his anxieties about me and the focus group faded.

The focus group sessions continued until the middle of February. After the sixth meeting the mothers became more passionate about the learning experience of their children and this became one of the dominant themes and findings of the study.

### **The James Mercer School**

The James Mercer School is a large urban school. In the late 1990s and early 2000s its students were making Annual Yearly Progress<sup>5,6</sup> but as the decade progressed it was not able to achieve these results. At the time of the study, the school was in the second year of a three-year restructuring plan that had been worked out with the district. The principal was a seventeen year veteran at the school and was highly regarded by the

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<sup>5</sup> Annual yearly progress (AYP) refers to the accountability measures built into the No Child Left Behind Act. AYP is a measure of the extent to which a student demographic group (black, white, Hispanic, etc.) demonstrates proficiency in English language arts and mathematics. Each state sets the minimum level of improvement, measurable in terms of student performance that school districts and schools must achieve within time frames specified by NCLB.

<sup>6</sup> The No Child Left Behind act (NCLB) passed on January 8, 2002 was a renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). NCLB wrote into ESEA strict accountability for student outcomes to insure that all children in the United States receive a high quality education. NCLB provides grant funds to schools and districts to carry out their work. Grant money for early childhood literacy is funded under NCLB through Reading First Grants.

administration. As part of the restructuring<sup>7</sup>, additional resources were being applied including the early literacy program<sup>8</sup>.

### **Focus Group Members**

There were six regular group members including myself. Bea and Jack<sup>9</sup> are a married couple in their mid to late 30s. Bea is Cuban and Jack is Irish. Bea grew up in the neighborhood and graduated from the public schools. She took courses at a state teachers college and was certified to teach special needs students. Jack grew up in a nearby section of the city. He worked in facilities maintenance at one of the city's schools. Their son Jackie is five. At the time of the study Jackie was having a challenging time adapting to K2.<sup>10</sup> A capable and energetic child, he was finding it difficult to memorize the letters of the alphabet.

Nadia grew up in Jamaica and moved to this community four or five years before the study. A young woman in her late 20s she has one son Miles who lived with Nadia's parents in Jamaica until he was four. He moved to be with Nadia when he started K1 at the Mercer School.<sup>11</sup> Nadia completed her formal education in Jamaica at the ninth grade compulsory level. Yet Nadia continued her education by becoming engaged in work that was meaningful to her. She had an interest in early childhood education and she developed this interest by assisting in the classroom in Jamaica. Nadia had a very

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<sup>7</sup> School restructuring occurs when a school underperforms for a specific number of years and is required to restructure its procedures in order to make AYP. The restructuring for the Mercer School is mandated by the state and implemented by state, district and school personnel. Restructuring is monitored by the state department of education.

<sup>8</sup> The early childhood literacy program is a district wide program to encourage parents to send their children to school at the age of 4 in order to gain literacy. The goal is to help children develop literacy skills at an early age so that they will benefit from them in the higher grades.

<sup>9</sup> All names in the study are pseudonyms including the names of the schools.

<sup>10</sup> K2 is the second year of Kindergarten in the early childhood literacy program. Children are 5 years old when they enter K2.

<sup>11</sup> K1 is the entry level class for 4 year old children in the early childhood literacy program.

expressive conversational style and I found the sensitive quality of her observations encapsulated the great depth of feeling each parent in the group brought to the topic of education and child development.

Annie is a young African American grandmother in her late 40s. She has been caring for her grandson James since he was born. Annie and her daughter mutually agreed that Annie would care for James and be responsible for him. She is close to her daughter who lives nearby. Annie left school in the eleventh grade and became a single mother. Although her daughter now has her own apartment and a new job, Annie once commented that she raised her daughter without much instruction or guidance. Now as the primary caregiver for her grandson she continually expresses the desire to do everything she can for him to help him grow and mature. This includes making sure he has his regular doctors' visits including seeing specialists for his eyes. Annie has also been reading and talking with James about his books since he was in Head Start.

Maria is Portuguese and has lived in the community for many years. A trained nurse, she raised several children who went to the public schools. Maria learned with her own children that they need attention in order to do well in school so she volunteers her time to work with a non-profit organization that provides additional personnel at the Mercer School to help children in the classroom with their reading and schoolwork. Maria spends two mornings a week in James' classroom and knows James as a student.

There are two other people who came to one or two focus group sessions. Ali is a young mother in her early 20s. She and her son Walter live with her family. Walter did not go to Head Start or a nursery school before entering K2 at five years of age. From Ali's description, it appears he did not understand the rules of the classroom. Walter's K2

teacher expected her class to make steady progress and Walter appeared not to be fitting into her classroom routine. Ali transferred him to another school after two focus group meetings.

Marta is the K1 coach. I met her in the office of the director of the Early Literacy Program. She is Italian and works with eighteen K1 teachers in the district. Five of them are at the Mercer School. Marta came as a guest to the third focus group meeting and talked with parents about the physical and cognitive capabilities of children four and five years old.

### **The Flexible Nature of the Focus Group**

The original research question I developed for the group was “How do we get our children ready for school every day?” I thought this would be a good way to understand how these parents interpreted the expectations of the school. However, from the very beginning, Bea and Nadia were very explicit about wanting to know more about the content and expectations of the Early Literacy Program. Their assertiveness may have been due to the fact that the coordinator had recruited them to be in the focus group as part of the school’s initiative to be more open and inclusive with parents. Thus, the group went in a direction initiated by its members.

In a few instances, the coordinator invited parents to come to the focus group to express their concerns. A mother came one night whose 5 year old son was slower in his responses to instructions than other children in the classroom. The mother felt the teacher was not recognizing his need to be integrated into classroom activity. Another mother had a 9 year old daughter who all of a sudden was not doing well in her studies. They spoke with focus group members and the coordinator who attended portions of the initial sessions. Although this went beyond the boundaries of what I had originally envisioned

the focus group to be I realized the group was now being used by the coordinator to serve some of the needs of the school. These parents probably reflected some of the outlying concerns of parents in the school so it was good he had an opportunity to hear them. Most important, he demonstrated that the Mercer School was genuinely interested in forming relationships with parents and this condition made it possible for me to have the study there.

### **The Cash Incentive as Motivator**

I decided to pay parents \$25 for each session they attended to show that I valued their commitment to organize their time to attend every meeting. As the focus group evolved it appeared that the money was appreciated but it was not the primary motivator to stay with the group. The social aspects of the group, meeting people who are of like mind and having an opportunity to develop topics of interest, seemed to be the most compelling reasons for remaining involved. At first, the group was going to meet every other week but members expressed the opinion that a two-week gap between meetings was too long so the group met every week during the second half of the sessions.

### **Formatting the Analysis of Conversational Data**

The conversational data presented in the data analysis is layered with the multi-dimensional thoughts and impressions participants have regarding the education of their children. The analysis is formatted into talk segments and the text is written in two columns on the page. In one column there is a discussion of the theory and theoretical considerations underlying the ideas expressed in the talk segment. In the opposite column there is an analysis of the talk. As I participated in the conversation with members of the focus group, I could see three major themes evolve as discussions focused on topic related episodes. I divide the sessions according to these themes.



The first theme is titled “tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program” (focus group sessions 1-3). The second theme is titled “probing their interactions with their children and their children’s responses to the early childhood literacy program” (focus group sessions 4-7). The third theme is titled “appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to advocacy” (focus group sessions 8-10).

### **Unit of Analysis**

The content analysis of talk segments in each focus group session is a discrete entity. Each can stand alone as a separate subject of inquiry. This approach enables me to focus on that particular talk segment and relate it to the theory being discussed and its theoretical considerations. The analysis documents that this group of parents is talking about substantive ideas although they may not be totally conversant regarding the underpinnings of the intellectual idea. The theoretical analysis highlights the fact that experts in the field are examining and have examined topics these parents have begun to discuss and could continue discussing at a very meaningful level. To mention just a few of the topics that came up in the conversation there is the pedagogy of Montessori (1917), the concerns of the National Research Council (2000) regarding the structure of educational environments, the findings of researchers that young children show substantial knowledge about events that elicit emotions (Wellman, Harris, Bannerjee & Sinclair, 1995), the different ways children learn literacy (Ferreiro, 1990) and the importance of partnering with teachers in a meaningful way (Swick as cited in Knoph & Swick, 2008).

### **The Conversation**

In the initial focus group sessions there is talk about the lack of a syllabus to help parents guide their children through the program. As no syllabus is offered by the school administration focus group parents talk with me about how they should work with their children to support classroom learning. This begins the conversation that broadens into the three themes. Without an overarching statement, parents are apprehensive about the program's ability to develop literacy skills that stimulate all the growth processes in their children. The talk analysis examines the footings (Goffman, 1981) of participants as they exchange observations and experiences and in so doing construct knowledge in a safe social space.

In the focus group sessions that come at the middle of the series, parents see the early literacy program along two dimensions. One is the facilitating environment and the other is the progress of developmental growth. The facilitating environment encompasses the important idea of personality integration that requires an environment stable enough to explore. The parents' discourse into these areas modifies their schemata (Vygotsky, 1986) about education and child development.

They see many aspects of development. These include physical, emotional, intellectual and social development. Developmental and educational theories connect this growth to the perceptual field – the child's sensori-motor relationship to it and the subsequent psycho-sensory organization of it. In many trials and attempts to organize the perceptual field, the child acquires inner speech, language, literacy, and communication skills. Although their talk meanders, the main themes of their questions, perplexities and concerns focus on the facilitating environment and the progress of developmental growth.

In the final three sessions the need to work within a framework of mutual human awareness between parents and teachers becomes a main theme. Parents want to create a dialogue with teachers around common goals. These goals center on guiding their children into the total spectrum of the academic curriculum with their personalities fully engaged in the process of learning. In their talk we hear the peaks and lows of their enthusiasm towards trying to find a way to talk with teachers. They want their child and the teacher to have a mutually responsive orientation toward each other but in order to facilitate this they have to form a collaborative relationship with teachers.

The need for collaboration is urgent. Talk in focus group sessions brings to the foreground tension in the classroom around respect for the teacher by the child and respect for the child by the teacher. These concerns agitate focus group parents as they know such residues of disaffection in the classroom environment affect human contact, social-emotional development and academic performance.

As the focus group sessions come to an end, parents hear of a particular school in the district that has a philosophy that children will improve their academic performance if there are emotional outlets in the school such as art and music.

### **Structure of the Analysis**

The original verbatim transcripts of all ten sessions are extensive. The talk segments that I chose to analyze had to satisfy one of three characteristics of the verbatim conversation as I experienced it. Segments had to illustrate a response that moved the discussion forward; it had to make a strong point in response to a previous utterance; or it had to express a passionate interest in a topic. I came prepared to each session having

read and re-read the transcript from the previous session several times. Through this process I gained an intimate knowledge of their concerns.

The original verbatim transcript has been edited by extracting portions of conversational data from the original verbatim session. The extracted conversational data is segmented into six topic related episodes for a sharper focus of the conversation. However, the cadence and flow of words are true to the intent of the verbatim unedited version of the conversation.

Selected talk segments for each focus group session are under 150 lines in order to keep a sharp focus on the topic being discussed. A comparison of the number of lines in the original verbatim focus group session and the number of lines in the examined talk segments is given in Table 1.

**Table 1**            **Number of Lines in Verbatim Transcript and Selected Talk Segments**

<b>Focus Group #</b>	<b>Verbatim Transcript # Lines</b>	<b>Talk Segments # Lines</b>
Focus Group 1	<b>850</b>	<b>68</b>
Focus Group 2	<b>925</b>	<b>112</b>
Focus Group 3	<b>1150</b>	<b>74</b>
Focus Group 4	<b>592</b>	<b>114</b>
Focus Group 5	<b>555</b>	<b>101</b>
Focus Group 6	<b>962</b>	<b>123</b>
Focus Group 7	<b>1184</b>	<b>147</b>
Focus Group 8	<b>1035</b>	<b>107</b>
Focus Group 9	<b>1220</b>	<b>124</b>
Focus Group 10	<b>740</b>	<b>90</b>

Although there are many less lines in the talk segments, they follow the sequence of the conversation as it occurred. The cadence and flow of words of selected utterances are true to the intent of the entire transcript. A case in point from the six talk segments in Focus Group One illustrates the construction of the analysis. Bea opens the first focus group session with her questions about a structured teaching environment and the desire

to support the teacher in the classroom. The next talk segment is Nadia informing the group about the British standard of education and her observation that life in the Jamaican classroom is calm. In between these two utterances there are **120 lines** of talk. The talk concerns preparing K1 children for the more advanced literacy work in K2. There is discussion about Ali's son Walter being an active child and not being able to settle down and stay in his chair. There is discussion about 20 children in the K2 classroom and only one teacher. It is at this point that Nadia voices her observations about the classroom in Jamaica.

The third talk segment is Bea's description of her son's reaction on the first day of school when he realizes his K1 teacher would not be his K2 teacher. There are **220 lines** in between this and the previous talk segment. The talk leading up to the third segment contrasts differences between early childhood education in Jamaica and at the Mercer School. A comment that there is stress in the classroom and children become frustrated and discouraged immediately precedes Bea's utterance.

The fourth talk segment is the observation of Bea and Jack about the fast pace of the K2 curriculum. There are **76 lines** in between talk segments 3 and 4. The conversation is about a need for additional teaching assistants in the K1 and K2 classrooms. Talk segment five is the exchange between Ali and Bea about letting a child fall back a grade who is not adapting to the classroom. There are **104 lines** in between these segments. The discussion is about homework assignments that are completed but they are not returned with a checkmark by the teacher or a comment from her that something is wrong and how the parent could help the child correct.

The sixth talk segment includes Bea, Nadia, Jack and Ali who discuss in detail the effects on children of a fast paced classroom. There are **12 lines** in between talk segments 6 and 5. The talk relates to Bea's son not listening to the teacher and the frustration this causes in the teacher. There are an additional **250 lines** to the end of the session. I ended the segments at a point that appears to be a natural conclusion to the talk in the focus group session.

### **Analytical Tools<sup>12</sup>**

The discussion regarding analytical tools begins by noting the term mothering for schooling. This is a type of discourse that characterizes in part some of the talk in the focus group. It indicates how the mothers' concerns arise and it influences how some of the analytical tools are applied to analyze the talk. A term created by Griffith & Smith (2005), it refers to the work parents do to produce children who are receptive to learning in a formal educational setting. This activity can be categorized as complementary educational work. Parents draw on their thoughts, efforts, skills and resources to mobilize oversight of their children's education within the parameters laid down by the school (Griffith & Smith, 2005).

The discourse in the focus groups concerns the implementation of the goals of the early literacy curriculum. It also focuses on the ways these parents want to engage with those goals so they can assist the teacher and provide a good enough environmental provision for their children. The discourse becomes expansive as it follows the interests of participants and grows into topic related episodes. I allowed a member of the focus group to reformulate what the real issues were for the group as the study is meant to address "the everyday world as problematic," (Garfinkel, 1967). In this case it is the

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<sup>12</sup> The glossary of terms on page 58 provides definitions for each analytical tool that I use.

implementation of the early childhood literacy curriculum and it is the person in the midst of the experience who can best articulate what the concerns are and how she would like to approach them.

In the analysis of the conversation around topic related episodes, I follow the technique Tannen (2005) developed. I give a great deal of attention to the replies and responses of participants. The way an utterance is phrased is very important to me. It affects the way a person hears and interprets what another person says and it affects how well tuned the conversation is among participants. As an example, a perfectly tuned conversation confirms one's way of being human and one's place in the world (Tannen, 1986). To say something and see it taken to mean something else undermines one's sense of competence and becomes a disquieting conversation (Tannen, 1986). I was careful to lead participants in a conversation that was well tuned. In the analysis, the following analytical tools identify how well tuned conversations were among participants and the conversations they described with other members of the school community.

### **Footing**

I use footing (Goffman, 1981) in the analysis to examine how the participants create and interpret meaning in interaction as they relate to each other and to what they say. I use it to distinguish what topic they are engaging in and the sense of personal identity they are assuming. Following Goffman (1981), I use footing to identify the relationships they are negotiating and the alignments they are creating by how they manage their responses to the replies of what they hear from the other person. In the analysis, I use footing to examine how participants fine tune their roles in speaking as

topic related episodes are developed and the meaning that is given to the topic (Ribeiro & Hoyle, 2002).

### **Situated Meaning**

To capture the content of what is being said as each topic related episode is being discussed, I work with situated meaning (Goffman, 1975). Situated meanings create topic related episodes. Their meanings hinge on the footing embedded in the language that comes before and after a given utterance. As a participant observer in the conversation and as the result of working with transcriptions, I carefully observed and monitored situated meanings. I guided participants to speak about the schooling aspects of their relationship with their children and not on personal details that did not relate to this topic. I wanted situated meaning to retain a mid-level pattern or generalization (without going into specific details the speaker alludes to a problem) regarding the topic (Gee, 2005). Their schema would not be too general and they would not be too specific (Gee, 2005).

As an example of the way situated meaning is used in the analysis, from the first instance of utterances in the focus group sessions, Nadia in Focus Group 1 Topic Related Episode 2 is a mother but in her speech act as she introduces herself to the group she uses the footing of informant and constructs her social identity by telling the group what her standard of education is.

**Nadia:** 16Like I try to explain to people my standard of education the way I view education is  
17British Standard of Education format

As she concludes this talk segment, Nadia changes her footing to that of observant mother. She uses the word “stressful” and that creates a response from Bea in the next talk segment.

**Nadia:** 23It’s not really as stressful but what it does by the time that they reach that last  
24year they’re already settlin’ down



Bea uses the footing of compassionate mother and her response to Nadia opens up the topic of stressful teacher-child relationships later developed by the focus group.

**Bea:**    **25** And he saw  
              **26** that Miss Walker did not place him back in his line and it was so hard he cried

The conversation is well tuned; the participants understand what the other says and meaning is contextual; it is easily identified by situated meaning.

### **Schemata**

In addition to footing and situated meaning, the use of the analytical tool schemata<sup>13</sup> (Vygotsky, 1986) is helpful in analyzing the conversation. It allows me to determine where viewpoints converge and diverge. Schemata are an aid in understanding the views of participants about each other and also identifying the intellectual divide in expectations about the early literacy program between teachers and parents. Employing schemata as an analytical tool, gives me the opportunity to identify those moments in the conversation where ideas are being reorganized in the minds of the participants and where the exposure to new information expands insights.

As one example, the focus group participants had a lengthy conversation about social emotional development that extended over several sessions. Use of schemata analyzed how this broadened the topic for them. Thoughts were becoming more informed as they were beginning to see that academic learning and social-emotional development could be woven together in the curriculum.

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<sup>13</sup> Schemata – as used in this context derives from Vygotsky's (1986) work. It refers to his conceptualization that through inter-psychological relations, i.e., inter-personal communication, individuals take ideas and internalize them through intra-psychological mental functions. Ideas are transformed into individualized representations of the collective representation. As parents in the focus group discuss ideas I share with them about education and child development, their individualized representations of the collective representation changes through the discussion. Likewise, teachers have a different collective representation of the early childhood literacy program.

### Linguistic Register

Linguistic register is another analytical tool I found useful in analyzing the conversational data. It refers to the choice of words, tone and sentence structure that people choose for a particular setting and audience (Tannen & Wallat, 1993). I use this analytical tool to contrast the stances individuals take toward the parents in the focus group. As an example, the K1 coach who has a talk segment in Focus Group Three Topic Related Episode Five says

**Marta:** 60You know I want this school to be a place where parents are coming, parents feel like  
61they're welcomed; parents feel like they're talking with the kids and doing things.

Although professionally trained, she assumes a colloquial and informal linguistic register with the use of repetition. ("Parents feel like they're welcomed; parents feel like they're talking with the kids and doing things.") Her tone is expansive and welcoming. She is happy to see the parents in the focus group.

As a contrast to this stance, Mrs. Tyler, also a professionally trained woman takes on an authoritative linguistic register as reported by Bea in FG2 TRE3. Her restrained tone keeps Bea in her subsidiary role as parent. Statements and directives by Bea such as, "I'm not getting any of the stuff back," attest to an authoritative stance by Mrs. Tyler.

**Bea:** 60And uhm you know I told her well I'm not getting any of the stuff back (said  
61questioningly) you know corrected but when I had my meeting with her it was like she  
62was kind of like uhm do you have uhm any complaints?

## Glossary of Terms

A glossary of terms that summarizes the discussion on analytical tools follows.

<b><u>Term</u></b>	<b><u>Definition</u></b>
Conversational Style	A theory and method to understand how people communicate and interpret meaning in conversation (Tannen, 2005).
Footing	Goffman coined the notion of “footing”. This is an element of conversational style (Tannen, 2005). It is the act of participants negotiating interpersonal relationships or alignments with each other in a speech encounter. Footing is a concept that refines the notion of role performance and social role of an individual within the encounter (Ribeiro & Hoyle, 2002).
Schemata	These are cognitive concepts that assist people in the interpretation and production of discourse. They originate from what we internalize from our exposure to life experiences.
Schemata	Piaget (1953) uses the term schemata in context with the sensori-motor development of the 18-28 month old child who through sensory impressions and the use of memory innovates adaptively to the physical environment.
Speech action	This is a speech activity (Gumperz, 1982) around the response that identifies the nature of the response, to whom the response is addressed and the footing on which the respondent articulates the response.
Discourse model	Ideas about domains that are shared by people in different cultures. In the focus group one discourse model is the early literacy program (Gee, 2005).
Situated meaning	Meaning is situated in local, on-site, social and Discourse practices and it is continually transformed in these practices.
Topic related episode	A subject of interest with a contextual meaning related to the early literacy program.
Linguistic Register	The words, syntax and tone choices deemed appropriate by a particular setting and audience

The analysis of the conversational data that follows uses these analytical tools to examine the meaning of the talk in each topic related episode. They also facilitate the discussion of theory and theoretical considerations in context with what participants said.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ANALYSIS OF CONVERSATIONAL DATA**

#### **Introduction**

In this chapter, the analysis of conversational data takes a micro-analytic approach regarding the examination and discussion of topics parents bring up in their ten two-hour focus group sessions. The unfolding of the talk segments is in sequence with the original conversation and documents how parents build a meaningful and substantive conversation about the education of their children. Three themes that identify each section of the analysis highlight the tenor and tone<sup>14</sup> (Halliday, 2004) of the conversation regarding the central topic under discussion – the desire of parents to be involved with and informed about the learning of their children in the early childhood literacy program.

The three themes are “Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program” (Focus Group Sessions 1-3), “Probing their interactions with their children and their children’s responses to the early childhood literacy program” (Focus Group Sessions 4-7), and “Appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to advocacy” (Focus Groups 8-10). Before each theme-related section there is a brief introduction regarding what the parents are discussing. At the conclusion of each section there is a synthesis and discussion of the key points discussed and how these

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<sup>14</sup> Tenor, the flow of meaning that is apparent in what is being said and tone, the relative pitch of the voice or prosody when a word, phrase or sentence is articulated affect the different footings participants construct with each other during the three different phases of the conversation.

points relate to the theoretical considerations and discussion of the talk presented in the micro-analysis.

### **Introduction to the Talk in Focus Groups 1-3**

Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program pervade the talk in Focus Groups 1-3. Parents seek an understanding of their educational responsibilities to their children in context with the early childhood literacy program and this causes tension and unease for them. Their reactions stem in part from the actions of the administration. It has not conversed with them about the broad educational philosophy behind the program, the teaching pedagogy that supports the program and the week-by-week expectations for the child in the classroom. As a result, parents focus their talk on elements of the early learning experience that they think are important. They talk about using conceptual language with children, the pace of the classroom curriculum, and the physical natures of their children in the learning experience. They discuss the lack of information they receive about what the child is doing in the classroom and the desire to create a rapport with the teacher. One participant gives testimony to the experience of having an early childhood teacher who invites parents of her students into the classroom. Talk excerpts from Focus Groups 1-3 are discussed and analyzed in detail on the following pages. There is a synthesis of this conversational data following Focus Group 3.

**Table 2**  
**Section 1 – (Focus Group 1)**  
**Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
1	1	1-15	Tension around lack of information about the syllabus
1	2	16-24	Mother from Jamaica points out that classroom is less stressful in Jamaica
1	3	25-30	Failure to form relationships early between Jackie and his new K2 teacher causes distress
1	4	31-40	Parents become apprehensive about behavior changes in their child due to fast pace of K2 curriculum
1	5	41-48	Jackie wants to go back to day care causing his mother to question fast pace of curriculum
1	6	49-68	Parents observe that teacher's effectiveness is impeded by pace of the curriculum

*Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-15)*

**Tension around lack of information about the syllabus**

**Bea:** 1...okay I play outside with my son uhm but when they play outdoors – is the outdoor here  
2different that there are more imbedded or implicit questions that I wouldn't ask my son, for  
3instance, ah Jackie – what season is it?

**Natalie:** 4Uhhm

**Bea:** 5why are the why are the why are the leaves falling you know or why is it cold or uhm

**Natalie:** 6Are those questions you ask anyway?

**Bea:** 7No, not really (emphatically) not really because uhm I try to do more of safe play with him like  
8readiness okay zip up your jacket, tie your shoes [deleted extraneous talk]  
9So my style may be different and not you know matching this supporting this so that's why I  
10kind of like wanted to see a syllabus of what I can maximize that learning and talk about  
11possible vocabulary

**Natalie:** 12 Right

**Bea:** 13with him language

**Natalie:** 14Right

**Bea:** 15uhm, go to the library and really get books that is going to support the classroom teaching

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In her experimental studies in education, Montessori (1917) found that in order for a child to expand his power of attention, he has to find in his surroundings something organized in direct relation to his organic internal organization. Fundamental to Montessori's theory of developmental education is the tenet "economizing the

Discussion of the talk

In this talk episode, Bea introduces herself to the group. She uses the register of a parent but her referent is the voice of a teacher (which Bea used to be) who uses a structured situation to guide the thinking and activity of a child. Bea is aware that teaching styles differ so she wants to see a syllabus that she hopes will give her the rubric of how she

powers of the pupils.” This means helping children to use their powers of concentration to the utmost of their abilities without fatiguing them.

should talk with her son to support his learning.

*Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 16-24)*

**Mother from Jamaica points out that classroom is less stressful in Jamaica**

**Nadia:** 16Like I try to explain to people my standard of education the way I view education is  
17British Standard of Education format so we do what we call day care Kindergarten in  
18the Caribbean that’s before primary school.

19Kindergarten is 2 years preschool. They go from 3 because they start primary school  
20between 4, 5. The first 6-9 months do the same thing that they do in K1 here—play –  
21but by evening time they start doing rhymes, stories and you find the kids will do a  
22little bit of writin’ but it’s a little bit more like printed paper and they get to trace  
23letters. It’s not really as stressful but what it does by the time that they reach that last  
24year they’re already settlin’ down.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

When Montessori was doing her experimental work to discover children’s responses to learning activities, she watched a 3 year old child repeat 44 times putting different sized cylinders into their proper curved grooves. When the child stopped on her own volition, Montessori noted the expression on her face and observed it was as if she were “awakening from a refreshing nap.” This is the response that Nadia is looking for in her son but she observes that the classroom structure in his new school is stressful.

Discussion of the Talk

Nadia is the mother of a 4 year old K1 son. In this talk episode she is an informant about the British standard of education in Jamaica. She compares activity in the classroom for 3 year olds maturing into 4 years old in Jamaica where her son Miles lived until he was 3. She notes that children play “but by evening they start doing rhymes...” Although they do serious work on oral literacy, Nadia informs the group that children in Jamaica are not as stressful as they are in K1. Her talk foreshadows her apprehension that will continue to develop.

*Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 25-30)*

**Failure to form relationships early between Jackie and his new K2 teacher causes distress**

**Bea:** 25Last year he had Miss Walker -- his heart when he came in September. And he saw  
26that Miss Walker did not place him back in his line and it was so hard he cried and  
27cried. To him that was a trusting person that knew him at the Mercer and everything  
28he saw over the summer – the little weeds, the little rocks that he brought he brought to

29show her because he went camping and she said “I’m not going to be your teacher this  
30year that’s going to be your teacher, Mrs. Tyler.”

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The Executive Summary – Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers – Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy (2000) states that from a variety of theoretical perspectives a defining feature of a supportive environment is a responsible and responsive adult. The transition of a child from one grade to the next has to be planned. The child needs to have awareness of who the responsive adult is going to be who is so crucial to providing the supportive classroom environment.

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea speaks as an informant and as a mother. She informs the group of the facts surrounding the event. Her words “he cried and cried” conveyed her awareness as a mother of the deep response her son felt when he faced the reality that his familiar teacher from last year was not going to continue to be his teacher.

### *Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 31-40)*

### **Parents become apprehensive about behavior changes in their child due to fast pace of K2 curriculum**

**Bea:** 31one of the behaviors I’ve seen with my son is that he has this harassing thing now.  
32“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go.” Because here [at the Mercer] he’s taught “let’s go, let’s go,  
33 let’s go.”

**Natalie:** 34Go do what?

**Bea:** 35Whatever the task has to be

**Jack and**

**Bea:** 36Finish

**Jack:** 37Always going

**Bea:** 38 — He doesn’t know how to change

**Natalie:** 39Pace

**Bea:** 40the, the he doesn’t know how to say “when could we,” “could we now”

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The classroom environment is a supported environment that is carefully arranged with objects that stimulate the mind of the child (Montessori, 1917). What makes the learning experience come alive is the time given to the child to develop an organized and complex activity around the object. It is this

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea and Jack express concern about the behavior changes they see in their son due to the curriculum’s fast pace. Jack speaks only twice and he says only three words “finish” and “always going” but this ratifies Bea’s description of their son’s behavior. It also ratifies Bea’s observation that this behavior holds their



activity that exercises the child's intelligence. The persistent behavior of Bea's and Jack's son to constantly say "let's go" reflects the anxiety he senses within his internal organization and signals to him that he is not integrating the pace of activity in the classroom with his internal rhythm.

son back from gaining the appropriate social skills to initiate activity with them.

*Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 41-48)*

**Jackie wants to go back to day care causing his mother to question the fast pace of K2 curriculum**

- Bea:** 41 Jackie has asked me if he can go back to day care.  
**Ali:** 42 Maybe I can put him [Walter] back and he said don't do that. He doesn't need to go  
 43 back.  
**Bea:** 44 [deleted talk about a parent meeting] Jackie says when I'm at the daycare I go to the  
 45 bathroom and they help me and I don't have so many accidents rush rush rush and  
 46 sometimes I have an accident but I tell him Jackie you're here to learn. This is  
 47 different [from K1, from daycare] so you know then I ask him well why don't you  
 48 want to go to school. Because I have to do work fast.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

When Montessori (1917) was formulating her theory about "economizing the powers of children" her focus was on the physical development of the child as well as the intellectual. One of her first considerations was how much rest is necessary for a child after completion of a task? She also considered how long a time period should elapse for any particular task. Before Montessori became involved with her educational experiments, medicine had been brought into the classroom in Italy due to observations that children were showing physical symptoms due to classroom set up structures and procedures.

Discussion of the Talk

Bea's footing with Ali is one of a confidant speaking to another mother who is facing a similar situation with her son. Both boys have not been able to coordinate their minds and their bodies to the demands of the tasks that are waiting for them in the classroom. Bea explains to Ali that she tells Jackie he is in K2 to learn but then in mid-sentence Bea changes her stance with her son and asks why he doesn't want to go to school and his response relates to the physical demands that he has to work fast. In her talk with Ali, Bea does not return to her former stance that she instructs Jackie about the nature of K2 indicating she may now be ambivalent about this.

*Focus Group 1 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 49-68)*

**Parents observe that teacher's effectiveness is impeded by pace of the curriculum**

- Bea:** 49The teacher has said he wasn't good today because he didn't listen...He doesn't see  
50that being lined up nicely, he has his coat on. There's not other positive  
51reinforcements of everything else he does good throughout the day so when
- Nadia:** 52That's one reason of why he doesn't want to come to school because he is always  
53being told
- Jack:** 54Every day we go and pick him up. At the end of the day he wasn't listening, he  
55wasn't on top of it  
[deleted talk about attention span]
- Ali:** 56It goes back to the curriculum that she has. It's not fair for a 5 year old to go  
57through this and this and this. This is rushed and that is a mess.
- Jack:** 58Even me working I don't have a schedule like this from this to this after this to this  
59and this. I don't have this as a custodian in a school.
- Ali:** 60And when you have free time the kids get upset okay when it's time to put your toys  
61away.
- Jack:** 62How do you expect a 5 year old to do this? You don't have time.
- Ali:** 63You know she lets them have a break but when they have that break they go crazy.  
64Because they're not used to and you know having that free time. I notice when they  
65get the Leggos they swarm all over the Leggos and they don't want to play with this  
66one or that one "it's mine" and "she don't need it." "It's time now to put them  
67away." It's not fair because they get such a strict curriculum there's not enough time  
68to play so when they have that free time they just go nuts.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Ali has correctly identified that there is lack of balance between the curriculum and the structuring of the classroom. The teacher wants to accomplish all the academic tasks with the children and still incorporate a pause she knows the children need in order to relax. From their conversation, we learn that the parents sense that children are being switched from event to event very quickly. Shifting from task to task was a critical part of the curriculum to Montessori (1917). In her educational experiments, she developed diagrams that measured the activity of children relative to their quiescent state. In normal states of activity, the activity line

Discussion of the Talk

In the first half of this topic related episode, Bea and Jack recapitulate Mrs. Tyler's response to Jackie's inability to follow instructions. This becomes the referent for Ali when she responds to Jack's comment that he and Bea continually hear these complaints about their son. Ali correctly identifies that the curriculum has not given the children time to transition from work to play to work. Ali makes special reference to free time and the lack of development in social skills that would have helped the children share toys with each other.

sloped down gradually to meet the quiescent line after completion of an activity. This does not happen in the K2 class and causes parents to become concerned about the design of the curriculum.

**Table 3**  
**Section 1 – (Focus Group 2)**  
**Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
2	1	1-24	Annie describes how she works with James and the confidence he shows about his school work
2	2	25-40	Annie monitors James' work to make sure he knows his sight words
2	3	41-64	Mrs. Tyler describes her teaching methods to Bea. She combines process writing with phonetics. Bea feels insecure that she does not have a syllabus that explains this to her
2	4	65-83	The reading volunteer describes her experience as a parent in a Montessori like classroom. Bea sees a sharp contrast with her experience at the Mercer School.
2	5	84-95	Bea repeats her request for a guide to follow what her son is learning in school. Maria affirms her request saying that the Montessori teacher always reinforced that parents are their child's first teacher.
2	6	96-112	Nadia affirms Bea's request by saying she wants to know what her child is learning in school

*Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-24)*

**Annie describes how she works with James and the confidence he shows about his school work**

**Annie:** 1and as far as his homework it shocked me he said “no, no, no, let me do it by myself” well, go  
2ahead and you know when I checked over it, it was right. There was nothing but the sound  
3like “can’t,” “hat”

**Natalie:** 4What was the homework he was doing?

**Annie:** 5You know the homework that they sent home for Monday to do for the whole week?

**Natalie:** 7I don’t know what it is you have to explain

**Annie:** 8Oh, they’re like little pictures like ah “hat”. You’ll have “at” and you got to figure out the  
9sound you have the “h” the “j” whatever up top.

**Natalie:** 10Uh huh

**Annie:** 11He’s excited to do it by himself. He said “hu hu hu hu H”.

**Natalie:** 12Ooooh

**Annie:** 13You know, little stuff like that (Annie is speaking rapidly throughout.) And I’m surprised  
14he did both pages like colors, green, yellow, orange, blue and red. Him and the colors and “I  
15know I know I know I know how to do it you don’t need to help me.”

**Natalie:** 16What’s good though is that he did talk to you to sound it out to show you

**Annie:** 17Oh yeah

**Natalie:** 18to show you he could do it.

**Annie:** 19If he’s not sure about it, he’ll ask me because we’re right there at the table.  
20While he is doing his work. Believe it or not the homework we do it within  
21 2 days. You know.

**Natalie:** 22The whole week?

**Annie:** 23Yeah. We do it in 2 days. Like I said we sit down and we read you know  
24and stuff like that.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The National Research Council Report (2000) outlines the support that a structured, purposeful environment requires if it is to promote the growth and development of children. Although we do not know at this time in the evolution of the talk, what the exact relationship is between Annie and James' teacher, Miss Baker, we do see from this segment that both encourage and support James to demonstrate his cognitive strengths.

### Discussion of the Talk

Annie has established a pattern of doing homework with her grandson. She states that James brings home the weekly worksheets every Monday. There is a great deal of interaction between Annie and James. With his words, James pushes Annie aside saying, "no, no, no, let me do it by myself." Annie responds by saying, "Well, go ahead." James is an active, eager learner and this appears to delight Annie. She demonstrates to the group how James identifies the initial sound of a word "hu, hu, hu, hu H." to show how he can identify a word. James' experience in the classroom gives him a confidence and buoyancy that appears to be reassuring to Annie. This contrasts with the apprehensiveness Bea and Nadia feel

### *Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 25-40)*

#### **Annie monitors James' work to make sure he knows his sight words**

**Annie:** 25like the new words that he have to learn even though he know them we still go over  
26them every single day because he have to learn those she was telling me before he  
27gets to 1<sup>st</sup> grade. He says, "I already did that I already did that," so let's do it again  
(Annie speaking to James).

**Anony:** 28Right

**Annie:** 29Until you're able to do them by yourself so that we don't even need to do that. If I  
30give you a book James I said what's this word you know "the" like "me" "we"  
31"you" whatever. So he think I'm making it up no – you have to learn these things so  
32when you open up a book you will be able to read by yourself because that  
33Goodnight Gorilla I used to read that to him every you know that's his favorite book.  
34So that's how he learned to read it because every night what book you want to read  
35he want to read that one book it's about all different kinds of animals – hyena,  
36giraffe – so he learned how to read that by hisself. It's that only one book he know  
37how to read but that one book makes a difference.

**Natalie:** 38Right (emphatically)

**Annie:** 39It opens the door for the rest of

**Natalie:** 40Exactly

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Through her words and stance, Annie has conveyed that she and Miss Baker are in agreement about their approach to James. Five year old James has several skills that are all being supported by his teacher and grandmother to help him progress in his literacy work. Through her words, Annie has conveyed that she is going to support what Miss Baker and the school say are the criteria for moving onto first grade – knowledge of 50 sight words. Annie works closely with James and appears to notice when he does not recall sight words. Although this seems to make her anxious, Annie is able to balance this challenge with a task that James finds easier to conquer – his knowledge of words by recognizing drawings in his favorite bed time story. Thus, Annie is following one of Montessori's maxims – to let children gain confidence by first processing a task that is easier for them.

### Discussion of the Talk

Annie monitors James' work very closely. She is vigilant about his retaining sight words as Miss Baker has told Annie this is a criterion for James' moving on to first grade. Annie changes her register to teacher when she describes to the group how she addresses James when she wants him to demonstrate his sight words. "If I give you a book, James, I said what's this word you know "the" "like" "me" "you" whatever...you have to learn these things so when you open up a book you will be able to read by yourself. Yet Annie balances this harder work with a familiar bed time story that James has learned to read by recognizing the pictures.

### *Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 41-64)*

**Mrs. Tyler describes her teaching methods to Bea. She combines process writing with phonetics. Bea feels insecure that she does not have a syllabus that explains this to her**

**Bea:** 41He was in the conference because he was asked to get his things so again I was  
42thinking oh Lord they are going to give those sheets. Looking at how terrible the  
43writing is because he had a hard time writing his name. [deleted extraneous talk]  
44[Mrs. Tyler says to Jackie] why don't you get your notebook. What he did was that  
45he had we go camping we have a trailer and he put the camper and he put the little  
46fireplace outside and the little fire and you know Daddy holding on a little juice box  
47and he was just talking about that and he was talking about his sister and the two  
48dogs and then he was talking about the world series that uhm when they do all those  
49commercials then he was playing with his friend on one of those video games it was  
50his first time and he was playing with the remote control car so he drew the TV and  
51these wires. Then Mrs. Tyler says he tells everything.

52[deleted extraneous talk] [Mrs. Tyler talking to Bea] then beside that packet that goes  
53to you this is the writing and also for math they have a math notebook too. [deleted  
54extraneous talk] remember you were saying it was not legible that if he doesn't have

55these skills down it may look like he will have to repeat and then I was so concerned  
 56[deleted extraneous talk] and she showed me that this is what they do. They have this  
 57piece of paper and they do blocks and they'll say a letter and the child writes that letter.  
 58It's not that he'll write the whole alphabet out. It's the letter "A" and they'll write the  
 59letter "A". And he does that. [deleted extraneous talk].

60And uhm you know I told her well I'm not getting any of the stuff back (said  
 61questioningly) you know corrected but when I had my meeting with her it was like she  
 62was kind of like uhm do you have uhm any complaints? [deleted extraneous talk] I had  
 63said well you know [deleted extraneous talk] the work is a lot so I need to feel secure  
 64because I have no syllabus.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Mrs. Tyler has set high literacy standards for her pupils. She combines two methodologies in her classroom -- process writing (Goodman, 1990) and sound recognition associated with letters (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982). Mrs. Tyler is using techniques that ask the child to look at the experience of writing in two ways. For Jackie, process writing is easier to comprehend than looking at a letter and making a shape that conforms to the shape of the letter. Bea is trying to weigh how she can help her son strengthen areas where he is weak and tries to broach this subject with Mrs. Tyler but it appears Mrs. Tyler is focused on the learning goals she must bring Jackie up to and does not comprehend the meaning behind Bea's words that a syllabus would make her feel more secure. The Montessori approach views the parent as the child's first teacher and encourages the parent to visit the classroom and work with the child, however, this in itself is another teaching method and might conflict with Mrs. Tyler's orientation (North American Montessori Teachers' Association website, 2008).

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea describes the conference with Mrs. Tyler and Jackie. She describes the drawings Jackie has created to show many activities with his family and his friends. Mrs. Tyler explains that in addition to the weekly worksheet packet that Jackie works on at home, he does writing through his drawings and he has a math notebook. Bea appears amazed at the different types of work that Jackie does and feels a little emboldened by this display of Jackie's work. This stimulates her to ask Mrs. Tyler about the legibility of Jackie's handwriting. Mrs. Tyler does not recognize Bea's question and goes on to describe the writing and phonic work children do in the classroom which Mrs. Tyler says Jackie is able to do. Bea appears confused that she didn't know about the class work and the work she does help Jackie with is not returned. Bea says she indirectly approached Mrs. Tyler on this question and Mrs. Tyler, concentrating on what Jackie does in the classroom, asks Bea if she has any complaints. This response asserts Mrs. Tyler's authority over the work Jackie does and the lack of any real need to communicate with the parent if the child is producing the work. Bea tries to regain her footing to make her point of view relevant by saying the amount of work is significant

and she needs to feel secure by looking at a syllabus.

*Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 65-83)*

**The reading volunteer describes her experience as a parent in a Montessori like classroom. Bea sees a sharp contrast with her experiences at the Mercer School.**

**Maria:** 65It was very developmental almost Montessori thing and I loved it because I had a lot of  
66faith in her. She also invited the parents into the classroom. You had the most parent  
67participation because she would like [deleted extraneous words] to read. The first  
68thing we went in the kids were all reading. She encouraged the parents and sometimes  
69the parents didn't have it in their part of their cultural or whatever part of their familiar  
70thing so she would in that way was modeling so let's say you were modeling for me if  
71I didn't know how to read with my child. [deleted extraneous talk] So everybody read  
72and it was like it wasn't really reading we were just I mean an adult would read to a  
73child they didn't really know how to read [deleted extraneous talk] She would read  
74every day like Polar Bear Polar Bear and there was like predictable

**All:** 75Yes (everyone is listening intently to Maria)

**Maria:** 76Part of it was that they just learn just as you say to open the book. This is the  
77beginning that we read from left to right and all of those skills that go into reading  
78that we just take for granted.

**Bea:** 79I just love everything like I wanted to know I wanted to know like like a day in the  
80class what it involved you know children will take out a book. That is all I wanted  
81to know. Because when I dropped him off here in September [deleted extraneous talk]  
82because when I dropped him off. All I know is that teachers come out. They take him.  
83They close that door. You can't come in

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In her developmental studies on learning, Montessori (1917) did not do experiments with parents in the classroom to demonstrate what the effects would be. However, developers carrying Montessori's work forward have shown the positive benefit and outcomes in cognition when parents participate in an early childhood program. Under the direction of the head teacher who reports to the principal, parents in the Chicago Longitudinal Study are involved as volunteers in classroom activities. Classroom activities promote basic language and reading skills as well as social and

Discussion about the Talk

Maria affirms Bea's footing with Mrs. Tyler in the previous episode. Bea's response and reaction stirred a memory in Maria about a teacher in whom Maria had a lot of faith and she relates the origin of this faith to the teacher's Montessori developmental approach. The focus of Maria's utterance is directed toward parent participation in the classroom, especially parents reading to children. The teacher, like Annie and James, would read a familiar book every day making life in the classroom predictable. This description of classroom behavior evokes a strong response from Bea when she says, "I



psychological development (Chicago Longitudinal Study website, 2008).

wanted to know like a day in the class...” She contrasts this with her response and reaction to coming to school with Jackie. “They take him. They close that door. You can’t come in.”

*Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 84-95)*

**Bea repeats her request for a guide to follow what her son is doing. Maria affirms her request saying that the Montessori-like teacher reinforced with parents that they are their child’s first teacher**

**Bea:** 84[If] it was given like a little weekly, monthly letter we are going to do these things that way I  
85can look forward to them in the homework.

**Natalie:** 86It’s very ambiguous for a parent

**Bea:** 87I want to tell you because he was doing the phonic sheets at home then the little book then when  
88I came in I saw the writer’s notebook? Everything is all great but it would help me to organize  
89more because the work he is doing in Kindergarten is different than the work my daughter ever  
90got in Kindergarten.

**Maria:** 91But one of the other things is that like when I was with that teacher she reinforced the parent is  
92the first educator

**All:** 93Yeah (with meaning that this is so)

**Maria:** 94And I used to say that I am just a parent and I had to be corrected because she would always say  
95teacher

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Ann Epstein (2003) director of the Early Childhood Division at the High/Scope Educational Research Council says that there is empirical and practical evidence that we can promote the development of thinking and reasoning in young children in the early years by providing two curriculum components – planning and reflection. She says both are thoughtful activities that encourage children to consider what they are doing and what they are learning. Epstein (2003) states that when we engage children in reflection, we help them become aware of what they learned in the process, what was interesting, how they feel about it, and what they can do to build on or extend the experiences. Epstein (2003)

Discussion of the Talk

In line 84 Bea, taking the stance of a parent, wants to partner with Mrs. Tyler by planning with her for the homework in the upcoming month. She suggests a weekly or monthly newsletter. In lines 89-90, Bea expands on her thought about a weekly newsletter. It is not just to help her to plan what is coming up that she will be working on with Jackie, it is also to orient Bea cognitively because what Jackie is doing in Kindergarten [accelerated early childhood literacy program] is much different work than anything her daughter did in Kindergarten. Maria affirms Bea wanting to be involved. She responds as an informant about her experience and says that the teacher reinforced that the

states that evidence establishing the importance of planning and reflection comes from studies conducted by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. Although Bea does not articulate her goals quite this way, she is leaning toward helping her son think about what he is doing so she can help him achieve the goals the school has set for him.

parent is the child's first educator. Maria captures the tone of Mrs. Tyler's talk "just a parent" and affirms again that the teacher would correct her when she said "just a parent" and say "teacher."

*Focus Group 2 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 96-112)*

**Nadia affirms Bea's request by saying she wants to know explicitly what her child is learning in school**

- Nadia:** 96I would like to know what my kid is doing in school for one reason. He's at home.  
 97I would like some of the things that I cover corresponds to what he learns in school.  
 98Now I know he drew little pictures but he has his own scissors he has his own art  
 99supplies at home. What does he do? Where are his letters? He's not bringing  
 100home some
- Annie:** 101I get all his work that he does throughout the week. His homework for Monday,  
 102Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday we check off well she call a contract that's  
 103what we did Monday the other days we'll go over it even though it's done we'll go  
 104over it.
- Nadia:** 105That's what I started doin' like what I do is I notice he is working on his upper case  
 106and lower case and so now he's focusing on upper case "A" like this and I tell him  
 107apple is an "a" word, ape is an "a" word, airplane is an "a" word you know I try  
 108and some "a" words you have to use capital letters because it's an important word or  
 109it's a name like Arthur certain things so that way he understands what big "A" means.  
 110Why is this "a" and why is this "A"? The upper case or capital A because you have  
 111to tell him what that big A is. That is so much for him but the thing is he wants to  
 112know why.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The National Research Council (2000) stresses that responsible and responsive adults are critical to the supportive learning environment of the child. Research from a variety of theoretical perspectives suggests that parents and teachers promote development when they create learning experiences that build on and extend the child's competence. To do this, adults must be sensitive to individual and developmental characteristics of the child. Nadia and Annie are trying to do

Discussion of the Talk

Nadia affirms Bea's request to have a guide from the teacher regarding what her child is doing in school. In line 97, Nadia takes the stance of a teacher "I would like some of the things that I cover..." Nadia also informs the group that she keeps her son well supplied with school materials that help him carry out his work. Nadia's register moves into one of frustration in lines 99-100 when she states Miles is not bringing home exercises she could work on with him. Annie's experience

what the Research Council says they should. Annie has the most success and experiences less angst about this activity because she has clear communication with the teacher. Nadia does not tell us whether she has talked with her son's teacher. However, Bea has talked with the teacher and is coming to the conclusion that her son is in the process of learning many skills but she is unavailable to maximize the support she could give him because she does not have a monthly or weekly guide of the work he is expected to do.

sharply contrasts with Nadia's. Annie does communicate with Miss Baker and states in line 102 she has a "contract" with Miss Baker. This makes it much easier for Annie to work with James than Nadia with Miles.

**Table 4**  
**Section 1 – (Focus Group 3)**  
**Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
3	1	1-11	The K1 coach talks to parents about extending the conversations of children
3	2	12-31	Nadia explains her vision of the focus group – a place where parents can reflect on transitions and better understand the link between home and school
3	3	32-40	Annie explains her philosophy of learning and talks about <i>The Little Engine that Could</i>
3	4	41-59	Bea and Nadia affirm the sincerity of the principal and her interest in their children
3	5	60-67	The K1 coach expresses her sense of welcoming to the parents and gives them tips about how to help their children with physical tasks such as writing
3	6	68-84	The K1 coach talks about kinetic learners and creating ways of teaching

*Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-11)*

**The K1 coach talks to parents about extending the conversations of children**

**Marta:** 1You know I may arrive in a classroom and playing pretend in the dramatic play area or  
2like they're sitting in the writing center and crayons start to break. I said, "That reminds  
3me of a story." The kids go "Oh, yeah" It's just like in Matthew and Tilly when Tilly  
4broke a crayon. So you understand what we're trying to do. What we're trying to do is  
5to really expand little kids' minds about how everything they're doing is inter-connected  
6and having conversations about it. That's why centers time, the choice time in K1 and  
7definitely in K2 having the morning is crucial. As a teacher you rotate around and you  
8find out what's going on over here and you have a conversation. You know what kids  
9are doing. You extend their vocabulary. You know that there are certain words from  
10the story that are really important and you bring them back into their conversations  
11over and over again. That to me is the richest part.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Pontecorvo & Zuccheromaglio (1990) look at classroom settings in terms of processes that lead to outcomes. They view the classroom as a social setting in which it is possible to understand how the processes of individual cognitive growth are affected by supportive exchanges. This is what the coach demonstrates as she interacts with the children in the K1 class. She makes

Discussion of the Talk

The K1 coach met with the focus group during its third meeting. She gave examples of how she works with children to construct knowledge with them about literacy. In lines 2-4 she relates how she compares what happened in a story that had been read to them to an event that actually happened to these children during their writing center time. The coach takes the stance

time in the writing center for an opportunity for a social encounter with the children to discuss how the events people write about actually happen in our own lives. Pontecorvo & Zuccheromaglio (1990) state there is one critical factor that this type of teaching requires if a peer group is to be used as a source and support for learning. The teacher must be able to model a type of interaction in which children can learn to speak with each other and thus help each other effectively.

of informant about what happens in the classroom and her register is that of a friendly professional woman trained in early childhood education. Her talk with the parents is very unambiguous and her words in line 4, “So you understand what we do,” seem to imply that the coach is demonstrating to the parents that classroom structure is built to produce certain results. Her talk focuses concretely on that point in lines 9-11 when she singles out the purpose of stories. “You know there are certain words that are really important and you bring them back into their conversations over and over again.”

*Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode2 (lines 12-31)*

**Nadia explains her vision of the focus group – a place where parents can reflect on transitions and better understand the link between home and school**

**Nadia:** 12It’s not just about what grade your child is or what they are in K1 or K2. This group is  
13more like when you come home you get home with your kids you start talkin’ about  
14stuff and your kids don’t understand and you as the parent you know you try to make a  
15link. This forum here is actually is going to help you with the link like what concerns  
16you have you can bring it up here and try to answer or try to share the ideas or the  
17experience. It’s really not whether your child is in K1 or K2 because actually

**Anony:** 18Uhhum

**Nadia:** 19Because actually it’s only K1 parent that’s myself. This is a K2, this is a K2 and this  
20is a K2 (parent). Because their kids were in K1 and now K2 is new because how many  
21months weeks we been in school?

**Maria:** 22We’re finishing the second month so

**Nadia:** 23Right so you find you have more experience with it because you already did K1 so you  
24already have more experience with K1 because you already did it so it’s more like  
25you’re reflectin’ into what’s going on in K2. You understand (Ends with a lift on stand  
26and said softly) so but if you need to ask a question if you bring something up we be  
27able to uh

**Annie:** 28Discuss it or

**Nadia:** 29Yeah, get the conversation aroooooound that, you understand? We ask questions  
30concerning K1 because I’m new with K1. I tend to ask a lot more and since these  
31parents already did K1 they have more information to give to me who never done it.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In her talk, Nadia focuses on giving the child the most favorable supports for learning. In many ways Nadia is referring to a constructivist approach to pedagogy. Constructivists suggest that development results from interaction between children and their environments. Education is child-centered but the adult takes responsibility for placing the child in environmental circumstances that will provoke active construction of new understanding (National Research Council, 2000, p. 24). In her talk, Nadia uses the word reflection, which to her means having an opportunity to think about living through a grade experience with your child. Reflection is a strong component in Epstein's (2003) empirical work. In her observations of children, she states that reflection develops thinking skills in children.

### Discussion of the Talk

Nadia takes the stance of informer as she tells a new parent about the purposes of the focus group. Nadia points out that the group's purpose is to provide a link for the parent with the school when the child doesn't quite understand the school work. In lines 23-25 Nadia puts the emphasis on reflection. Nadia is the only parent in the group with a K1 child but in her talk she informs the parent that she benefits by listening to parents who have gone through the experience of K1 with their children. Her talk states in lines 24-25, "so you already have more experience with K1 because you already did it so it's more like you're reflectin' into what's going on in K2." Nadia foreshadows that she is looking for continuity in the transition from K1 to K2.

### *Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 32-40)*

#### **Annie explains her philosophy of learning and talks about *The Little Engine that Could***

**Annie:** 32because I say to myself it doesn't matter where you come from or whatever

**Nadia:** 33No, it doesn't

**Annie:** 34If you want to learn you'll learn but with me I think and sometimes like my grandson  
35when he asleep okay I tell him education is very important you know I say you can do  
36It just keep trying "I can't." No we don't don't say you can't you know I bought him  
37*The Engine that Could* and I read that to him all the time and I said then all the big  
38engines they said they can't but the little engine said "I think I can I think I can" and  
39when you think you can you ask for help (help said emphatically).

**All:** 40That's right (said softly)

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In her literacy work with her grandson, Annie is using a technique the K1 coach discussed with the focus group. She is

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Annie shares her philosophy of learning with the group. She describes her method for instilling

pulling words out of a story that relate to the situation of her grandson. She reads the story often to her grandson. Like Nadia, she takes a constructivist approach to learning and from the resources that she is able to offer her grandson she tries to instill within him a will to be confident that he is able to do the work and that he will ask for help when he needs it.

the will to learn into her grandson. Annie gives an example of talk with her grandson James when he says “I can’t.” Annie replies, “No, we don’t – don’t say you can’t...” To reinforce her point of view with her grandson, Annie informs the group that she bought him the book *The Little Engine That Could*. In line 37 she tells the group that “I read that to him all the time.” In line 38 she quotes a line from the book “...the little engine said ‘I think I can I think I can’ and when you think you can you ask for help. Annie has the full attention of the group and in unison in line 40 they say quietly, “That’s right.”

*Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 41-59)*

**Bea and Nadia affirm the sincerity of the principal and her interest in their children**

**Bea:** 41I have to make this place one of the most important things for my son. Because  
42that’s all I have right now. And this is what I’m going to do and that’s it. I just keep  
43telling myself that every time every time and there are times I’m not feelin’ it. [deleted  
44extraneous talk] I see that he gets bored with a lot of things but I feel I can come  
45to the school and I can ask somebody. And I have a principal that won’t turn away that  
46is committed to listening to me she doesn’t get hurt. She doesn’t get offended. She’ll  
47probably just breathe in okay okay okay but she’ll get back to me. [deleted extraneous  
48talk] I can say she is there in the morning and she moves around like clockwork and  
49she’ll get back to me and she does (does said emphatically).

**Nadia:** 50She’s a really remarkable person because I had an errand to run so I came and I  
51decided I will pick my son up at 1:30 because I will never make it back at 2:30 to get  
52him so I came and she’s like what are you doin’ here for my son. She said what do  
53you think it is here a day care center or something? You can pick your son up any  
54time? I said I have an errand to run. What are you going to do babysit him for me?  
55I’m going to be back here at 3:00. She said like yup go and run your errand and at first  
56when she said it I thought she was just kiddin’ with me (incredulous on kiddin’) or it  
57was a lit hint of sarcasm but she was very serious and I went and run my errand and  
58when I came back there my son was with her. And I was like she’s really a people  
59person.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The National Research Council (2000) p. 32 emphasizes care as part of the curriculum for very young children. The report states that adequate care involves

Discussion of the Talk

Bea realizes that she has to make the physical place of the school an important recognizable object for her son. In line 43 she says “there are times when I’m

cognitive and perceptual stimulation that promotes growth. These activities must occur in a safe and emotionally rich environment. The National Research Council (2000) examines the research that supports the importance of interactions between children and their caregivers (parents, teachers) to determine how these actions influence children's learning trajectories. The fact that Bea and Nadia through their talk demonstrate their high regard for the principal when she listens to them about the care of their children seems to indicate that Bea and Nadia would like to work with her for the benefit of their children.

not feelin' it." In her talk she acknowledges in line 44 that she sees "that [her son] gets bored with a lot of things..." She finishes her talk in line 46 by saying she has a principal who "is committed to listening to me..." Nadia affirms Bea's characterization of the principal as someone who is empathic, as someone who comprehends why she gives the amount of care and concern she does to her son. These observations foreshadow the loyalty Bea and Nadia have for the school based on their regard for the principal.

*Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 60-67)*

**The K1 coach expresses her sense of welcoming to the parents and gives them tips about how to help their children with physical tasks such as writing**

**Marta:** 60You know I want this school to be a place where parents are coming, parents feel like  
61they're welcomed; parents feel like they're talking with the kids and doing things. The  
62big concern is Oh my God are they gonna write. [deleted extraneous talk] There are so  
63many things you can do at home to help them besides reading to them, talking to them.  
64When you're talking about writing which we have a huge focus on almost too much  
65for little kids. There is nothing we can do about it. So what do we do to help them  
66about that? Hands need to get stronger so they can hold writing utensils. Get them  
67clay, get them play dough.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this episode, the K1 coach works through important principles of education regarding care for very young children that the National Research Council (2000) has identified.

Discussion of the Talk

The K1 coach speaks directly to the parents in an expansive way welcoming them into the domain of the school. She talks specifically about one skill the school district emphasizes at a very early age – writing. She acknowledges the district has an almost overwhelming focus on writing for very young children but as this is their policy there is nothing that can be done and parents and children have to adapt to it. Looking for positive outcomes, she gives parents ways they can strengthen muscles in the



hands of their children. She talks in a very direct way to parents and her register becomes that of a colleague as she discusses ways to construct a positive learning environment for the child.

*Focus Group 3 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 68-84)*

**The K1 coach talks about kinetic learners and creative ways of teaching**

**Nadia:** 68Does she give him an opportunity to explain his situation?

**Ali:** 69No. She's so structured in what she has to do then it's like okay well he's too busy  
70under the table or he takes his shoes off or he's on top of the table. You know it's like  
71why does he take his belt off I don't know why don't you ask him about it

**Marta:** 72Another one of those kinetic learners

**Ali:** 73Yeah

**Bea:** 74Or why don't after so many years teaching this why don't they have that kind of  
75school?

**Marta:** 76Because we're stifled in the school structure and so what happens instead of going  
77Walter and Jackie are kids who are learning in a certain way so what am I going to do  
78to make writing workshop exciting for them because they're not going to be able to sit  
79at that table for an hour. [deleted extraneous talk] How do we do it in a way that  
80they're going to be able to focus and if we're saying it's writing there shouldn't just be  
81writing going on there should be other things that are going on that help kids build  
82their strength in their hands, build their strength in their back, build their ability to sit  
83for a long period of time so they're able to then when it's time to pick up the marker or  
84the pencil and write to do it as well. .

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Gardner (1983) states there are many ways to create knowledge. There are many intelligences children can possess. One of these is bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. A kinesthetic learner asks "How can I involve the whole body when I learn?" Tactile activities are examples of teaching activities using clay and manipulative materials (Armstrong, 2000). Relaxation exercises are also part of kinesthetic learning. The research showing that children learn in

Discussion of the Talk

Ali's concern for her son Walter who cannot sit for long periods of time creates a response from the coach about kinesthetic learners. The point the coach makes in lines 77-79 is "what am I going to do to make writing workshop exciting for them because they're not going to be able to sit at that table for an hour?" The coach focuses on kinesthetic/physical aspects of learning and informs the parents that in addition to the act of writing, caregivers should focus on ways

different ways becomes a challenge for teachers to be observant and supportive. Within the talk of the focus group, the coach indicates children have different needs. She infers that a structure has to be constructed around different learning styles if children with different intelligences are to benefit.

to build the physical strength of children so they can perform the writing task.

### **Synthesis of the Talk in Focus Groups 1-3**

It is not until the last conversational excerpt in this section (FG3 TRE6) that we see an expert in early childhood learning listen and respond to the parents' questions about early childhood education. Uppermost in their minds is the physical nature of their children and how this relates to personal expression in the classroom. Knowing their concerns about the physical demands being placed on their children to sit and write for long periods of time and how this dampens their sense of personal expression, she replies that the response of a well run early childhood classroom should be to understand how to make the writing activity workshop exciting for these children, knowing they cannot sit at the table for an hour as the musculature in their backs and hands are not fully formed.

Montessori (1917) realized the importance of the child using the body to engage with the physical environment and made this a focal point of her pedagogy. Physical exercises were planned that helped children prepare to hold a pencil and write with a flowing motion. Montessori (1917) focused on other aspects of the physical experience including the importance of children having tactile connections with objects in their environment. In her work with 3-6 year old children, development of sensory impressions from touch prepared children for symbolic learning. Children would be asked to draw the outline of the object to see if they could remember it and draw it from their imagination.

In a study of intelligences, Gardner (1983) would find that children possess many intelligences; one of them is bodily kinesthetic intelligence – movement of the body to interact with and explore the environment. Tactile activities and relaxation exercises also came to be known as part of kinesthetic learning (Armstrong, 2000). It is these considerations about the physical nature of learning in young children that the mothers would like to discuss.

Yet, it is not just the physical nature of their children that these mothers are watching and scrutinizing, they are also trying to understand how the curriculum interfaces with the personal development of their child in language and thinking skills. We see this in the first topic related episode (FG1 TRE 1). Bea asks about the nature of conceptual talk in the classroom so she can replicate it with her son when they are together. She asks, “When they play outdoors – is the outdoor here different that there are more imbedded or implicit questions that I wouldn’t ask my son...,” (Lines 1-2). Bea is trying to create a mutual exchange of learning with her son through language. Epstein (2003) notes there is empirical and practical evidence that educators can promote the development of thinking and reasoning in young children in the early years by developing a sense of planning and reflection with them. Engaging with children helps them become aware of what they learned, what was interesting, how they feel about it and what they could do to build or extend their experiences.

This is the type of focus Bea is looking for in her desire for an orientation of the classroom experience. She wants a structure she can continue to model with her son in a way that supports what he is learning in the classroom. This is true of the other mothers as well who through their utterances convey that they have close relationships with their

children; they especially like to do homework with them. It is understandable why these parents would be upset about the pace of a classroom that does not have smooth transitions from task to task and the proper relaxation time for children between tasks. As one parent observes (FG1 TRE6) children rush through their work with the result that their output does not show attention to the details of what they are doing. The time given children that allows them to complete tasks is crucial to their growth and maturity. It is the time given to the child to develop an organized and complex activity around the object that makes the learning experience come alive. It is this activity that exercises the child's intelligence (Montessori, 1917).

Again, this is the type of understanding parents are seeking regarding the classroom experience. They are eager to have faith in the teacher who they hope is assisting their child to navigate through the school year. They would like to be part of this experience with their child. The comment by Maria (FG2 TRE 4) that she learned by observing the teacher in the classroom conveys the human connection these mothers are seeking with the teacher. They want to partner with her to support the child. There is evidence that parents play a valuable contributing role in the classroom experience when given the opportunity. Studies of the progress children make shown by results from the Chicago Longitudinal Study indicate that parents working as volunteers in the classroom who participate in activities promoting basic language and reading skills as well as social and psychological development contribute to the maturation of the child (Chicago Longitudinal Study website, 2008).

### **Introduction to the Talk in Focus Groups 4-7**

The conversation in Focus Groups 4-7 intensifies around the mothers' reactions to their children's experiences in the classroom. They have only a discernment of what

occurs that is based on peripheral knowledge. Not having a close relationship with the teacher, they stand on the edges of the experience. To fill in the information gaps, they rely on observations of their children's written work and conversations with their children about classroom activity to understand the comprehensive nature of the educational experience their children are receiving.

The focus group conversations come to represent an opportunity to share points of views about specific instances of recurring concerns. The talk ranges over a series of topics including classroom behavior and the wide swings of responses children have from those who do not comprehend assignments to those who finish their work efficiently and quickly and then become bored. It includes the differences in opinion between a parent and teacher critiquing a child's written assignment and the need to articulate common goals and values around the value of a child's efforts and work.

The talk also includes the sense of overwhelming responsibility parents feel toward their children and their educational experience. They believe the tension they feel toward the teacher caused by lack of access to her creates an atmosphere of weak mutual support for her child which produces an unstable emotional environment. Lastly, the talk includes a discussion of how a positive social-emotional tone could be established in the classroom and the institutional vision that could support it. These talk excerpts are discussed and analyzed in detail on the following pages. A synthesis of the conversational data follows after Focus Group 7.

**Table 5**  
**Section 2 – (Focus Group 4)**  
**Probing their interactions with their children and their children's responses**  
**to the early childhood literacy program**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Topic Related Episode</b>	<b>Lines</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1-26</b>	Annie talks about how she engages in conversation with her grandson James
<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>27-41</b>	Annie discusses James' written work and the fact that he turns in his homework every week
<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>42-53</b>	Annie talks about her apprehension about James having the skills to go into 1 <sup>st</sup> grade
<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>54-72</b>	Maria describes how she enters the classroom and how the mood Miss Baker has established affects her
<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>73-94</b>	Maria describes how Miss Baker models work to be done at work stations
<b>4</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>95-114</b>	Maria describes how Miss Baker works with the children on sight words and punctuation

*Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-26)*

**Annie talks about how she engages in conversation with her grandson James**

**Natalie:** 1Do you have conversations with him...

**Annie:** 2Well, sure (emphasis on sure and a little indignant Natalie said that) I talk to my baby  
3every day

**Natalie:** 4About the...

**Annie:** 5The first thing is how is your day in school or whatever he do. He'll tell me you know  
6from the time he had lunch until what Miss Baker said or what Judah said or what  
7Charles or Juan

**Maria:** 8He's very critical

**Annie:** 9I have no problems because I have to communicate with him you know what he's  
10thinkin' (emphasis on thinkin')

**Natalie:** 11Have you always been like that?

**Annie:** 12Oh yeah, oh yeah and you know since his other grandmother well his nanny because  
13it was us two you know she passed in September you know (Annie's voice is  
14becoming emotional) maybe he he he hit a little road block because he's never talked  
15about he always say I want to go to nanny's house and catch hisself she's an angel  
16now. But that you know well I don't well maybe like I said well maybe it's just me  
17the reason he's not comprehendin' but that's one thing he's never talked about and I  
18don't want him to talk about it for him to do it

**Natalie:** 19Okay

**Annie:** 20on his own little terms. You know but it's

**Natalie:** 21You don't think that's affecting his schoolwork or anything?

**Annie:** 22I'm uh uh no well I'm hopin' that it's not but he just never talked about it. You know  
23and like I said he uh to me like I said to Miss Baker the other day how is his work?  
24She said it's good you know for the grade that he's in. He understands everything you  
25know just about everything that the lesson that they're learning so you know he turns  
26in his homework every week

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This episode demonstrates how events in the personal life co-mingle with external obligations to an institution. Annie appears to keep everything in balance for James thus demonstrating good pedagogy according to the criteria of the National Research Council (2000). She provides emotional guidance and support for James and she motivates, instructs and supports his learning. This bodes well that James should continue to do well in K2.

### Discussion of the Talk

Annie through her talk shows that she combines care with education. When she interacts with her grandson, Annie monitors what James does in school every day by asking him what he does in school and he gives her a detailed answer. James experienced the loss of his other grandmother in September and Annie does not know if this has affected his comprehension regarding school work but she respects his inner thoughts and does not push him to talk about the incident. Annie is also in close communication with James' teacher, Miss Baker, and Miss Baker reassures Annie that James understands just about everything that is being taught in the lessons and Annie emphasizes to Natalie that James turns in his homework every week.

### *Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 27-41)*

#### **Annie discusses James' written work**

**Natalie: 27**His written work is good?

**Annie: 28**It's jjjjjust that it (Annie sounds like she is becoming confused)

**Maria: 29**I don't I don't I was just doing an activity with him

**Natalie: 30**Oh, I see

**Annie: 31**Yeah, he he need a little help but you know like spacin' his words so I tell him James

32instead of puttin' like it's just JamesGrantJr it's just like one big word I said well put

33your finger there after you write James put your finger there and then write Grant.

**Natalie: 34**Uhhum. It's good

**Annie: 35**You know like I said as he get older maybe everything will work itself out which I'm

36hopin' that that it would.

**All: 37**It will, it will.

**Natalie: 38**He's a hard worker it sounds like.

**Maria: 39**I mean as long as the most important ingredient you can give a kid is acceptance and  
40love.

**Annie: 41**Oh, that that that's the ke the key to me i i i is love.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

James does not put a space between his names because there is no visual or audio cue to signify a space between proper names (Garton & Pratt, 1998)

### Discussion of the Talk

The district stresses the importance of a child being able to write with comprehension beginning at age 5 in K2. Annie monitors how James writes his

James comprehends his name as one object. Distinguishing a space between proper names is a cognitive function that James will learn (Garton & Pratt, 1998). In the meantime, Annie hopes as James gets older everything will work out. She seems unable; however, to distinguish whether James' reaction to life events are distracting him from concentrating on assimilating this knowledge or whether assimilation will take place at a later time as part of James' natural developmental process.

name. He does not leave a space between his names. Annie tries to give James cues when she works with him by inserting her finger after one name so James cannot write in that space and thus must leave a space between names. In response to what she just said Annie tells the group in lines 35-36 "you know like I said as he get older maybe everything will work itself out which I'm hopin' that it would." Maria responds to Annie's apprehension by saying in lines 39-40 "the most important ingredient you can give a kid is acceptance and love." This changes Annie's footing to the group and she becomes more confident in her response in line 41 "Oh, that that that's the ke the key to me i i i is love."

*Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode3 (lines 42-53)*

**Annie talks about her apprehension about James having the skills to go into 1<sup>st</sup> grade**

**Annie:** 42The other day my mother said the same thing to me because I'm sittin' there and I'm  
43analyzing things that we talk about or what could I have done or what even when he's  
44colorin' up and I said James you're not erasin anything but after he color he just just  
45got to take the paper and wipe it off. I said that's not goin' to correct the problem that  
46you outside the line. You know. He said Okay I'm sorry and still be doin' that I don't  
47know so that maybe when he get in 1<sup>st</sup> grade or whatever but he have to learn  
48everything now he's in K2 you know when he's going into 1<sup>st</sup> grade like the words that  
49she's givin' him we go over that and uhm sometime I think he sees things backwards.  
50You know as far as uhm for example what is that word on the paper? It was "and" and  
51he kept saying ant. I said James there's no t on it. He said no the one right I said  
52James what are you focusin' on? The the words are right there. They're right in the  
53same up right up top. You know, so...(voice trails off).

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The District has set up K1 with a developmental approach but K2 does not conform to this method. We have learned from previous talk segments that when Annie approaches Miss Baker about James' skill level, Miss Baker says

Discussion of the Talk

When Annie is working with James, her mind is on different aspects of his education. Annie informs the group that she talks with her mother and in her talk she analyzes what she says to James and what she could have done when she is



he is doing what he should be doing for his grade level but she gives no more details. This lack of detail fails to give Annie concrete evidence of the day to day progress James is making and on her effectiveness as a teacher as she works with James every day. The National Research Council Report (2000) says that excellent early childhood programs (p. 8) expose children to a variety of thought processes and discourse patterns which lead to such mental strategies as categorizing, reasoning and meta-cognition. Miss Baker does not have the time to work with children in this way. If she did have the time, she may have been able to answer some of Annie's detailed questions. If someone had spoken with James about his coloring skills, he may have expressed that his muscles get tired and this could have been conveyed to Annie.

working with James. In this talk segment, Annie identifies three interactions with James. When James colors outside the lines, she insists that he color inside the lines. When James self-corrects and erases, Annie tells him that won't correct the problem as she wants him to have control over his movements. Annie infers in line 47 that things will get better when he gets to first grade. In mid-sentence she changes her stance regarding her opinion and says in lines 47-48 "but he have to learn everything now he's in K2 you know when he's going into first grade like the words she's given him." Annie has identified that her interactions with James have an impact on what he does but she cannot fine tune how she relates to him and she appears to spend some time thinking about this.

*Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 54-72)*

**Maria describes how she enters the classroom and how the mood Miss Baker has established affects her**

**Maria:** 54I'm always coming in at 9:30 to 11:30 Mondays and on Wednesdays I come in 9:00 to 5510:45 [deleted extraneous talk]. What I was really impressed with her the first time 56was the fact that she kept her voice quiet. She didn't scream; she didn't screech and in 57fact sometimes when she's talking to them and they're not listening she will lower her 58voice and uhm I appreciate that. When I go in on Mondays they've been in art so they 59come in then she comes in and they quickly go right away to sit on the rugs – rug area 60and everybody's assigned you know first row, second row, third row and she lets them 61fidget a little bit but if some she'll get upset if they're fidgeting and it's distracting the 62person next to them like they were having a conversation or sucking on their clothes, 63flipping their shoes off but moving around so much that the next person next to them 64will start looking. Sometimes the girls play with their hair or they'll have their 65conversation. And she'll try to overlook it as much as she can but then if they're 66getting really excited she'll do a couple of things. Once one of them she'll say "I'm 67going to stop right now." And the minute she does that they're all like you know they 68put their heads up. Or she'll say I'm going to count now and she starts counting. If 69she has to she will call one of the children and she'll say something like "I don't think 70you're making a good choice." Or if they're still like she'll give them warnings and 71then I think the third time "Okay, you're going to have to sit over there." "Put your 72head down."

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The National Research Council Report (2000) states that low adult-child ratios in the classroom are associated with more extensive teacher-child interaction and less restrictive and controlling teacher behavior. Smaller group size (segmenting the class into smaller work groups) has been associated with more child initiations and more opportunities for teachers to work on extending language, mediating children's social interactions and encouraging and supporting exploration and problem solving. Miss Baker has only one teaching strategy she can use to maintain classroom decorum – that is to be respectful of children by not talking to them out of anger and frustration but nonetheless she has to isolate children who are moving about too much. If there were assistants in the classroom, it is possible more productive use could be made of the time.

### Discussion of the Talk

Miss Baker teaches twenty 5-year old K2 students. She has no assistant although Maria comes in twice a week, each time for about two hours, to read with the children. Miss Baker teaches by talking to the children. Although children sit on the rug when she talks to them, she cannot tolerate too much movement as it becomes distracting for other children. Miss Baker has developed techniques for quieting children that impress Maria. Maria says, “she kept her voice low. She didn’t scream; she didn’t screech.” However, sometimes these techniques are not successful when children continue to move around and then Miss Baker has to isolate the child from the group and instruct the child to “put your head down.” From the K1 coach we know that 5 year old children cannot sit in place for long lengths of time so it is to be expected that they will start to move from their seated positions on the rug. Since Miss Baker has no other activity planned for the children at this moment, she has to ask them to leave the group so she can continue to teach.

### *Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 73-94)*

#### **Maria describes how Miss Baker models work to be done at work stations**

**Maria:** 73so sometimes like they’re not doing their work in their stations and every time she  
74has a lesson she actually spends a lot of time not only teaching the lesson but  
75afterwards when they’re going to do an activity like this she actually models it for  
76them and uh so then they go to their station and she has a model for them which I  
77think is a neat idea and the 8 ½ by 11 those plastic pictures frames

**Anony:** 78Uhhum

**Maria:** 79that stand up. She has everything there for them, you know and so they already know  
80what they’re supposed to do and uh

**Natalie:** 81Are they supposed to tell a story about the pictures?

**Maria:** 82Well, she has different activities. They have different centers. Some of them are  
83listening so they are actually listening to a tape and they go through the story. I  
84haven’t gone to that so I don’t know what goes on there. And then they have this the  
85writing center where they do the sentences. They get the sentences but I don’t know  
[deleted extraneous talk]

- Bea:** 86This is poetry center because it's actually a little (Bea shows Jackie's work in poetry.  
87He pastes sentences of a poem in sequence that Mrs. Tyler has numbered 1, 2, 3, and  
884)
- Annie:** 89They also have a little book that she had. They come home every night and they recite  
90the little poem and so their homework and she'll send the paper home like uhm  
91"Hickory dickory dock the mouse went up the clock." The words mouse is
- Natalie:** 92I got it
- Maria:** 93They have this one and they have another poetry where they say the song and they can  
94draw the picture because like I say I haven't gone to all the centers

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

There are many activity segments to Miss Baker's class and from the talk we know she organizes the physical structures of her classroom very clearly. The children have a straight forward invitation to engage with the activity. However, Miss Baker does not have an assistant so it remains unclear how successful the results of the activities are. The National Research Council Report (2000) (p. 185) notes that children develop ideas and concepts at very young ages that help them make sense of their worlds. Learning is the building of new understandings by the child on the foundation of existing understandings. Thus, learning will be most effective when the child's preconceptions are engaged. It is apparent from the data in Maria's talk that only Miss Baker is the responsible adult in the classroom who has the opportunity to engage with children at the stations. Thus, it would seem that much of the learning that would come from the learning stations remains dormant because there is no other adult to engage with the children.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Maria describes the many aspects of a lesson. When the children are doing a hands-on activity Miss Baker demonstrates with a model and she has a model at each of the work stations. Maria informs the group in lines 79-80 "she has everything there for them...and so they already know what they're supposed to do." Maria gives information about additional activities. Students have a listening center where they listen to a story on a tape and they have a writing center where they concentrate on sentence formation. Bea and Annie respond by mentioning other activities – the poetry center where children learn to hear and say a rhyme and how to memorize a poem.

### *Focus Group 4 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 1-24)*

#### **Maria describes how Miss Baker works with the children on sight words and punctuation**

- Maria:** 95she gives them everybody gets an opportunity to go up there. And uh  
**Natalie:** 96to the front of the class

- Maria:** 97Right. Kids get a chance to go up. And sometimes she'll go they'll raise their hand  
 98And she'll call on them and they don't really know what they're supposed to do so  
 99she'll say okay and then the kid comes up and starts yelling. She says you have to give  
 100them a minute. They have to think so then she'll try to help them because she knows  
 101that they just wanted to go up there and so then they go process too and they think  
 102that some of that is because she wants to teach them how to read you know left to  
 103right and then she goes over punctuation if there's a capital why and like recognition  
 104of some of the sight words and it's just amazing the amount of things that are going  
 105on during that time and then they break into centers and uh
- Natalie:** 106So is there a sentence on the board and the child has to point to it and say this is a  
 107comma, this is a capital letter.
- Maria:** 108No, they can just say uhm Manuela might go up there and she'd say what do you  
 109notice about the sentences? And if they just picked out A she'll say oh, that's A so  
 110she'll circle letters. She'll say do you see anywhere else in the word the letter A and  
 111so then they'll go and sometimes they'll miss it and she says I think you missed it.  
 112What do you think children, you know? Some of them will say yes. Some of them  
 113couldn't care less. And then she'll say why don't you try it again. Why don't you  
 114back up, back up and they'll see it

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In Topic Related Episode 6 we see another example of Miss Baker's organizational style and her ability to engage with her students. It seems her skills and dedication would have produced more robust results if there were an assistant(s) who asked children questions about what they are learning in Miss Baker's class. As it stands, children feel engaged by Miss Baker and want to participate but they have not assimilated what it means to go to the front of the room and make an observation about something Miss Baker has written on the board. The National Research Council Report (2000) states that meta-cognitive skill development allows children to learn to solve problems more effectively. However, the curriculum has to be supported in this development with an adult working with children to help them reflect, predict, question and hypothesize about what they think.

### Discussion of the Talk

Maria gives yet another example of how Miss Baker engages with her twenty K2 students. During writing center time Miss Baker "goes over punctuation if there's a capital and why and like recognition of some sight words..." (lines 103-104). Many of the children when they get to the front of the room have not put any meaning around what is expected of them and they do not respond to the letters on the board. Maria informs the group that Miss Baker gives the child enough time to orient themselves to the task. She then gives them verbal prompts to find particular letters in a word to strengthen their letter recognition. After this group exercise, the children break up into smaller work group centers.

**Table 6**  
**Section 2 – (Focus Group 5)**  
**Probing their interactions with their children and their children’s responses**  
**to the early childhood literacy program**

<b>Focus Group</b>	<b>Topic Related Episode</b>	<b>Lines</b>	<b>Description</b>
5	1	1-10	Bea talks about the rhythm of the child – the child opening up to get something
5	2	11-23	Bea acknowledges that teachers want to feel the reciprocal relationship with parents
5	3	24-39	Maria asks “how do parents and teachers work together around each individual child?”
5	4	40-60	Having core values is important so teachers and parents can discuss fundamental questions about children
5	5	61-83	Parents want to learn about social-emotional development
5	6	84-101	Parents realize they need to understand social emotional development so they can help the teacher

*Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-10)*

**Bea talks about the rhythm of the child – the child opening up to get something**

**Bea:** 1I want to encourage you and tell you let the process just evolve. Find out what is the  
2level of your child and that your child is comfortably learning. It’s an acquisition. It’s  
3an acquisition. The word acquisition means how someone is opening themselves to get  
4something and that is the rhythm of the child. And I had that concern with my son  
5Jackie. He was attending the school. He was portrayed like as uh a behavioral, learning  
6concern and I’ve had to really step in and talk to the teacher and I think a lot of it had to  
7do with my background. I used to teach. I had the language to approach the teacher in a  
8certain way, to talk and I think that when we’re talking about the emotional aspect of the  
9child when a teacher is frustrated and overwhelmed there’s not going to be that social-  
10emotional connection that my child needs

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this talk episode Bea connects Jackie’s level of learning to his natural rhythm to open himself up to absorb (to get) something (new information). Bea acknowledges in lines 5-6 that Jackie was beginning to be viewed as a behavioral, learning concern and she acknowledges when she concludes this segment that to learn a child needs a social-emotional connection to the teacher that will not be there if the teacher becomes frustrated and

Discussion of the Talk

Bea is speaking to a parent who came to the focus group as the result of an invitation from Annie. This neighbor of Annie’s has a ten year old daughter in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade who this year started doing badly in her school work. Bea gives the visitor some advice based on her experience. She tells the guest that learning is a process (line 1) and “let the process just evolve.” Bea elaborates and says it is an acquisition. She explains (line 3-4) “acquisition means how

overwhelmed by the child. The National Research Council Report (2000) reports that class size and staff-child ratio critically influence program quality and children's learning and development. Researchers found (p.145) that smaller group size was associated with more opportunities for teachers to work on extending language, mediating children's social interactions, and encouraging and supporting exploration and problem solving. Disentangling ratio and class size, the Report cites Muestler (1995) and Boyd-Zaharias & Pate-Bain (2000) that improving the ratio without reducing class size does not yield the same positive results. This difference may be due to a teacher not working as effectively with aides or aides not being effectively trained to make the social-emotional connection with the child to facilitate learning.

someone is opening themselves to get something and that is the rhythm of the child." Bea describes her situation as an example of finding the level of learning for her child, line 5-6 "He was portrayed like as uh a behavioral, learning concern..." And she draws a connection to the teacher (lines 9-10) "...when a teacher is frustrated and overwhelmed there's not going to be that social-emotional connection that my child needs."

*Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 11-23)*

**Bea acknowledges that teachers want to feel the reciprocal relationship with parents**

**Bea:** 11You took that journey with me in September when I had that with Jackie and I didn't  
12know if I had to have an IEP meeting you know that

**Natalie:** 13Right

**Bea:** 14And you've seen the evolvment; you've seen the growth. You've seen what I've  
15had to do. I feel I really had to come in and fight for my child this year.

**Natalie:** 16So Bea worked with the teacher

**Bea:** 17And working with the teacher was "how can I help you to help my child?" And the  
18interview that I had with that other teacher you know she said I can communicate  
19with the parents and tell them what homework to do and stuff like that but now the  
20reciprocated aspects, actions for the teacher, to be able to move around she needs  
21that involvement of the parents to come in and okay you know uhm I could help out  
22by making sure that I can pick up my homework and see if another parent in my area  
23has the homework. You know just like that kind of a thing.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Goldenberg (2004) p. 125 found a correlation between teacher's attempts to involve parents in their children's academic development and (1) children's home literacy experiences and (2) parents' satisfaction with the child's school experience. In one study, Goldenberg (2004) created a homework liaison program that included home-school contacts. The liaison would talk with parents about the specifics of the homework after gathering the information from the teacher. As in the Mercer School, many parents in the study did not speak English as a first language so the liaison was bilingual. The most important factor in a self-help network or family liaison system is communication between the teacher and the parent and the social-emotional link that then develops toward learning.

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea explains how she has learned to work with the teacher "how can I help you to help my child?" (line 17). From her talk with a teacher, Bea comprehends that a teacher can tell a parent what homework to do but there has to be a reciprocal component for the exchange to be effective. Although Bea does not enunciate it clearly it appears she is saying the teacher gains confidence in her work with children when parents become pro-active, come to school and say they "could help out by making sure that I can pick up my homework and see if another parent in my area has the homework." (lines 22-23). Bea seems to be vaguely outlining a parent homework network that understands the homework assignments and looks out for each other to make sure children have their homework assignments

### *Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 24-39)*

**Maria asks "how do parents and teachers work together around each individual child?"**

- Maria:** 24How do we work together around the child? We're all committed to the child.  
25Because if we didn't have the child none of us would be here. The teachers would  
26not be here. The parents would not be here
- Annie:** 27Yes
- Maria:** 28And I think we should always try to be (inaudible) not to be adversaries but to really  
29work
- Anonym:** 30Together
- Maria:** 31How do we work together? Because if you then get into a situation because we as  
32parents are professional too – we're professional parents.
- Natalie:** 33Exactly.
- Maria:** 34I mean the teachers are professionals so how do we work the best of both of those  
35two individuals for the best of the child. The child is constantly growing and we are  
36ourselves don't know because it's the first experience with our particular child,  
37particular personality. Even though you have other children each child has its own  
38uniqueness.
- Everyone:** 39Uhhum

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In her utterance, Maria has brought up many important topics that relate to the tensions in the school situation between home and school, between parent and teacher. There are now two dominant adults in the child's life that should work together so the child does not develop a split view of the world. In her utterance, Maria has described the dynamic attributes of the situation – the child is constantly developing and parents don't know [how everything will turn out] because this is the first experience with this particular child, with this particular personality. This talk segment frames the situation – how do parents and teachers together work to give the child a strong and supportive environment. The child is now forming an attachment to another adult and one of the outgrowths of a positive attachment is felt security, warmth, mutual regulation of responses. Internal working models develop through systematic patterns of exchange. The positive aspects of an attachment bond are that it takes time, there is a sense of safety, there is a sense of reciprocity and caring (Ayoub, 2004 Lecture).

### Discussion of the Talk

The talk in Focus Group 5 Topic Related Episodes 1 and 2 focused on a child's internal rhythm and level of understanding and the reciprocal relationship between parent and teacher to support the child. Episode 3 continues this talk with Maria noting that both parents and teachers are committed to the child but how do they work together to support the child? Maria uses the word adversaries to describe what the relationship should not be. She then utters the phrase "if you then get into a situation" (lines 31-32) and qualifies this utterance with "parents are professional too – we're professional parents." (line 32) Maria isolates the main focus of her utterance – the child is constantly growing and we ourselves don't know [everything] because it's the first experience with our particular child with that particular personality.

### *Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 40-60)*

#### **Having core values is important so teachers and parents can discuss fundamental questions about children**

- Maria:** 40I think what you're saying about the core values is so important. We do have a great  
41opportunity here like you were saying here with the principal, [the coordinator] and  
42then how do we get this to grow?
- Natalie:** 43Grow and include the teachers.
- Maria:** 44Especially like the teachers sometimes they're a little like parents. They're the most  
45isolated people (on people a sigh/laugh).
- Annie:** 46Well, some parents can be but I I I want to know what my child, my grandson, my  
47child is doing. How is he progressing in school? Every day I ask him when he  
48come in, "How was your day?" Just like last week. She had to speak three times.  
49He had finished his work but he wanted to distract the other kids. And I told him  
50that wasn't fair. And I said to her and she said she took 5 minutes and I said you  
51should have took it all. That will teach him. You know. You sit down and see the



- 52other kids playing what did you do? What did the teacher tell you (emphasis on  
 53you) to do? Because at home I'm more strict than the teacher.  
**Maria:** 54Because you know him better too.  
**Annie:** 55And and then he got mad because he said, "Didn't I tell you that I didn't have a good  
 56day in school?" I said, why, what did you do? I'll tell you when I get home. No,  
 57tell me now. So I went and asked Miss Baker and he was upset because she told me  
 58what she had to do to discipline him. He was upset about that and you know  
 59stomped all the way home but I said good if that was me you wouldn't have played  
 60at all.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This episode demonstrates the complexities that arise at the Mercer School as the young child develops self-awareness. There is a need for disciplined behavior in the classroom yet there is a lack of activity for children who do their work faster than other children and then become bored waiting for them to finish. The National Research Council (2000) states that learning takes place on many dimensions in the young child and that any curriculum model for early education should be concerned with supporting children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive growth (p. 184). A high quality early education program should allow teachers time to construct the classroom experience in terms of what children are capable of learning and learning effectively. There are many dimensions in the child the teacher needs to reach which leads back to Montessori's (1917) thesis of the economic use of the child's energy.

### Discussion of the Talk

Maria continues the talk about home and school working together. When Natalie says it is important to include the teachers, Maria responds that sometimes they are the most isolated people. Annie hears the words "isolated people" and responds to those words by uttering she wants to know what her grandson is doing, how he is progressing. This leads Annie into informing the group that Miss Baker had to discipline James because he finishes his work before the other children and then distracts them. The discipline was to take 5 minutes of play time from James. James has self-awareness and Annie describes how James expresses it saying, "Didn't I tell you that I didn't have a good day in school?" and preferring to tell her at home what had upset him.

### *Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 61-83)*

#### **Parents want to learn about social-emotional development**

- Natalie:** 61He does his work quickly and then he's waiting for the other children  
**Annie:** 62Well, she said he did his work; he knew the work but after he got done he wanted to  
 63go and talk to the other kids who wasn't finished  
**Natalie:** 64Right. He does his work quickly but he's [5] and he wants to talk – yeah.

- Annie:** 65 Sometimes he talks too much.  
**Natalie:** 66 So that's all part of the social emotional. You know, that's why we need to... My  
 67 opinion...  
**Annie:** 68 Give me your opinion. I want it.  
**Natalie:** 69 There is a social emotional curriculum that is taught and teachers learn to integrate  
 70 it, to mix it in with the academic  
**All:** 71 Mmmm  
**Natalie:** 72 So uhm  
**Annie:** 73 Because he can't sit too long. And even at home.  
**Natalie:** 74 So there are ways that you could have approached James in a way that wouldn't  
 75 have frustrated him. [deleted extraneous talk]  
**Annie:** 76 I try to explain to him once he got home.  
**Natalie:** 77 Yeah uhm so the teacher learns how to say this to the child so he can slowly  
 78 understand Oh, I should do this not that the teacher has to tell me I should do this.  
**Bea:** 79 Control their bodies. Is that what you're trying to say?  
**Natalie:** 80 Control their bodies. Control their minds. Shape their minds a little more. But this  
 81 is all education and so I want to get back to [Professor Locke] uhm I did talk to her  
 82 about uhm coming over and talk to us about what is the social and emotional  
 83 curriculum like. She's happy to do this and she said she would come over Friday.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

How social-emotional development is integrated into the curriculum has become an important topic for the group. Integration into the curriculum requires responsive teaching –teachers enabled to focus on individual children by having the time to do this. Teachers who are warm and responsive are more likely to promote strong social and emotional skills in children (National Institute for Early Education Research).

### Discussion of the Talk

Annie confirms Natalie's observation that James is an active child. Annie says, "he can't sit too long." (line 73). Natalie responds to Annie that there are ways she could have approached James about his behavior that wouldn't have frustrated him. In response to Annie saying "I try to explain to him once he got home," Natalie says a teacher learns how to speak with a child so he can slowly understand the meaning of his behavior in the classroom. Bea asks if this is about controlling their bodies and Natalie responds it is about controlling their bodies and shaping their minds.

### *Focus Group 5 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 84-101)*

**Parents realize they need to understand social emotional development so they can help the teacher**

- Bea:** 84 you know I experienced Kindergarten the social emotional aspects when my  
 85 daughter was in Kindergarten  
**Anonym:** 86 Uhhum  
**Bea:** 87 You know the theories and methodologies change with generation and generation so  
 88 the experience that I was holding with my daughter didn't with my son who's doing

89the writer's notebook so then how do what techniques do I have to work with that  
 90particular age level I don't know the teacher will. You know I don't know so luckily  
 91Mrs. Tyler has shown me I know that I still I still have some more questions. You  
 92know because I know she's there to teach the children and not teach me (laughs with  
 93a little relief for saying this) you know but I think that if we have this resource to  
 94come and show the parents you know for this moment right now you know with this  
 95academic educational trend right now this is what professionals are seeing and you  
 96can share with us and help us.

**Maria:** 97Is there anyway we can tape it so that if people can't come like say invite all the  
 98parents also

**Natalie:** 99You mean video tape it?

**Maria:** 100 Like invite all the like make it a parent council type meeting where they can come,  
 101then video tape it so we can then have more discussion and more

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Epstein (2003) stresses listening to children to encourage them to think about their intentions as they indicate choices and make plans throughout the day (p. 3). Talk with children about how they want to plan their day. Ask children open-ended questions to seek genuine information about their intentions and how they want to carry them out. Encourage children to elaborate on their plans – use specific questions – what they would need to do to do that particular task.

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea explains that she experienced the social emotional aspects of Kindergarten differently with her daughter because her school work was different. She was not constructing a writer's notebook when she was in Kindergarten. Bea does not know how to talk with her 5 year old son who is in the midst of gaining literacy skills and how to support his social-emotional growth. She informs the group that Mrs. Tyler knows how to interact with Jackie as a teacher but Bea has to find out by herself how to interact with Jackie as a parent and this is why she would like to hear how parents can work with 5 year old children in an early childhood literacy program.

**Table 7**  
**Section 2 – (Focus Group 6)**  
**Probing their interactions with their children and their children’s responses**  
**to the early childhood literacy program**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
6	1	1-22	Bea discusses a District Residency Program that brings pre-service teachers into the classroom with an experienced teacher
6	2	23-38	Nadia and Bea meet with teachers to talk about their children’s responses to classroom learning. Nadia says she wishes other parents who have children in higher grades were at that discussion as she does not have intimate knowledge about their children’s experiences
6	3	39-67	Bea and Nadia discuss the importance of having parents on the parent council who have children in classes at every grade level so they can advocate for the growth of children in that grade and help teachers reflect on their teaching repertoire
6	4	68-84	Nadia says that teachers and parents are so overwhelmed with responsibilities that they have not found a way to advocate together for the child
6	5	85-103	Nadia talks about behaviors in the classroom and says the teacher should give the child that avenue to explain why he feels that way
6	6	104-123	Bea tells the group that Jackie’s work on printing the alphabet was not considered appropriate by his teacher

*Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-22)*

**Bea discusses a District Residency Program that brings pre-service teachers into the classroom with an experienced teacher**

- Bea:** 1This is the new teacher development program to come and teach in [the District] and  
2this is the training for the new teachers to do grade wise from Kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup>  
3grade throughout the year. [deleted extraneous text] So I made that for you because I  
4talked about it at the last meeting and it’s a reference to what I had said
- Natalie:** 5Right. I took something off the Web too. This is another this gives the overview of it  
6and it’s a mentoring program, right?
- Bea:** 7It is.
- Natalie:** 8[deleted extraneous text] The older teacher in this residency program the person who  
9is in the program for their first teaching experience they’re in the classroom Monday  
10– Thursday with the senior teacher.
- Bea:** 11Yes and what’s unique is that[the District’s] Plan for Excellence they’re offering this  
12to that teacher as opposed to that teacher fulfilling a practicum on his or her own  
13with the university [the individual is attending] uhm it kind of feels like a hit or miss  
14because you’re wondering are you with the right classroom with someone that really  
15is seasoned? Well, [the District] does it all for you, it’ll find the seasoned teacher  
16that has all these accomplishments so that you can come in. Like a teacher apple  
17golden winner you know
- Natalie:** 18Are you focusing on having this program and looking for teachers to teach K1, K2  
19and 1<sup>st</sup> grade? Is that your focus?

**Bea:** 20My focus was to get these uhm aspiring teachers to come and support our classroom  
 21teachers because they are going to school and then that way our teachers aren't so  
 22overwhelmed.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The High/Scope K-3 curriculum is a developmental approach to learning in the classroom (High Scope Educational Research Foundation). It may reflect the teaching qualities that Bea is seeking. It is based on the child development ideas of Jean Piaget and views children as active learners whom teachers help to plan, carry out and reflect on their own self-designed learning activities. The teaching staff arrange instructional activity centers in the classroom and maintain a daily routine to provide active learning experiences in mathematics, language, science, art, social studies, movement and music that match children's needs and address appropriate content, skills and concepts in these areas. The teaching staff does not stand out of the way and permit free play to simply happen. It guides children in their choices of activities towards developmentally appropriate exercises.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Bea is optimistic about the District's Plan for Excellence for pre-service teachers. In lines 14-15, Bea utters that the novice teacher wonders "are you with the right class room with someone that really is seasoned." Bea answers her own question in lines 15-16 "[the District]" does it all for you. It'll find the seasoned teacher that has all these accomplishments so that you can come in." As a respondent, Natalie asks Bea if her focus on this program is to find teachers to teach K1, K2 and first grade. Bea's response in lines 20-22 is that her focus is "to get these uhm aspiring teachers to come and support our classroom teachers...and then that way our teachers aren't so overwhelmed." Bea does not say how she envisions the novice teacher would interact in the classroom. Based on her previous utterances in FG2 TRE6 where she describes all the work that Jackie does it may be that Bea would like another adult in the classroom so Jackie could talk and reflect with someone about the work he has done.

### *Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 23-38)*

**Nadia and Bea meet with teachers to talk about their children's responses to the classroom. Nadia says she wishes parents who have children in higher grades were at that discussion as she does not have intimate knowledge about their children's experiences**

**Bea:** 23There are teachers that are asking me you know when we had that  
**Nadia:** 24When we had that meeting. They asking us about things like different grade  
 25teachers and I mean first I can relate to my son in K1. I can tell you at every  
 26morning my son is enthusiastic and happy to be in school. He loves his teacher. I  
 27wanted my son to start school with a positive attitude. I want my child to wake up in  
 28the morning and I say, "Oh, you have to be in school today because you're going to

29be at Mrs. Burns. He says "Oh, Mrs. Burns, okay, let me run out of bed," which is  
 30exactly what I have. He is in K1. I understand the way he reacts to things on the K1  
 31level. My son is not in a K2 class. I have no clue when I'm listening to Bea I  
 32have some sort of an idea being a parent from the parent point of view. I have no  
 33idea what's going on. I don't know about the book because he's not at that level. I  
 34do know about my son doing hand paintin' and drawing his fingers and numberin' it  
 35because that's what he's doin' right now so I can understand her concern as a parent  
 36but what he's doin' on his level on the K2 level I don't understand I don't  
 37understand what's going on in the grade 1 level because I don't have a child in grade  
 381. I can sympathize

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The implications of the utterances in this talk segment are that Nadia would like to be able to anticipate future positive growth for her son Miles in the upper grades. Nadia's son is enthusiastic about K1 and his teacher has a lot to do with this as she follows a developmental approach to the classroom environment. From previous utterances, it appears that Nadia would like this type of education to continue for her son. However, based on the testimony of Bea and Annie, it does not appear that teachers beyond K1 follow this approach. A developmental approach requires that the child have the experience of interacting closely with the teacher. As an example, in the High/Scope Elementary Approach to the Classroom Environment (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation) teaching staff think about and plan classroom activity with children so children develop a sense of predictability, control and ownership of a smoothly functioning classroom routine. Planning guides work by helping children structure their own activities that they have identified, and helping them take responsibility for following through on them. When children talk with teachers they speak in the form of adapted information, giving simple, factual information about what

### Discussion of the Talk

This talk segment focuses on Nadia's wanting intimate knowledge regarding what goes on in the upper grade classrooms at the Mercer School so she can anticipate what her son's reactions will be in the higher grades. In lines 35-36 Nadia utters "I can understand her concern as a parent but what he's doin' on his level on the K2 level I don't understand." The referent in this utterance is Nadia's observation that she cannot be helpful to Bea when Bea expresses concerns about K2 to Nadia. In addition, Nadia states in lines 24-25, "They [teachers whom Nadia and Bea addressed at a meeting] asking us about things like different grade teachers." They wanted to know from Bea and Nadia the reactions of children to different grade teachers. Nadia and Bea do not have this information. However, Nadia can positively say in lines 25-26, "I can tell you at every morning my son is enthusiastic and happy to be in school." Although Nadia is having a positive experience in K1 her talk foreshadows that she is uncertain about the following years. To add complexity to this problematic situation, teachers appear not to be communicating with parents about their children's perceptions regarding the classroom experience.

they have done (Piaget, 1955). Close associations between parents, teachers and students do not appear to be forming at the Mercer School. These relationships would facilitate a discussion about teaching styles.

*Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 39-67)*

**Bea and Nadia discuss the importance of having parents on the parent council who have children in classes at every grade level so they can advocate for the growth of children in that grade and help teachers reflect on their teaching repertoire**

- Bea:** 39Do you see why we need parents in the upper grades?  
**Natalie:** 40Right  
**Bea:** 41They're the ones that really tie in. [deleted extraneous talk]  
**Natalie:** 42Right  
**Bea:** 43We really need more [parents] to show what's working and what's not working  
**Natalie:** 44Okay, so you want them to be on the parent council  
**Bea:** 45We do, we need them because they will advocate for the inequities in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>  
 46grade so when my child gets there I will not (emphasize not) experience that.  
**Nadia:** 47If we get, if we get a parent in each grade remember as our child moves up in grades  
 48so will our status in parent council move up. When my child moves up to 2<sup>nd</sup> grade I  
 49will no longer be an advocate of 1<sup>st</sup> grade so we'll always be looking for somebody  
 50to replace the K1 you know? We're going to lose our 5<sup>th</sup> grade parent in the parent  
 51council  
**Bea:** 52She's leaving. Her child is going into the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. [deleted extraneous talk]  
**Natalie:** 53Uhhuh and where do the ideas so you then have the ideas we discussed them then to  
 54what level are those ideas raised to whose attention do they come to?  
**Bea:** 55School based management so it affects the teaching so that the teachers see they  
 56reflect WOW this is what's happening at home  
**Natalie:** 57Uhhum  
**Bea:** 58so they can manage their classrooms better; improve their teaching repertoire and  
 59really look you know at the overall goals and maybe break them up and make them  
 60more uh uh fine tune them to the children because it's like looking at uh a picture.  
 61When you're very very close to that Monet you see little dots and that's all you see  
 62and when you step away you see many dots making that picture (emphasis on many)  
 63and sometimes for the teacher you're stuck on that red ink that you really don't see  
 64the progress of the overall paper that the child did put their name was going  
 65somewhere that the child did finish it, maybe a couple wrong, but they're so bogged  
 66down on that red ink and that's why you need parents cause parents are the ones  
 67that support what they do.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this segment, Bea discusses at length her desire for a dialogue between teachers and parents so teachers could hear from parents their reactions to the class work their children bring home

Discussion of the Talk

The critical utterance in this segment belongs to Bea who says in lines 45-46 "we need them because they will advocate for the inequities in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade so when my child gets there I will

from school. According to Bea, parents see that a paper is not perfect but they also see that there are many parts of the paper where the child has done well. Bea would like the teacher to be more congruent with the parent's positive perspective and help the child do better next time. Looking toward the future, Bea wants to escape the experience of current Mercer parents who see their children performing at low levels on state achievement exams. She would like parents of these children to be parent council members so these concerns can be aired and worked through with the teachers. This dialogue requires a structure if it is to develop. The most important factor in creating structure is principal leadership (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). The educational philosophy of the principal toward a broad vision promoting development and learning provides the institutional support. Schools that want to create classroom environments promoting the intellectual growth of all children need to have the desire to become involved with school-based, applied child development (Comer, 2001).

not (emphasis on not) experience that.” Bea is foreshadowing what she will be saying in Focus Group 10 TRE 2, that children at the Michaels School are scoring 15-20 points higher than Mercer children on achievement tests. Bea wants to recruit parents from the upper grades to be on the parent council so they can bring forth the classroom experiences of their children to the Parent Council. Natalie responds to Bea's statement by asking in line 54 “to whose attention do they [this information] come to?” Bea responds in lines 55-56 “school based management so it affects the teaching so that the teachers see they reflect WOW this is what's happening at home.” As Bea further explains in lines 63-64 she would like teachers to be more congruent with the way parents look at their children's work papers that they bring home from school. The papers may not be perfect but there are many elements in the papers that are good and parents would like teachers to work with the children so they could do better next time.

*Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 68-84)*

**Nadia says that teachers and parents are so overwhelmed with responsibilities that they have not found a way to advocate together for the child**

**Natalie:** 68So are you going to form...do you want to form like a forum with the parents and  
69teachers so you can talk to them about

**Nadia:** 70Bea and I had an agreement when we spoke (emphasis on spoke) that you know the  
71teachers have a really hard job here taking care of our kids that they learn, that they  
72are comfortable in their class. They work well in the classroom and parents we have  
73a full time job. We have to make sure that yes our kids get there on time. They are  
74in school and that they are learning. We have to make sure that the roof on their  
75house and their their all the other little stabilities that need to be provided for we  
76provide for them

**Annie:** 77We're still working; it's a 24 hour job.

**Nadia:** 78Yes, but the problem is for some reason the parent we are so overwhelmed with our  
79responsibilities; the teachers are overwhelmed with all these criteria they need to



- 80come up with. We have this big gap in the middle that the child is in the middle of  
 81and for some reason the parent and the teachers are not advocating together—  
 Annie: 82 together.  
 83They're not on the same page, yeah  
 Nadia: 84This leaves the child standin' alone

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Nadia is correct in her understanding that children can perceive the internal states of the people around them. In this case, there are so many demands on teachers and parents regarding their responsibilities towards the children they care for that they become overwhelmed. Wellman, Harris, Bannerjee & Sinclair (1995) state that young children evidence substantial knowledge about events that elicit emotions such as happiness, sadness, fear and anger. In addition, their data suggests children evidence several aspects of a subjective-experiential understanding of emotion as children's explanations of emotion showed they understood internal thoughts could trigger emotions (Wellman et al, 1995). These perceptions relate directly to social-emotional development and point to developing problems if the situation Nadia describes is not corrected. Parents and teachers play a similar role in developing social and emotional skills in children (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2007). Uppermost is that they show consideration for their feelings, desires and needs. In the classroom it means that the environment allows teachers to focus on individual children.

### Discussion of the Talk

The image of the child being left alone with no support from parent or teachers pervades this talk segment. Nadia begins this talk segment by acknowledging that parents and teachers share joint responsibility for the child. In lines 71-72 Nadia says, "teachers have a really hard job here taking care of our kids that they learn, that they are comfortable in their class." In lines 74-76 Nadia states the responsibilities of the parents. "We have to make sure that the roof on their house and their their all the other little stabilities that need to be provided for we provide for them." According to Nadia the nature of their responsibilities has overwhelmed parents and teachers. Nadia refers to "criteria" teachers need to come up with that overwhelm them. This may refer to being sure that children are doing grade level work. Describing the effect this sense of being overwhelmed has on the child, Nadia utters in line 81 "for some reason the parents and the teachers are not advocating together. Annie affirms by saying "together" with Nadia. Then Annie continues in line 83 "They are not on the same page." Nadia concludes in line 84 "This leaves the child standin' alone.

### *Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 85-103)*

**Nadia talks about behaviors in the classroom and says the teacher should give the child that avenue to explain why he feels that way**

- Natalie:** 85 Did you say this to the teacher?
- Nadia:** 86 I have said yes we have brought it up.
- Natalie:** 87 \_\_\_\_\_ At the presentation?
- Bea/Nadia:** 88 We have
- Bea:** 89 And right now
- Nadia:** 90 That's the problem. The teachers are not communicating (emphasis on  
 91 communicating). Like I said I'm not movin' my child anywhere. My child and I  
 92 you know each parent like I said to the teachers I said each parent knows what they  
 93 are sending. When you see my child misbehave in school I'm not shocked as a  
 94 parent 'cause guess what my child misbehaves at home too.
- Annie:** 95 And we can't you know
- Nadia:** 96 Yeah. We know what we sent to you to deal with you know but what we know we  
 97 also know that our kids have a lot of really special qualities about it. The classroom  
 98 is filled with so many kids that it's hard for that one teacher to see it. Number two  
 99 the teacher/child communication there is something seriously wrong with it because  
 100 if my problem is havin' a problem at school you have to instantaneously call me  
 101 about it instead of communicatin' give my child that avenue to explain to you why  
 102 he feels this way and what made them get to that point where they have to vent  
 103 with their peers. There is a problem. My child should be able to talk to you

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The critical point Nadia is making in TRE 5 is that there are too many children in the classroom for one teacher to teach. The National Institute for Early Education Research (2007) states the following about quality preschool programs. I apply this to the K1 and K2 experience as this experience fits the early education category. High quality programs are organized in ways that allow children to form close, sustained relationships with teachers and encourage positive interactions with peers. Small group sizes and high adult-child ratios have been associated with positive social and emotional outcomes for children, including longer attention spans and better peer relations. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) expands on the importance of relationships. Growth promoting relationships are based on the child's continuing give and take ("action and reaction") with a human partner who provides what nothing else in the world can offer – experiences that are individualized to the child's unique

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Nadia is very concerned about her child's interactions with his teacher. It appears that sometimes Miles can misbehave in the classroom. When that happens, Nadia would like Miles to have the opportunity to work that problem through with his teacher. In lines 101-103 Nadia states how she believes the flow of communication should be between her son and the teacher when he has misbehaved with a peer. "...give my child that avenue to explain to you why he feels this way and what made them get to that point where they have to vent with their peers." In lines 97-98 Nadia in her stance as a concerned and caring parent utters how she sees her child and the limitations of the classroom environment that preclude the teacher from seeing him clearly. "...our kids have a lot of really special qualities about it. The classroom is filled with so many kids that it's hard for that one teacher to see it."

personality style; that build on his or her own interests, capabilities, and initiative; that shape the child's self-awareness, and that stimulate the growth of his or her heart and mind.

*Focus Group 6 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 104-123)*

**Bea tells the group that Jackie's work on printing the alphabet was not considered appropriate by his teacher**

- Bea:** 104One last thing was about the printing. He was given this assignment because his  
105printing the alphabet it was not appropriate and this was when I came back in  
106January (after the holiday break). I came back in January and you know that when  
107we came back in January the children lost over a week in school so fine motor was  
108not practiced as much at my home
- Nadia:** 109Can I ask what was inappropriate, what did she say was not appropriate about his  
110printin?
- Bea:** 111She says it's not legible. It's not at the level of
- Nadia:** 112It's A B C D E F G
- Bea:** 113She made him do it over and then I said, "Jackie, how do you...do you know what  
114I'm asking you to do? Yes, the alphabet, Mummy (said in a child's voice). I said  
115well, you did it right there, right? And he said yes and I said well what do you  
116think your teacher was asking you to do?
- Natalie:** 117Right
- Bea:** 118I don't know. I don't know if she wants me to write like her but I'm too little, too  
119little to do it beautiful but I know what the letter "a" is and I can show you how  
120Jackie does the letter "a" so I wrote it here (on Jackie's paper in the upper left of the  
121block for "a") and then he did it after me. He wrote it there and then he did it after  
122me. And then I said there is nothing inappropriate about that.
- All:** 123Yeah

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this segment we hear from Bea that Jackie was not able to complete a classroom exercise on the alphabet. The exercise did not require children to associate sound to phoneme; it only required that they print in sequence from memory the entire alphabet in upper and lower case letters. In a developmental approach with children to understand what the alphabet is the concept of alphabetic principle is used. This principle states that the child can identify a phoneme (alphabetic letter) with its

Discussion of the Talk

This talk segment centers on an alphabet exercise Jackie was asked to do in class. Early in January, Jackie had to print the alphabet in sequence from memory. He printed the first six letters and then he lost the sequence and began writing letters that were not in sequence. The teacher asked Jackie to take the assignment home and redo his work. In lines 115-116 Bea asks Jackie what he thinks the teacher was asking him to do. Jackie responds in lines 118-120 "I don't know if she wants me to

appropriate sound. The High/Scope Growing Readers Early Literacy Curriculum (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2005) is designed for children 3-5 years old. In its scope and sequence matrix, under alphabetic principle, the Level 3 emergent skill for phoneme recognition is the ability of the child to recognize 17-26 letters including 8 or more lower case letters. The Level 3 emergent skill for letter sound correspondence is the ability of the child when spelling a word to choose a letter based on the sound it represents. The curriculum does not mention writing the alphabet in sequence as an emergent skill for 5 year old children. Regarding classroom instruction, McGee & Richgels (1989) say that alphabet letter learning in the classroom should capitalize on children's interests in talking about and learning alphabet letters; link their instruction and talk about the alphabet to children's understandings and observe children as they engage in reading and writing to find out what letters and aspects of letters they are exploring.

write like her but I'm too little too little to do it beautiful but I know what the letter "a" is and I can show you how Jackie does the letter "a." Bea, acting in the dual role of mother and teacher, models for Jackie each letter of the alphabet and Jackie copies what she writes. Together, they finish the exercise. After telling this story, Bea appears vindicated that her child can do the work by saying in line 122 "...there is nothing inappropriate about that" rephrasing what Mrs. Tyler had said earlier about Jackie's work that it was inappropriate.

Figure 1 Jackie's Alphabet Exercise in Class

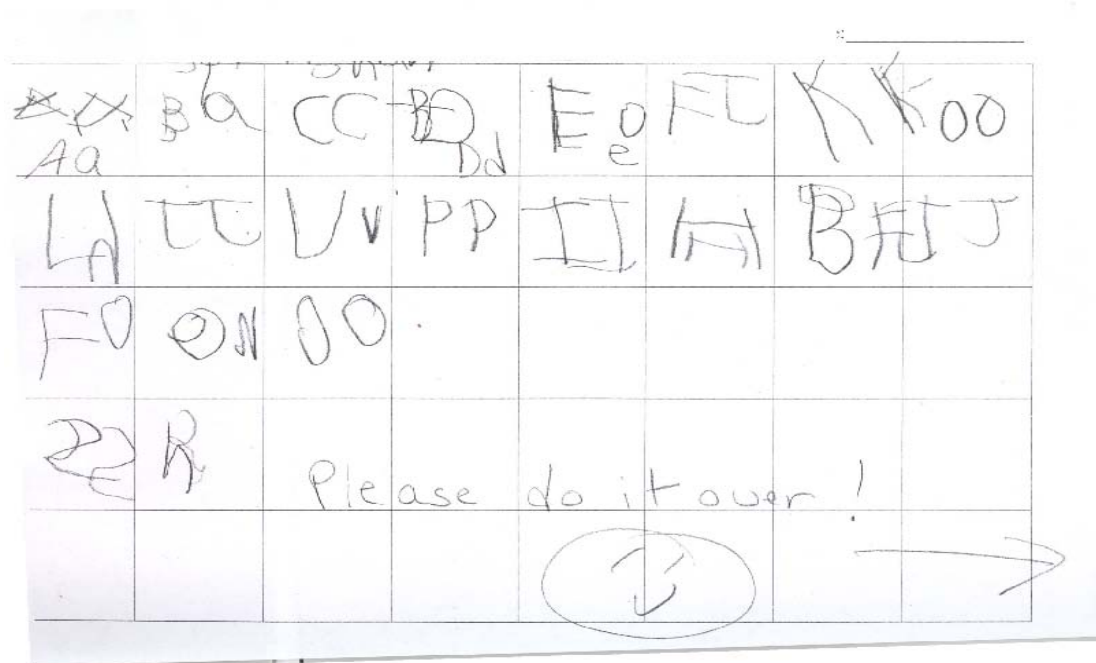
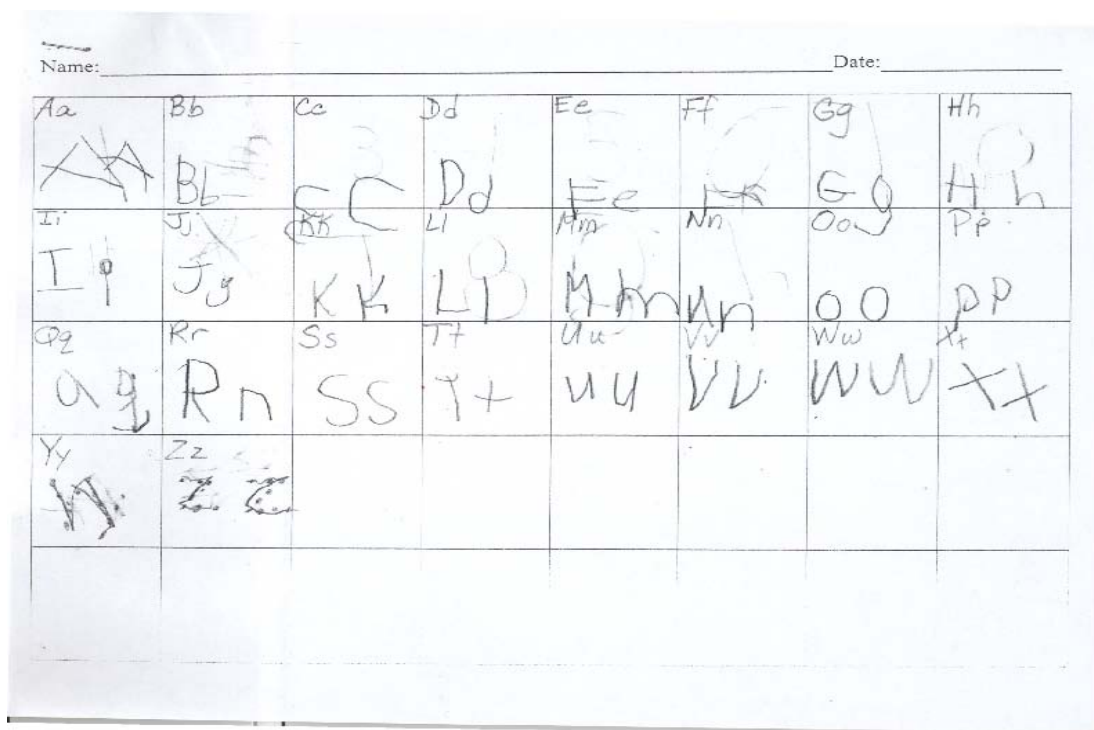


Figure 2 Jackie's alphabet exercise with Mother



**Table 8**  
**Section 2 – (Focus Group 7)**  
**Probing their interactions with their children and their children's responses**  
**to the early childhood literacy program**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
7	1	1-27	Nadia shows Miles' progress report to Natalie when he was 2 ½ - 3 years old and in a pre-school environment in Jamaica
7	2	28-53	Nadia could see clearly Miles' progress from his pre-school progress report; thus far, she has not received a similar report for K1 work
7	3	54-77	Nadia describes a system of peer guidance in Jamaica
7	4	78-107	Jackie can draw the imagery that he visualizes and wrote a title above it
7	5	108-124	Anticipating a conference with Mrs. Tyler, Bea wants to highlight text about developmental writing from a book on Early Literacy and match it to Jackie's work
7	6	125-147	Parents report that children got progress reports in K1 but they have not received progress reports yet for K2

*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-27)*

**Nadia shows Miles' progress report to Natalie when he was 2 ½ - 3 years old and in a pre-school environment in Jamaica**

- Nadia:** 1Remember I was telling you I have a lot of the paper work for my son from  
2Jamaica so this is my Jamaican envelope and this was the evaluation from 2 ½ - 3 ½  
3years old and these are what they did some of the stuff and they grade them on it.  
4It's not a school. It's more like a daycare
- Annie:** 5Like an early intervention program?
- Nadia:** 6Yes, but the environment is like a preschool environment. It's introducing kids at  
7that young age how to settle into preparing them for school
- All:** 8Uhhum
- Nadia:** 9Into the environment; it's like a classroom but then there is also another area  
10adjoining the classroom
- Maria:** 11So that they have desks? Is that what you mean like classroom?
- Nadia:** 12They have low tables for each individual [deleted extraneous talk]
- Nadia:** 13When I compare his work there is a lot of stuff that's similar
- Annie:** 14To what they're doing here?
- Nadia:** 15Yeah, this is his art
- Natalie:** 16How old was he when he did this?
- Nadia:** 17He was 2 ½, 3 almost 4
- Natalie:** 18Okay. And how many people are in the room?
- Nadia:** 19Because I wasn't there, small classrooms, it's like a big building like this you  
20know each floor would probably have 5 classrooms and each classroom would  
21probably have like anywhere between 10 to 15 kids something like that. There's  
22always; it's not one person, it's like 2 people in the classroom
- Annie:** 23That's what they did they did that in K1
- Nadia:** 24These are all words that he did
- Annie:** 25Because Miss Adams had Miss Ritchie there was two and they would split the  
26kids you know one would take 11 and another would take 11. In K2 there's just  
27one teacher

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This talk segment focuses on the progress report Miles received when he was 3 ½ and living in Jamaica. The report focuses on his development in five critical areas. In addition, Nadia has brought in a folder of Miles' work including his art work. Figures 3 and 4 show Miles' ability to conceptualize himself and his family. The good results on his progress report (Miles received mostly 1's on his review) apparently stem from the classroom environment that includes a small group size, 10-15 children, and a good ratio of teacher to pupil, one teacher to 5 or 7 children. These conditions facilitate the development of emotion and cognition in the young child that rely on the emergence, maturation and interconnection of complex neural circuits in multiple areas of the brain. The circuits that are involved in the regulation of emotion are highly interactive with those that are associated with planning, judgment and decision making (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Due to this development Miles at the age of 3 is able to draw contrasting images of himself and a detailed picture of his family.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk episode, Nadia shows Natalie Miles' 2 ½ - 3 ½ year old evaluation from Jamaica. (For a sample of the Jamaican evaluation form see Appendix A.) The evaluation grid includes five development areas: Social and Emotional Development, Cognitive Development, Language Development, Gross Motor Physical Development and Fine Motor Physical Development. Under each heading there are several sub-headings that document in detail how the child is progressing. The documentation requires careful observation by the teacher. As an informant, Nadia describes the class environment in Jamaica in lines 20 and 21 "...each classroom would probably have like anywhere between 10 to 15 kids..." "...it's not one person, it's like 2 people in the classroom." In line 23 Annie responds to the information that Nadia has given. "That's what they did they did that in K1. In line 25-27 Annie says "...there was two and they would split the kids you know one would take 11 and another would take 11. In K2 there's just one teacher." This utterance exchange between Nadia and Annie foreshadows the evolving dilemma they face as the school year unfolds and there are not enough adults in the classroom

Figure 3 – Miles' art work at the age of 3 ½



Figure 4 – Miles' portrait of his family at the age of 3





*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 28-53)*

**Nadia could see clearly Miles' progress from his pre-school progress report; thus far, she has not received a similar report for K1 work**

- Nadia:** 28This was the evaluation from the end of the year (2006).  
**Natalie:** 29He got all 1s  
**Nadia:** 30Yeah, he was doing pretty well (said modestly).  
**Maria:** 31So they tell you what it is  
**Nadia:** 32They tell you what it is and they tell what stage [deleted extraneous talk]  
**Natalie:** 33Is there a similar assessment like this for him in K1 so far?  
**Annie:** 34They, they that's how they give them  
**Nadia:** 35Oh, they do?  
**Annie:** 36Yeah  
**Nadia:** 37But if you remember this is his first time so I haven't reached that point where I haven't  
 38received it.  
**Natalie:** 39When will he get something like this?  
**Annie:** 40Well, they only give it to him once. They don't get report cards like the kids  
**Natalie:** 41They don't? It's just at the end of the year?  
**Annie/Nadia:** 42Yes  
**Maria:** 43But then that doesn't give you too much as a parent  
**Natalie:** 44I know. That doesn't give any feedback  
**Nadia:** 45Yeah (quietly)  
**Annie:** 46Well, you're you're right but but like you know like I said I ask the teach show me what  
 47you because he thinks he's my teacher but I said while you're in school a long time just  
 48teach me what you're doin' in school so that way I'll know exactly what is you know how  
 49far he is  
**Nadia:** 50Yeah  
**Annie:** 51Like I said Miss Baker she's pretty good because I can always go and talk to her. Like  
 52sometimes I pick him up early; how is he doing in school? What does he need help on?  
 53And she says basically nothing because he's doin' at his age what he should be doin

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this talk segment Nadia and Annie reveal that they do not have clear communication with their teachers about the developmental progress their children are making. It is the middle of January and they have not received progress reports. The Mercer School has an early literacy program and parents are anxious about receiving a report as they know their children have to acquire foundational skills to go on to the next grade. Nadia and Annie are parents who work with their children who would benefit from a school program that discussed what their children are doing in the classroom and how they could be supportive. A very important element

Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, the focus continues to be Miles' detailed progress report from Jamaica. In line 33, Natalie asks Nadia "Is there a similar assessment like this for him in K1?" There appears to be confusion between Nadia and Annie regarding when parents see progress reports for their children. Natalie in line 41 asks if they get reports just at the end of the year and Annie and Nadia both say yes. As a respondent, Maria in line 43 says "...that doesn't give you too much as a parent." Nadia quietly responds "Yeah." Annie affirms what Maria says and then tells her how she deals with the situation. In lines 47-48 she utters that she talks to Miss Baker

for children in early literacy programs is acquiring an understanding of the alphabetic principle. All young children must discover the alphabetic principle to become fluent, independent readers (Snow, Burns & Griffin as cited in *Growing Readers*, High Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2005). McGee & Richgels (1989) give several examples of how parents can imbed alphabet learning in activities with their children – reading and writing alphabet books or creating alphabet games with their children. The lack of taking into consideration future needs of parents led to a lack of planning so nothing was done to provide this resource. Now, Annie does not have access to these ideas but must rely on whatever Miss Baker tells her which in this incidence is vague and general.

and says “...just teach me what you’re doin’ in school so that way I’ll know exactly what is you know how far he is.” Later, in lines 52-53 Annie says she asks Miss Baker “What does he need help on? And she says basically nothing because he’s doin’ at his age what he should be doin’. The parents reveal in this segment that they have no clear insight into the developmental progress their children are making.

*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 54-77)*

**Nadia describes a system of peer guidance in Jamaica**

**Natalie:** 54How do you compare the two, Nadia?

**Nadia:** 55Well, you know, I try not to compare them because it’s two different environments for him  
56and when I look at this work he’s kind of like basically keeping up

**Natalie:** 57Yes

**Nadia:** 58Because as I said, in Jamaica life is a lot different with his peers; the whole classroom  
59format is slightly

**Natalie:** 60Explain how it’s different because I want it on the tape

**Nadia:** 61His classroom there’s a scheduled time just like here; a scheduled time for everything; he’s  
62getting more; he’s being more guided

**Natalie:** 63In Jamaica?

**Nadia:** 64Yeah. It’s like the teachers they have a specific time for something and they kind of have a  
65way of organizing all of the K1; it’s amazing to see; it’s hard to explain; the bell system  
66where the kids learn from the time they come in there’s one bell ring and that is to stop; the  
67second bell now is to organize and get ready for a classroom. See, it’s amazing after the  
68first month, back in the school, and you see the kids and parents just sit back and observe.  
69There is no interfering; you know we are just there to look and see how our kids are  
70progressin’.

**Natalie:** 71Do the children appear tense because of that?

**Nadia:** 72No, because the bigger kids kind of help the little ones in the beginning so when the first  
73bell rings the kids who have been there and know the system a lot longer will hold the little  
74ones’ hands to stop and then when the second bell they all start walking and they stop and  
75put them in theirs and then they get in their line. [deleted extraneous talk.] In the Caribbean

76we believe guidelines are there because it doesn't change as we get older so you may as  
77well start developing them at a young age.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this talk segment Nadia has a long utterance about peer relationships and how they help young children gain the social competence to regulate their emotions. The expression of this type of human contact appears to have a calming effect on Miles' school community in Jamaica. Parents come to school to observe how their children are progressing. There is no sense from the administration that they are interfering. In addition, in lines 58 and 59 it appears that Nadia believes this orientation toward peer support has been helpful to Miles' academic progress. Ladd, Birch & Buhs (1999) found that positive pathways to classroom participation emerged from mutual peer friendships and from teacher-child relationships. The data from their research showed that the significant path estimated (correlation) between classroom participation and achievement was substantial and positive. In addition, Ladd, Birch & Buhs (1999) observed that peer acceptance was the most important mediator through which other factors (family background, prior behavior) were linked with both participation and behavior. Thus, peer relations/peer acceptance is vitally important to achievement. It should be noted that the construction of the classroom environment to nurture peer acceptance is critical to these outcomes.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Nadia compares the classroom format in Jamaica to the format in Miles' K1 classroom. Preceding this utterance she says in line 56, "I look at this work [from Jamaica] he's kind of like basically keeping up." She says this in a way that does not show true confidence in the work. Nadia elaborates that "in Jamaica life is a lot different with his peers" (line 58). In Jamaica Miles is given more guidance to develop social competence to understand and regulate his emotions. Nadia describes the bell system and how at the first bell an older student will hold the hand of a younger child to cue that child to stop and organize himself to get ready to go into the classroom. When the second bell rings they start walking. They stop and the older child places the younger child in his line and then the older child goes into his line. The school has these guidelines for a purpose. In lines 75 - 77 Nadia says, "In the Caribbean we believe guidelines are there because it doesn't change as we get older so you may as well start developing them at a young age." In addition, this orientation has a salutary effect on the entire school community. Nadia says "back in the school and you see the kids and parents just sit back and observe. There is no interfering, you know we are just there to look and see how our kids are progressin'" (lines 68-70).

*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 78-107)*

**Jackie can draw the imagery that he visualizes and he can write a title above it**

- Natalie:** 78this is what I wanted people to look at. This was a worksheet that Jackie was  
79given. I looked at the other side and he flipped the page over and he drew this.  
80He not only drew this but he wrote something about it.
- Annie:** 81That's what they have to do now. The picture and the story.
- Natalie:** 82What he said was "I had a party at my house." And if you read what I passed out  
83(the chapter on process developmental writing from Early Literacy)
- Nadia:** 84Yes, I saw that
- Natalie:** 85It has examples much like what Jackie is doing. [deleted extraneous talk] You can  
86see he's making up; he's putting the symbol beside the sound that he hears
- Nadia:** 87My daughter has that problem
- Natalie:** 88Yeah
- Maria:** 89And they start writing without the vowels. They hear the beginning and the middle
- Annie:** 90They get the sound
- Natalie:** 91I mean he's got the "y" going the wrong way so what? He's only what? 5?
- Bea:** 92Uhhum
- Natalie:** 93Look what he did! He conceptualized a party in his house
- Nadia:** 94Yup
- Natalie:** 95In a room
- Nadia:** 96Exactly
- Natalie:** 97With ah looking out the window maybe and seeing the tree
- Nadia:** 98Yeah (others laughing with happiness that he drew this imagery)
- Natalie:** 99Now, see, my question is if you were a developmental trained in a developmental  
100way you would come over to Jackie and say "Jackie, tell me what this is about."  
101And he would start telling you what he said.
- Nadia:** 102Uhhum
- Natalie:** 103And I want you to read this because he's doing exactly what he should be doing.  
104It's part play; it's part work.
- Nadia:** 105Yeah
- Natalie:** 106Kids learn through play
- Bea:** 107I'm so proud, so proud

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this segment it becomes apparent that Jackie is most comfortable expressing his thoughts on paper by drawing them. This is called process writing. Cambourne & Turbill (1987) describe one principle of the process-writing classroom. A teacher de-emphasizes traditional, didactic, teacher-controlled methods. As part of her pedagogy, Mrs. Tyler works with process writing. Drawing is an activity related to writing and becomes part of the writing process for Jackie. It helps him to compose

Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Natalie talks about Jackie's interests and abilities in terms of his productive output. His worksheet showed some skill copying words but the fact that he flipped over the worksheet and drew an elaborately detailed picture of a party at his house showed that this was the way he wanted to work with expression and symbols. Natalie says that in the title above the picture Jackie wrote the letters for the sounds that he heard (line 86). Nadia responds that "My daughter has that

meaning and allows him to meet the demands of writing. He is rehearsing meaning and discovering how to develop and sequence a story (Cambourne & Turbill, 1987). Jackie is also learning how to write sentences as Mrs. Tyler has instructed Jackie to write a title above his drawing. Jackie is able to do this but he spells party “prty.” He hears the sounds of syllables and not phonemes and thus constructs his spellings based on the sounds of the syllables that he hears (Ferreiro, 1990). Through these activities Jackie is building scaffolds to help him facilitate the learning he is grappling with to solve the literacy puzzle.

problem” (line 87). As respondent to Nadia Maria says “...they start writing without vowels. They hear the beginning and the middle” (line 89). Annie responds “They get the sound” (line 90). In line 93 Natalie brings the focus group back to the point that Jackie is able to conceptualize something that happened in his environment, “He conceptualized a party in his house” (line 93). Natalie places this utterance within a developmental context and says a teacher trained in early childhood development would extend Jackie’s language about what he had drawn. This speech segment ends with Bea feeling good about Jackie’s work. She says “I’m so proud, so proud” (line 107).

Figure 5 Jackie's Descriptive Art Work



Figure 6 Jackie's Worksheet

Word	Make	Write
had	h d j	h d j
of	o f	o f
all	B l l	B l l
went	W e n t	W e n t

*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 108-124)*

**Anticipating a conference with Mrs. Tyler, Bea wants to highlight text about developmental writing from a book on Early Literacy and match it to Jackie's work**

- Bea:** 108they want to do an evaluation because he's doing something developmental  
**Natalie:** 109Who is the they in this? They want to do an evaluation  
**Bea:** 110Mrs. Tyler wants to (said as if a cry is pulling at her)  
**Natalie:** 111Now this gets me totally confused because she's not an early childhood  
 112education teacher  
**Bea:** 113Yes  
**Natalie:** 114She's looking at it from her point of view as a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher  
**Bea:** 115Right  
**Natalie:** 116He's not doing 1<sup>st</sup> grade work  
**Annie:** 117In Kindergarten they're [deleted extraneous talk]  
**Bea:** 118Because I want to take this documentation (the chapter on Writing)  
**Natalie:** 119And match it to his homework  
**Bea:** 120Match it. I want to take it and highlight it to match it when she (Mrs. Tyler)  
 121decides to have a meeting I'm going to have [the principal] come but you know  
 122I've been having these conversations so far I haven't gotten any I haven't gotten  
 123the results of any assessment I don't know. I haven't got my first; I haven't  
 124gotten a report card.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Although Mrs. Tyler is allowing children to develop process writing in her classroom, she is also holding them to a strict interpretation of literacy which is being able to write each letter of the alphabet in its recognizable form and to be able to write the entire alphabet, upper and lower case characters in sequence. Mrs. Tyler is combining two pedagogies in her teaching style – child centered and didactic. Unfortunately, Jackie is not responding to Mrs. Tyler's didactic criterion regarding literacy. He cannot retain the memory sequence of each letter so he can write it in alphabetic sequence. As a result, Mrs. Tyler is recommending Jackie for an evaluation which Bea realizes will ultimately lead to his being classified as a special needs child who will become isolated from the mainstream classroom. Berk (2002) notes that learning disabled or special needs students obtain average or above-average IQ scores but have

Discussion of the Talk

One week after the alphabet exercise occurrence, Bea informs the focus group, "They want to do an evaluation because he's doing something developmental" (line 108). As the respondent, Natalie asks "Who is the they in this?" (line 109). Bea responds, "Mrs. Tyler wants to" (line 110) and Natalie hears a little cry pull at Bea. To put Mrs. Tyler's request in a developmental context, Natalie tells Bea "She's looking at it from her point of view as a first grade teacher" (line 114) which Mrs. Tyler was before she began teaching K2. Natalie reminds Bea that Jackie is not doing first grade work. Bea responds by saying she wants to take as documentation to her meeting with Mrs. Tyler the writing chapter in *Early Literacy* (1990) to show that Jackie is advancing in a developmentally appropriate way.

great difficulty with one or more aspects of learning. As a result, their achievement is considerably behind what would be expected on the basis of their IQ. Bea is in a dilemma. She knows it is only due to the fact that a classroom teacher in this district can set the criterion for achievement that puts Jackie in this position. Developmentally he is doing well for his age yet this is not a weighting factor and Jackie could become a special needs child.

*Focus Group 7 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 125-147)*

**Parents report that children got progress reports in K1 but they have not received progress reports yet for K2**

- Bea:** 125I haven't seen I I haven't seen a progress report. I haven't seen anything. Nothin.  
126Nothing. Nothing.
- Annie:** 127She didn't invite you to have a one on one with her to check his work?
- Bea:** 128The only one that I've had is his math notebook that is so full; it has a whole  
129bunch of checks on it. Doing excellent with all his numbers and his writer's  
130notebook. She checks on him and everything so yeah but every child should [get]  
131a progress report
- Annie:** 132Yeah to see
- Bea:** 133A progress report that says we worked on all these things [a lot of talking I can't  
134decipher]
- Natalie:** 135This is what; this comes from Jamaica. Look at this (a performance rating of  
136Miles at 2 ½ - 3 that shows progress in many domains)
- Annie:** 137Miss Adams gave us at the end of the year
- Natalie:** 138It goes language,
- Bea:** 139You know what, my daughter came here –James Mercer preschool intervention  
140program – and I'm going to bring you (inaudible) her progress report and I'm  
141waiting for my son's progress report
- Maria:** 142Well, when did she get it?
- Bea:** 143I don't think that this curriculum has one
- Annie:** 144Yes they do because they gave it to James, in K1 from Miss Adams.
- Bea:** 145Oh, I got K1 from Miss Winters
- Annie:** 146Well, I don't know about Miss Baker but she'll send something home to let me  
147know how he is in this; how he is in that.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The topic of progress reports is central to this talk segment. Before the focus group sessions ended, Miles and James

Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, the topic of progress reports comes up again. A report is especially important to Bea



did receive their progress reports for K1 and K2. (See Appendix B and C for samples of each.) It is worth noting that the K1 progress report reviews literacy development divided into many sub-domains that are rated on different levels of development. In contrast, the K2 progress report is not developmentally constructed. It does not break down skills to their sub-domain level and thus it does not give a gauge of developmental progress. Rather, the K2 progress report rates performance in terms of matching standards and how far from the standard the child's performance lies. Chen & McNamee (2007) state that in curriculum embedded assessments for Pre-K – 3, teachers observe, document and analyze how children engage in classroom activities from different curricular areas. These areas serve as a window for gauging their developmental progress. The progress report at the Mercer School does not assess development in this way at the K2 level. This creates a giant hole in the teacher's knowledge base about each child and ultimately in the knowledge base of the parents who are expecting the teacher to give a detailed report of their child's development.

because the work that Jackie is doing with his math notebook and writer's notebook is good. In line 129-130 Bea says that after a one-on-one with Mrs. Tyler to check Jackie's work Jackie is "doing excellent with all his numbers and his writer's notebook." Yet Bea still wants a progress report. In response, Natalie holds up Miles' Jamaican report. It gives a progress report in many domains. Looking at the report makes Annie remember that James received a similarly detailed report in K1. She says in line 137 "Miss Adams gave us at the end of the year." Annie repeats this utterance when Bea says "I don't think this curriculum has one" (a schedule for progress reports) (line 143). The confusion over when parents receive progress reports added to their desire to use them to help them monitor their children's work creates an anxiety ridden situation. The lack of specific knowledge about how their children are progressing developmentally compounds their anxiety when teachers do not speak directly to them about the developmental growth of their children. This puts parents in a precarious position as the ground is moving beneath them as their children are expected to advance to the next grade level yet they are not given specific information about progress so they can support the teacher to help the child.

### **Synthesis of the Talk in Focus Groups 4-7**

The mothers of the focus group share the universal concerns all parents have who are trying to guide their children through the schooling experience. Conduct in the classroom is of paramount importance as this determines the quality of the experience. Mothers are looking for innovative ways in the classroom to capture the attention of the child in the pursuit of productive work and play. There is evidence from the testimony of Maria (FG4 TRE6) that many children in James' class do not know how to speak with the teacher about ideas. With only one teacher for twenty students, the possibility does not exist to break this large group into smaller groups each working with an aide who is assisting the teacher in the engagement of language and literacy skills with the children.

Excellent early childhood programs expose children through conversation to a variety of discourse patterns and thought processes that lead to meta-cognition. Conversations help teachers work with children to extend language, mediate children's social interactions with each other, encourage and support exploration of the physical environment and solve problems (National Research Council, 2000).

Another universal concern, the goals and values that guide how parents and teachers together support the educational experience of the child, is of great importance to the mothers. This is an especially critical dimension when parents and teachers express two different viewpoints about the quality of a child's written work (see Bea's comments in FG6 TRE3). The parent who knows the five year old child since birth can look at a half completed paper and recognize the strengths of the child in a superficially weak paper. Without training as an educator to bring out these strengths in the written work, the parent must rely on the teacher. Yet it is the child's temperament and personal orientation and expression toward learning that is the crucial determining factor that the

teacher must engage with if the child is going to work on the task. It is the will of the child that guides the child to be persistent and focus on the object (Montessori, 1917). An approach that would give teachers more intimate knowledge about the ways individual children react to the learning experience is the High Scope educational approach to learning developed by the High Scope Educational Research Association. In this approach, the teaching staff thinks about and plans classroom activity with children so children gain a sense of predictability, control and ownership of a smoothly functioning classroom routine. This approach creates a better connection with the parents' knowledge of the child's inclinations and abilities.

The fact that a sense of partnering has not been established with teachers and the realization that teachers and parents do have different opinions about the quality of a child's papers produce a sensation in the mothers that parents and teachers face an overwhelming responsibility with regard to the education of their children. Nadia sees a lack of stability coming out of this situation and wonders about the effects weak mutual support from parents and teachers have on the child's sense of security (FG6 TRE4).

Nadia has cause for this concern. Evidence has shown that young children show a substantial knowledge about the events that elicit strong emotions such as fear and sadness. In addition, data from the study cited below suggests that children show an understanding of the subjective-experiential aspects of emotion as children's explanations of emotion demonstrate they understood internal thoughts could trigger an emotion, i.e., the memory of a dog (Wellman, Harris, Bannerjee & Sincalir, 1995). It is the emotional valence parents and teachers create that surround the child that is of critical concern to

the mothers. It is another factor that contributes to the consideration of goals and values each have for the child in the classroom.

Maria correctly points out why setting the emotional tone of the classroom environment is critical. The environment has to take into consideration that children are constantly growing and each child is unique (FG5 TRE3). The mothers in the focus group and their children are aware that another important adult has been introduced into the learning experience of the child. Implicit in the talk of the mothers is the desire for a positive attachment of their child to the teacher. They would like to see their children express a sense of felt security and warmth in the classroom. The emotional tone of the classroom is a dimension the teacher has the ability to create as internal working models of positive relationships develop through systematic patterns of exchange. They take time to develop. There is a sense of reciprocity and caring and a mutual regulation of responses when it is successful (Ayoub, 2004).

It is in the classroom that their children experience learning when they are away from home. The ability of their children to move through the activity of each day is important. The mothers look to the teacher to promote healthy development and adaptation to the classroom. Echoing the observations of Ayoub (2004) teachers who are warm and responsive are more likely to promote strong social and emotional skills in children (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2005).

When Nadia talks about the calm stability in the Jamaican school her four year old son recently attended the mothers listen intently (FG7 TRE 3). This quality allows the school to develop a peer relationship system where older children help younger children gain the social competence to regulate their emotions and behavior. Nadia believes this

support has been helpful to her child's academic progress and this is substantiated by the research. Positive pathways to classroom participation emerge from mutual peer friendships and from teacher-child relationships (Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999). The calm that pervades the Jamaican school also allows for inclusivity of parents to come into the classroom to observe how their children are progressing.

There is a structure to this school that supports these responses. The most important factor in creating structure is principal leadership. The educational philosophy of the principal toward a broad vision promoting development and learning provides the institutional support for such structure to be considered a possibility and then the initiative to build it (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007).

### **Introduction to the Talk in Focus Groups 8-10**

Central to the conversation in Focus Groups 8-10 is the conceptualization the mothers begin to engage in to visualize a way, sanctified by the Mercer School that would allow a dialogue to begin between teachers and parents. This would be a discussion about adjustments in the classroom environment that would strengthen and balance the social and emotional dimensions in the learning experience with the concentrated attention children are asked to summon in order to focus on conceptual academic tasks embedded in the early childhood literacy curriculum. To give action to their words, the mothers investigate a nearby school with similar demographics.

The school they investigate has an ambience of everyone working together. This has resulted in a consensus that art and music must follow the children from Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade to help release pent up tension and emotion. After these activities, parents have found that children are able to put greater concentration into academic tasks. The mothers learn that school governance, in particular a strong and active parent

council, has contributed to this thinking about children. They express cautious hope when Bea tells them that a responsive principal helped parents form the strong council (FG10 TRE4). They now have a tangible example that ideas generated by their talk could produce positive changes in their school. However, these ideas are just beginning to form. There have been no substantive discussions with the coordinator or the principal about the idea of a dialogue. Thus, at this moment, each mother must deal in her own way with the expressive nature of her child and his adaptation to the classroom. Talk excerpts from Focus Groups 8-10 are discussed and analyzed in detail on the following pages. There is a synthesis of this conversational data following Focus Group 10.

**Table 9**  
**Section 3 – (Focus Group 8)**  
**Appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development**  
**could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to**  
**advocacy**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
8	1	1-22	Nadia describes how children interact with music during class time in Jamaica. In the K1 classroom she observes that music is an isolating experience.
8	2	23-39	Bea describes the sensory lessons her aunt, a Kindergarten teacher, did with her classes 30 years ago.
8	3	40-65	Bea and Nadia say they want to converse with teachers about social emotional development
8	4	66-80	Nadia says there is no communication between parents and teachers. Bea says she thinks the social emotional development talk could bridge the gap between parents and teachers
8	5	81-93	Bea draws a distinction between behavior management skills and social emotional development
8	6	94-107`	Bea says there is a need for someone to come to the school who can find common goals drawn from the academic calendar and from social emotional development

*Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-22)*

**Nadia describes how children interact with music during class time in Jamaica. In the K1 classroom she observes that music is an isolating experience.**

- Nadia:** 1Your agenda. It's part of your agenda a certain day in the week is music right? and  
2you do like they teach you songs they teach you to play something simple like the  
3flute every child had a recorder from primary school all the way up until you finish  
4high school you must have a recorder for music class and you learn to play. And the  
5thing about it is that uhm as much as it's like it's really good for the ki for us because  
6it calms you down a little
- Natalie:** 7Right
- Nadia:** 8and it helps you and it's a relief other than sittin' down with that book all the time and  
9you know it's so different now that even at the Kindergarten here level the kids yes  
10they go to music but they don't really interact
- Bea:** 11It's isolating
- Nadia:** 12you know they don't
- Bea:** 13It's isolating it's isolating
- Natalie:** 14It doesn't relate to everything else
- Nadia/Bea:** 15Yeaah (said emphatically)
- Nadia:** 16You know it's not like let me see it let me touch it let me I mean we even learn how  
17to take the recorder apart and
- Natalie:** 18Yeah
- Nadia:** 19and put it back together what's part of you know because with kids if you just  
20handin' something and they have to be delicate with it it's like it's no fun so they  
21teach you okay you're gonna pull it apart anyway so let's show them how to do it  
22right

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This talk segment with Nadia demonstrates how the methods of Montessori (1917) to allow the child to focus on, touch and explore objects in the environment are so vital to the child. Nadia, like Montessori, has observed that a great interest in an object can calm a child. This talk segment is also an introduction into the relationship between exploring objects in the perceptual plane and the acquisition of positive social-emotional traits. Not only does getting up from a seated position and working with the recorder calm children in the Jamaican school but it also puts them in a social situation where they mingle with each other. Although they may not converse with each other through oral language, they hear the sound the other makes and through sound they comprehend that they are together for a particular time in space. The experience situates the child in the reality of the school.

### Discussion of the Talk

Nadia has become increasingly apprehensive about the way classes are conducted at the Mercer School. In her first utterance in this segment she says, “Your agenda. It’s part of your agenda a certain day in the week is music, right?” Nadia acknowledges the school gives K1 children exposure to music but it does not use the experience to orient the children to each other. In addition to her concerns about the academic agenda, Nadia is now expressing a concern about the agenda for the arts and the social emotional aspects of education.

### *Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 23-39)*

**Bea describes the sensory lessons her aunt, a Kindergarten teacher, did with her classes 30 years ago**

- Bea:** 23and then she would show them different sounds  
**Nadia:** 24Yeah  
**Bea:** 25and they would close their eyes  
**Nadia:** 26Yup  
**Bea:** 27and one sound she would use the piano what do you think this is boys and girls?  
 28And knocking on the door what do you think this is boys and girls  
**Nadia:** 29Yeaah  
**Bea:** 30They would go outside and the texture of the grass  
**Nadia:** 31Yeah  
**Bea:** 32the leaves things like that it was all feeling  
**Natalie/**  
**Nadia:** 33Uhhm  
**Bea:** 34and it was just more sensory. So I’m thinking that if  
**Natalie:** 35Because you know that is how children learn at that age  
**Nadia:** 36Yeah  
**Natalie:** 37that’s why she did that  
**Bea:** 38I’m thinking that if we (pause) did we get away from social emotional development  
 39with children to then become service providers of special needs?



### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In Montessori's (1917) work with 3-6 year old children, the development of sensory and perceptive faculties is fundamental to later learning. As an example, if children were to learn about candles, candles were brought into the classroom to engage their sensory perceptions. Children touched the candle to feel its smooth texture. They saw the different parts of the candle and its form. Moving from the physical, sensory perception of touch and sight, children would be asked to draw the outline of the candle to see if they could remember it and draw it from their imagination. Montessori's (1917) pedagogy scaffolds the development of symbolic, representation activity with sensory perceptions.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Bea describes the lessons of sensory perception her aunt, a Kindergarten teacher, conducted with her class thirty years ago in the same school system. Bea's son is five but in Bea's own words, he is a young five so the sensori-motor stage of learning is important to Bea. In line 34 Bea says [the Kindergarten experience] "was just more sensory." As a responder and supporter of Bea's thinking, Natalie in line 35 says, "that is how children learn at that age." In line 38, Bea associates the sensory perception lesson with social emotional development and makes a final comment in lines 38 and 39 that questions the new teaching methods for Kindergarten. "Did we get away from social emotional development with children to then become service providers of special needs?"

### *Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 40-65)*

#### **Bea and Nadia say they want to converse with teachers about social emotional development**

- Bea:** 40because there was some talk about having a parent and teacher activity like a game  
**Nadia:** 41Mmhmm  
**Bea:** 42Where the teachers and the parents break up into teams and they'll play around a  
 43basketball or something  
**Natalie:** 44You know I mean you should just sit down and  
**Bea:** 45Right  
**Nadia:** 46Yeah  
**Bea:** 47It was just something like but but now you know we're not into that we don't want  
 48to we're not here not to just have fun no we're here  
**Nadia:** 49(pitching her voice above Bea's) The truth is as I was sayin' you know let's be  
 50realistic teachers they come we want them to teach our kids  
**Natalie:** 51Yeah  
**Nadia:** 52we want to make sure the classroom is safe, the child is being cared for  
**Natalie:** 53Yes  
**Nadia:** 54and the teachers are come and teach our kids  
**Natalie:** 55Yes  
**Nadia:** 56and RESPECT (respect heavily emphasized) our kids the same way they want our  
 57kids to respect them  
**Natalie:** 58Mmhmm  
**Nadia:** 59No more, no less. We don't want them to parent our children—

- Bea:** 60 \_\_\_\_\_ But it's not  
61going to be through games we want it to be \_\_\_\_\_
- Nadia:** 62 \_\_\_\_\_ a serious conversation
- Natalie:** 63Exactly
- Bea:** 64Social emotional development (pause) strategies and things that are happening to our  
65children that they're struggling with in the classroom

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Bea and Nadia say they want to have a conversation with teachers about strategizing around social emotional development to help their children in the classroom. They appear uncertain that this will happen. Knopf & Swick (2007) state that what is often neglected when there is a need for teacher-parent conversations is that there must be a way of establishing open lines of communication that facilitate the development of relationships that will enable these conversations to take place. What is notable in this process is that the decision to actively establish a positive relationship with parents changes outlooks in teachers (Swick as cited in Knopf & Swick, 2007).

### Discussion of the Talk

This talk episode ends with Nadia telling Natalie that she would like to have a serious conversation with teachers about social emotional development. This utterance is in response to an exchange between Bea and Natalie. Bea began as an informant in line 40 stating there had been talk "about having a parent and teacher activity like a game." Natalie responds in line 44 that "you should just sit down and." Bea immediately responds by saying, "Right," changing her stance from informer to someone becoming engaged with the importance of the type of communication. In line 49 Nadia pitches her voice over Bea's to state what she wants from teachers – "to teach our kids," "the child is cared for," and "respect our kids." Bea supports Nadia by stating that a conversation strategizing about social-emotional development could help children in the classroom.

### *Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 66-80)*

**Nadia says there is no communication between parents and teachers. Bea says she thinks the social emotional development talk could bridge the gap between parents and teachers**

- Natalie:** 66And just put it right put this to them you know in a nice way. They are extremely  
67overwhelmed
- Nadia:** 68Exactly
- Natalie:** 69they are tense and they're uh not sure of their footing with you and you're not sure  
70of your footing with them
- Nadia:** 71Because there's no communication

- Bea:** 72I think this presenter is going to bridge us together because uhm there hasn't we can  
73say that this can be the beginning of building partnerships
- Nadia:** 74uhhm
- Bea:** 75that after this workshop and once we know what the teaching expectation is because  
76we don't go to the professional development we don't sit with them with the State to  
77see what they do you know uhm we want to start sharing okay what's happening  
78with our children and then other workshops that can come about is how you you can  
79do a math you can do a homework session. Just simple things but we've got to come  
80to the table.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Knopf & Swick (2008) state that if the early childhood teacher is to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with families he or she must believe that families have an important role in the process of education. Knopf & Swick (2008) citing Swick (2004) state that as teachers validate parents by involving them in meaningful partnership roles at least three benefits emerge. Parents gain confidence in themselves as partners with teachers; parents and teachers have more meaningful involvement with the children and each other; teachers see parental involvement in more positive and diverse ways.

### Discussion of the Talk

Topic Related Episode (TPE) 4 is a continuation of TPE 3. In line 66 Natalie suggests that Bea and Nadia bring up these matters with the teachers "in a nice way" and adds "they are extremely overwhelmed." Nadia ratifies Natalie's statement. Natalie responds by elaborating that parents and teachers are not sure of their footing with each other. Nadia responds by saying there is no communication. Bea takes an optimistic stance and points out that the speaker on social-emotional development could build a bridge between parents and teachers that could be the beginning of a partnership. Nadia affirms Bea's statement and Bea's stance changes from optimism to determination as she describes her vision for the talk in line 75. It is a workshop to help parents "know what the teaching expectation is." Bea clarifies the symbol of the bridge in lines 77-78 it is a connector to start sharing "what's happening with our children."

### *Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 81-93)*

#### **Bea draws a distinction between behavior management skills and social emotional development**

- Bea:** 81There was a psychologist or no social worker he came last year and they had a good  
82turnout
- Nadia:** 83We need to get a list of all who came last year

- Bea:** 84all the parents came and some of the teachers but it wasn't something that bridged  
85(pause) the teachers and the parents because all he talked about was behavior  
86management skills. And you know what that's not what we want
- Natalie:** 87That's a negative
- Bea/Nadia:**88Yes!
- Bea:** 89I want to know how
- Natalie:** 90We want to look at this in a growth and development
- Bea:** 91I want to know what I need to what are my expectations and what's the teacher's  
92expectations of the emotional development of my child (child emphasized) to  
93support the education.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this talk segment, Bea would like the opportunity to talk with teachers about mutual expectations regarding the emotional development of her child and how this development could support his education. She draws a distinction between behavior management skills and emotional development saying a previous speaker's talk about behavior management skills did not build a bridge between parents and teachers. This was due to the fact that behavior management was not what parents wanted discuss according to Bea. Wuthnow (1995) describes outcomes when people work within a framework of mutual awareness. "Having a framework of understanding makes behavior more meaningful. Behavior that is meaningful is more likely to be sustained over a longer period of time." From her utterances it appears that Bea is reaching for this type of communication. Comer & Haynes (1991) appear to affirm the value of what Bea is trying to achieve. The results of their work with the school development project showed that parents can contribute insights and knowledge that enhance the skills of a school's professional staff when the goal is to strengthen academic programming Comer & Haynes (1991).

### Discussion of the Talk

The topic of behavior management skills has a negative connotation for Bea. In lines 81-82 Bea speaks as an informant and tells the group that last year a social worker spoke to a group of teachers and parents about behavior management skills. This talk did not bridge parents and teachers. In lines 85-86 Bea explains why this did not occur. "All he talked about was behavior management skills. And you know that is not what we want." Natalie responds to this utterance in line 87 and says, "That's a negative." Bea and Nadia respond immediately in unison and say "Yes!" Natalie expands on what she thinks Bea and Nadia would prefer. In line 90 she says "to look at this in a growth and development." This utterance gives Bea the ground on which to articulate the kind of information she wants. In lines 91-93 Bea says, "What are my expectations and what's the teacher's expectations of the emotional development of my child to support education."

*Focus Group 8 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 94-107)*

**Bea says there is a need for someone to come to the school who can find common goals drawn from the academic calendar and from social emotional development**

- Bea:** 94The teachers said that it was very refreshing to hear what Nicole and I had to say  
 95because there were no parents before that saw what they were going through but then  
 96we need someone to come in and find what the common goals are and put them  
 97together a plan for the parents and a plan for the teachers because the teachers they  
 98have an academic calendar but you know what as parents we don't have the training  
 99to look at our children through the lens of an academic calendar we look at our  
 100children through are they sleeping enough to listen to this person? Why is my child  
 101not napping? Don't they know that that hour sitting up is too long? And then my  
 102child is going to throw a tantrum? You know and and that's the thing these babies  
 103get they don't have the emotional
- Natalie;** 104She's got the language of both
- Bea:** 105Exactly
- Nadia:** 106Yeah
- Bea:** 107That's what we need

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In this talk segment, Bea says it is important to have someone come to the Mercer School who can help parents and teachers find their common goals. Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) note that socio-cultural backgrounds, experiences and events impact learning and development. Finding someone to help parents, families and teachers discover their mutual goals would require taking into consideration the ability of that person to understand the impact personal backgrounds have on expectations. Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) believe the socio-cultural backgrounds of teachers and families affect their interactions. It impacts how parents are viewed and how the process of parent and family involvement is constructed. The process of finding the right person means people with different backgrounds can agree on who to invite. As educators, Souto-Manning & Swick (2006) found that in order to construct a meaningful collaboration with families it was important to be responsive to the multiple ideas parents and families have.

Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Bea takes the stance of a well-informed mother who identifies the issue of social-emotional development and its relationship to the academic agenda as an issue of primary importance. Bea sees the solution of bringing a balance between the social emotional development of the child and the school's academic agenda by having a person unaffiliated with the school help teachers and parents find common goals (line 96). Bea outlines the nature of the divide between parents and teachers. In lines 97-98 Bea says "the teachers they have an academic calendar but...we don't have the training to look at our children through the lens of an academic calendar." Bea says parents look at their children through their physical needs. In line 100 Bea clarifies what this means, "are they sleeping enough to listen to this person [the teacher]?" Natalie responds to Bea as her informed stance becomes more plaintive and says, [Miss Locke] has "the language of both" (line 101). Bea and Nadia quickly ratify what Natalie says

Thus, the process of finding someone to help the Mercer develop common goals may be a little more complicated than Bea envisions.

and Bea ends this talk segment by saying, “That’s what we need” (line 107).

**Table 10**  
**Section 3 – (Focus Group 9)**  
**Appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development**  
**could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to**  
**advocacy**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
9	1	1-22	Annie has a paced weekly schedule for James but the early morning start time is disrupting James' natural rhythm
9	2	23-34	Sometimes James is so tired Annie lets him stay home from school. She has a lot of self doubt about this as James will have to have good attendance in first grade
9	3	35-49	Lack of sleep discourages James. Annie realizes he is too young to understand he needs to develop a will toward a positive attitude for school
9	4	50-63	The Mercer School new early start time of 7:30 has disrupted the schedule of working parents who previously were able to pick up their children after school
9	5	64-100	Bea talks about a program in the district that has a long day with scheduled nap and rest times for children
9	6	101-124	Bea talks about the transition time she needs with Jackie to help him enter the school day

*Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-22 )*

**Annie has a paced weekly schedule for James but the early morning start time is disrupting James' natural rhythm**

**Annie:** 1Because he knows there's a time and place when you come in have a snack – it's  
2time to do your work – read a book maybe for 20 minutes or half an hour

**Natalie:** 3mmhmm

**Annie:** 4Then if you want to watch (inaudible) Sesame Street for a few hours then it's time  
5for you to eat, have your bath, good-night.

**Natalie:** 6Yeah

**Annie:** 7But the problem we're havin' now is th the time is starting to catch up with him  
8because I picked the school because it was a 9:20 school

**Natalie:** 9uhhm

**Annie:** 10And I then you know sometime he go to bed around 7:30 but I think he gets too  
11little too sleep to where he's still tired in the morning (said hurriedly and a little  
12agitated)

**Natalie:** 13Oh I see (with a descending sound)

**Annie:** 14And now we're havin' a little problem in the mornin' "I'm tired; I don't want to go  
15to school; I don't like school" uhm I'm a meanie

**Natalie:** 16Uhhuh

**Annie:** 17I try to explain to him I'm not being a meanie you have to go to school. But he said  
18you know like it's dark now because when he's up because I like to try and fix him  
19a hot breakfast and before he go to school and lately here to let him have the extra  
20sleep I haven't been givin' him his oatmeal or he's been comin' to school eatin' and

21sometimes he say I didn't eat because I don't like it. I know at home he's going to  
 22have his juice; he's going to have his oatmeal

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Annie and her grandson James have developed a highly refined mother-child mutually responsive orientation (MRO) toward each other (Kochanska & Murray, 2000). In part, this is due to Annie's ability for perspective taking. Annie is able to adopt the psychological point of view of her grandson and this helps her to respond sensitively to his needs and to engage in mutually enjoyable activities with him. In their study (Kochanska & Murray, 2000) found that personality differences among mothers may predispose some women better than others to co-construct and function in mutually responsive systems with their young children. It appeared from the study that mothers with tendencies to adopt others' psychological perspectives were better able to take on such a role.

### Discussion of the Talk

Annie has co-constructed with James a pattern of behavior that appears mutually enjoyable for both. As an informant, Annie tells Natalie in lines 1-2 "he knows there's a time and place when you come in [after school] have a snack – it's time to do your work -- read a book maybe for 20 minutes or half an hour." In lines 4 and 5 she continues, "Then if you want to watch Sesame Street for a few hours, then it's time for you to eat, have your bath, good night." Early in February, the effects of the 7:30 a.m. school start time have started to catch up with James. He tells Annie he is too tired and doesn't want to go to school. Annie, being responsive to his needs, lets James sleep several more minutes. However, this is disconcerting to Annie who is not able to give James a wholesome breakfast before he leaves for school. In line 20 Annie says, "I haven't been givin' him his oatmeal." It further worries Annie that sometimes James doesn't eat breakfast at school because "...sometimes he say I didn't eat it because I don't like it." In lines 21 and 22 Annie again mentions the oatmeal breakfast. "I know at home he's going to have his juice; he's going to have his oatmeal."

### *Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 23-34)*

**Sometimes James is so tired Annie lets him stay home from school. She has a lot of self doubt about this as James will have to have good attendance in first grade**

**Annie:** 23You know the first year went smooth because you know the 9:20 (9:20 said crisply)  
 24and he got you know enough rest to where you know he wouldn't have to be tired  
**Natalie:** 25Right



- Annie:** 26And so some days like now I feel bad I feel guilty to us you know something you  
27don't have to go to school today but I know that's a bad habit (voice comes down  
28on bad habit) and I don't want to get into because he's going to be going to the first  
29grade and that's dif important that's when they start grading you and your  
30attendance and stuff.
- Natalie:** 31Yeah
- Annie:** 32So now I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place because I like this school and  
33it's close to where I live at but I don't know I may have to choose another school  
34for him to go to simply because of the time.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Montessori (1917) developed an equation to show that the psychical factor of a child, the development of the child's intellect or mind (P) is the sum of two factors, I and E. The unknown internal factor (I) is represented by X and E the external factor or the environment is directly observed. Montessori (1917) states an individual cannot be divorced from his environment because the content of the environment constitutes the means of experience in which the child evolves. However, the psychical individual is not his environment but a life in himself hence the formula  $P = X + E$  in which X is the internal and intrinsic. In order to study development it is essential to first determine the constant element, the means of development offered by the environment. Two significant factors on the external side of the equation in James' life is the early start time for school and Annie's response to the early start time.

### Discussion of the Talk

The 7:30 a.m. start time for school has produced internal strains for Annie in her mutually responsive orientation system with James. On occasional mornings when Annie sees James is too tired to go to school, she allows him to stay home. This weighs heavily on Annie's conscience as she knows it is a bad habit and that in first grade the teacher will start to grade James' attendance. Yet, in spite of the early start time, the decision to choose another school for James is difficult for Annie. In lines 32-34 she informs Natalie that "...now I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place because I like this school and it's close to where I live at but I don't know I may have to choose another school for him to go to simply because of the time."

### *Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 35-49)*

**Lack of sleep discourages James. Annie realizes he is too young to understand he needs to develop a will toward a positive attitude for school**

- Annie:** 35So (pause) that's another thing so half way up the street, I'm tired, I'm tired, I don't  
36want to go to school, I don't like school anymore." And I don't want him to to to  
37go through that right now you're too young to be saying I hate school
- Natalie:** 38Yeah

- Annie:** 39And he never did that before until now the timing it wasn't a problem at first but  
40now it's catching up to him
- Natalie:** 41Yeah, yeah it's getting week in week out with this
- Annie:** 42So that's one of my biggest worries is that I don't want him to have a bad  
43experience now he's too young to be saying I hate school, I don't like school and I  
44told him baby you got a long way to go
- Natalie:** 45Right, right
- Annie:** 46So please stop saying you hate school 'cause you got more years to go James.
- Natalie:** 47Yeah
- Annie:** 48Uhm I don't know (said quietly under her breath). I try to explain it to him but he's  
49too young to understand

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Sleep is important for a developing 4-6 year old child and it is a critical factor in the problems James and Annie are having about James' attitude toward school. On the average, 4 to 6 year old children need 10-11 hours of sleep (Berk, 2002). Between ages 3 and 5, most North American children give up naps. However, a quiet play period or rest after lunch helps them rejuvenate for the rest of the day (Dahl as cited in Berk, 2002). Sleep is necessary so the child has the energy to engage with the environment. A classroom arranged to engage the child requires that the child persevere in the task so that his intelligence can become gradually enriched. Each child moves in obedience to the motor power within him to perceive the external world. The child observes, reasons and corrects errors of the senses in a sustained and spontaneous activity. It is the child who seeks to win from his environment the possibility of concentrating his mind upon it (Montessori, 1917).

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Annie informs Natalie that when she and James are halfway up the street walking to school, James starts to say, "I'm tired, I'm tired, I don't want to go to school, I don't like school anymore," (lines 35 and 36). Annie understands that James' schedule requires him to get up very early to go to school and that the lack of sleep has caught up with him. His body cannot sustain the daily routine of this activity. Annie tells Natalie in a very concerned tone that James is "too young to be saying I hate school," (line 43). Annie tries to give James a sense of the long stretch of time he will have to go to school. "Please stop saying you hate school 'cause you got more years to go, James" (line 46). However, his young mind cannot absorb this. Annie's confidence in the situation diminishes into a very quiet tone as she confides to Natalie, "I don't know. I try to explain to him but he's too young to understand" (lines 48-49).

### *Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 50-63)*

**The Mercer School new early start time of 7:30 has disrupted the schedule of working parents who previously were able to pick up their children after school**

- Nadia:** 50When the school was a 9:20 school what's the uhm usual time for dismissal?

- Annie:** 513:20; 3:25  
**Nadia:** 52Oh, okay  
**Bea:** 53And then they give you an optional before school program and  
**Bea/Annie:** 54after school program  
**Nadia:** 55Yeah  
**Bea:** 56So your needs are still being met but you have the choice to keep your child you  
 57know at home and sleep  
**Annie:** 58So they gave the kids a longer day without askin' the parents  
**Nadia:** 59Yeah  
**Annie:** 60you know you might have a job after you pick your kids up you know then you got  
 61to try to find someone to sit with the kids you know before school or after school  
 62when a lot of parents picked the school okay they got enough time to get the kids  
 63ready and get themselves ready drop the kids off and go on to work.

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The dilemma in this talk segment stems from the school not taking the initiative to consult with parents about the new extended school day. Although teachers were given the authority to set the new start time, they did not have all the necessary information when they made their decision. The teachers did not consider how different start times would affect family routines. If they had consulted with parents they would have learned of personal circumstances and potential conflicts. With this knowledge, the principal could have created a good enough plan that accommodated family needs and still provided an adequate school day for learning. In an ethnographic study, Lawson (2003) found that teachers put parent involvement into two categories. Each category describes how families and parents cooperate and work for the needs of the school as defined by teachers. School-based and home-based parent involvement revolves around activities that help reinforce the school's mission. Such a focus on school mission would preclude considering parents' views regarding the structuring of the school day.

### Discussion of the Talk

This year the James Mercer School went on an extended school day that was mandated by the District. The school had the option of deciding when the school day would start. As an informant, Bea tells the group about the benefits of schools opening at a later hour. These schools have optional before and after programs that give parents the flexibility to keep a young child at home to get extra sleep before the first class begins. Annie tells the group that "they gave the kids a longer day without askin' the parents" (line 58). The change from a later start time to an earlier start time has produced stress for parents who have to coordinate with other adults to pick their children up from school. Many parents had picked the Mercer School because it had a later starting time and this helped them coordinate their day with their children. Annie brings up this point as this talk segment concludes, "a lot of parents picked the school okay they got enough time to get the kids ready and get themselves ready drop the kids off and go on to work" (lines 62-63).

*Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 64-100)*

**Bea talks about a program in the district that has a long day with scheduled nap and rest times for children**

- Bea:** 64Because the developing achievers they had this kind of model in mind they have  
65their program from 8:00 'till 4:00. You know their program because they uhm their  
66little ones they nap
- Nadia/**
- Natalie:** 67When do they nap?
- Annie:** 68No they they used to in K1 they used to
- Bea:** 69They have a rest they have a rest period because I was lookin' at that school for  
70Jackie when I was going to transfer him. They have a rest period as a matter of fact  
71right when they they eat, they go outside
- Natalie:** 72Right
- Bea:** 73And then they come back they listen to a story and then they rest (rest emphasized).  
74And then during that rest period you know the teachers have their meetings and all  
75that stuff and then class resumes again at uhm 2:00. You know?
- Natalie:** 76So they start at 8:00?
- Bea:** 77They start at 8:00
- Natalie:** 78And they have breakfast there?
- Bea:** 79Oh yeah! They have breakfast there uhm
- Natalie:** 80Then they have exercise?
- Bea:** 81Then they what they do is that theirs is different because when they come in they  
82have like the morning socialization. The kids come in and they get to play a bit; do  
83the head count; the kids transition and they know that they are in school
- Natalie:** 84Okay
- Bea:** 85They line them up; they tell them okay hats off; everything inside your back pack.  
86Then they go inside the cafeteria; then they eat and then if anyone's tardy they're  
87coming into the cafeteria they're eating; they'll take a couple of breakfasts inside  
88the room in case they get kids late from the bus; they come in and then at that time  
89they're having circle
- Natalie:** 90Mmm
- Bea:** 91So the kids come in it's a warm up; the kids are coming in and they're doing the  
92whole circle again. Now everybody is in
- Nadia:** 93Mmmm
- Bea:** 94The late kids [deleted extraneous talk] then the instruction starts
- Natalie:** 95Mmm
- Bea:** 96Math, the reading uhm then at that time they go to lunch then they go outside or if  
97it's inclement weather they have indoor recess
- Natalie:** 98Okay
- Bea:** 99The gym and after that they come back and they nap. Everything starts back up at  
1002:00.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Parents in the focus group are sensitive and alert regarding the experience of their child in the classroom. Lightfoot (2003) writes about this response. "To parents, their child is the most important person in their lives, the one who arouses their deepest passions and

Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, Bea reveals to the group her investigation of another school in the District. This particular school has a very long day from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Bea talks about the transition process into the school day "when they come in they have like the morning

greatest vulnerabilities, the one who inspires their fiercest advocacy and protection” (Lightfoot, 2003). The construct of the mutually responsive orientation (Kochanska, 2002) is intended to apply to a parent-child dyad yet it can also be applied to a student-teacher dyad. The key idea is the actualization of the socialization process through relationships. When relationship partners are responsive and attuned to each other, are mutually supportive and enjoy being together, they form an internal model of their relationship as a cooperative enterprise and develop an eager receptive stance toward each other’s influence (Kochanska, 2002). Focus group parents are aware that the environment has to be structured for this response to occur in the classroom. It is the reason why Bea investigates different forms of class day structures.

socialization” (lines 81-82). “The kids come in and they get to play a bit; do the head count, the kids transition and they know that they are in school” (lines 82-83). The children have breakfast, circle time and then they start their math and reading lessons. They break for lunch, then go outside and play. When they come back in they nap. Then “everything starts back up again at 2:00” (lines 99-100). Bea is persistent in seeking out different forms of school day structures so she can discuss them with other parents at the Mercer School. This school gives children time to absorb transitions and to rest. Children are eased into the school day with a lot of socialization and their bodies rest during naptime after major tasks are completed. These characteristics of the school day are important to Bea.

*Focus Group 9 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 101-124 )*

**Bea talks about the transition time she needs with Jackie to help him enter the school day**

- Bea:** 101 First of all you know he’s having that tough time with Mrs. Tyler and when he  
102 comes in he’s just the kind of kid that he needs to have a second check a second  
103 run through of where he is he wants to take everything off and put it in his back  
104 pack and he just needs to say good bye for a little while because it’s a long day  
105 and it’s just getting to the point where I’m being told “he’s too big for that,” “you  
106 need to cut that off” (said in a harsh tone)
- Natalie:** 107 Who said that?
- Bea:** 108 “You need to get done” Uhm Miss Day or uhm and then when this conversation is  
109 happening [the principal] will come out and say, “Well what’s going on?” “Are  
110 you ready for school?” And it’s just not even that it doesn’t even have to get to  
111 that it’s just that there has to be a place like the yard was a place [deleted  
112 extraneous talk]
- Bea:** 113 But it’s not giving the kids the socialization in the morning
- Annie:** 114 Like they used to have – to run around, play, do whatever, to unwind I’ll say okay  
115 well now they can go to school now
- Bea:** 116 Like I used to practice with Jackie this is where you’re going to be and he’d say  
117 I’m not ready right now so I’d take him to under the little tree right there and sit  
118 and talk and I would say okay uhm where’s your line? And he would say that’s  
119 well that’s my line over there.
- Annie:** 120 Yup and they’d get into

**Bea:** 121And then I'd say well find your buddy James okay well he's not here yet and and  
 122I'd ask him do you want to wait? And he says yeah yeah 'cause he's coming and  
 123then when James comes in he'll line up with him and everything happens but that  
 124doesn't happen when they're all shoving them in

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This talk episode allows observation of the needs Bea and Jackie have when they say good-bye to each other before Jackie lines up with his class to begin the school day. The encounter is intense and feelings are the topic of discussion.

Laible & Thompson (2000) found that the contexts and currency of parent-child interactions change over time.

Exchanges begin as non-verbal and become increasingly verbal. Contexts expand from being centered on play to parent-child discussion of events and ideas. The developing dyad emotion-laden verbal discourse is related to the security of the attachment relationship between mother and child. Mother-child dyads with secure attachment relationships are able to reference feelings more frequently than insecure dyads (Laible & Thompson, 2000). Feelings are important for Bea and Jackie and in this talk episode Jackie learns to articulate and work with his feelings.

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea relates to the group the amount of time she needs to converse with Jackie before he is able to let her go and he is able to join his line to begin the school day. Bea tells the group why this is important "he's just the kind of kid that he needs to have a second check, a second run through of where he is...he just needs to say good bye for a little while because it's a long day" (lines 102-104). Bea relates how last year she helped Jackie to gradually get into his line. First, he wanted to wait for his friend James. He told Bea he wanted to wait because he knew he was coming. When Jackie sees James, Bea says "he'll line up with him and everything happens" (line 123). Bea concludes by saying "that doesn't happen when they're all shoving them in" (lines 123-124). In K2 the morning routine for getting children to start the school day goes at a much quicker pace than in K1. This is difficult for Bea and Jackie because Jackie's internal rhythm does not match the school's pace for what is expected during the transitional period for K2 children.

**Table 11**  
**Section 3 – (Focus Group 10)**  
**Appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development**  
**could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to**  
**advocacy**

Focus Group	Topic Related Episode	Lines	Description
10	1	1-12	Bea talks about investigating a nearby neighborhood school that has built participatory school councils into its framework
10	2	13-28	Nadia says the parent council at the Michaels School enables the kids, parents and teachers to function together
10	3	29-50	Bea says parents at the Michaels School believe that academics will improve only when there are emotional outlets for the kids in the building
10	4	51-62	Bea's friend at the Michaels School organized parents through the parent council. With this support she requested a school report regarding what is offered at each grade level
10	5	63-79	Not having the support to organize an inclusive talk around social-emotional development Bea tells Natalie inviting the speaker would be ineffective
10	6	80-90	Annie becomes fearful that James will not have the emotional support of his K2 friends when he enters first grade as his group will not be staying together

*Focus Group 10 – Topic Related Episode 1 (lines 1-12)*

**Bea talks about investigating a nearby neighborhood school that has built participatory school councils into its framework**

[Bea relates going to another nearby elementary school to discuss school structure]

**Bea:** 1they also have uhm a parent council, school based management and a school site  
2council and the profile of the John Mercer it only has an outreach coordinator.  
[deleted extraneous talk]

**Bea:** 3at the Michaels she said we do not have a family outreach coordinator we have a  
4nurturance program

**Natalie:** 5What's that? [deleted extraneous talk]

**Bea:** 6It fosters social emotional development [deleted extraneous talk]

**Bea:** 7It offers trainings and workshops to the teachers to imbed that in the classroom  
8environment and their repertoire in teaching

**Natalie:** 9Okay

**Bea:** 10which is what we have been learning

**Natalie:** 11Uhhm

**Bea:** 12Here with you

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

This talk segment focuses on parent-school governance structures that mobilize a specific school to create innovative programming that helps students in the classroom. In particular, this school focuses on nurturance and created teacher workshops to help them imbed social-emotional learning within the structure of the school day. Shatkint & Gershberg (2007) citing Bryk et al (1997) found that it is possible for school site councils to be effective and parents can influence school decisions if the council systematically develops plans based on a well-defined educational philosophy. Explaining the differences in effectiveness of parent input among schools within the same district, Shatkint & Gershberg (2007) citing Bryk et al (1997) state that research findings indicate that a principal with leadership skills and a collaborative style is the single most important factor as her influence can help offset the potential for bias in decision making. This requires a principal who finds ways to systematically incorporate input from parents, can act as an advocate for parents and as a mediator between parents and other members of the school site council.

### Discussion of the Talk

Bea informs the group that she went to the Michaels School and discussed with a friend that school's parent-school governance structure. Bea relates to the group that the Michaels Schools has three structures authorized by the district. "...they also have uhm a parent council, school based management and a school site council" (lines 1-2). This utterance is followed by more detailed information contrasting the Michaels School to the Mercer School. "at the Michaels she said we do not have a family outreach coordinator we have a nurturance program" (line 3). Natalie responds by asking "What's that?" (line 5). Bea responds "it fosters social emotional development" (line 6). Bea gives further detail "it offers trainings and workshops to the teachers to imbed that in the classroom environment and their repertoire in teaching" (lines 6-8). After this utterance Bea changes her stance from informer to focus group participant and tells Natalie this is what we have been learning here with you. In this talk segment with Natalie, Bea associates the establishment of parent-school governance structures with innovative programs that help teachers learn how to help children with social-emotional skills.

### *Focus Group10 – Topic Related Episode 2 (lines 13-28 )*

**Nadia says the parent council at the Michaels School enables the kids, parents and teachers to function together**

- Bea:** 13And when I look at the scores at the Michaels they're unbelievable 15, 20 points  
14higher than ours
- Maria:** 15But it's a very small school too
- Bea:** 16But it's a school that



- Nadia:** 17They did a comparison with the schools that have active parent council  
**Bea:** 18Yeah  
**Nadia:** 19And we looked at their uh percentages for kids that are passin’  
**Bea:** 20Yeah  
**Nadia:** 21kids that are just barely passin’ kids that are not passin’ at all and the schools that  
 22do have parent council that are workin’ with like the  
**Bea:** 23young achievers  
**Nadia:** 24They have a very good pass  
**Bea:** 25They have a very good pass  
**Nadia:** 26It’s amazing how much one little group you know enables the teacher and the kids  
 27and the parents to function that’s  
**Bea:** 28beneficial to the kids. They have a soccer program

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

The Comer School Development Program involves parents in school planning and management (Comer & Haynes, 1991). The program has been responsible for academic gains in several schools. To produce these results, the program provides a conceptual and operational framework that focuses on child development centered training for staff and parents. In one example, after working with the program for six years, 80% of students passed the Michigan Education Assessment Program Test (MEAP) in reading and science and 100% passed in mathematics. In the following year, 2000, the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class achieved the highest MEAP test scores among elementary schools in their size category in the state. The principal’s philosophy, “the school should be a safe haven for children, someplace that inspires learning” is an important underpinning for these achievements (Comer, 2001). In the Comer program parents work together with the staffs of schools to develop and implement comprehensive school plans. Parents do not supersede or challenge the authority of principals and their staffs. They provide perspectives on matters that serve the best interests of children (Comer & Haynes, 1991).

### Discussion of the Talk

At the beginning of this talk segment Bea states that academic scores at the Michaels School are 15-20 points higher than the Mercer School. Nadia responds to this utterance by saying the district did a comparison of district schools between those that have an active parent council and those that do not. Speaking as an informant and talking about the results of the comparison, Nadia says, “we looked at their uh percentages for kids that are passin’ (line 19). She talks about the levels of passing “kids that are just barely passin’, kids that are not passin’ at all” (line 21). Nadia continues as an informant saying that “schools that do have parent councils that are workin’ with like the (line 22-23), Bea finishes the sentence with “young achievers” line 23. Nadia continues “have a very good pass (line 24). Nadia sums up the talk in this segment and foreshadows what she wants by saying, “it’s amazing how much one little group you know enables the teacher and the kids and the parents to function that is (lines 26-27), Bea concludes the thought “beneficial to the kids” (line 28).

*Focus Group 10 – Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 29-50)*

**Bea says parents at the Michaels School believe that academics will improve only when there are emotional outlets for the kids in the building**

**Bea:** 29Because the Michaels School and the uhm the Science & Math School they do  
30not have a community center but because they believe the parents believe that the  
31only way the academics are going to improve is that you have to have some kind  
32of engagement where the kids feel that there are emotional outlets in the building  
33so it's like a two-way

**Natalie:** 34Uhhm

**Bea:** 35They can release you know emotionally and then pick up the information in that  
36building

**Natalie:** 37Right [deleted extraneous talk]

**Bea:** 38and they do it with the ah specialties that they have

**Natalie:** 39Okay

**Bea:** 40So here at the Mercer we have specialties

**Natalie:** 41What are specialties?

**Bea:** 42The specialties are like the ah um

**Maria:** 43The art teacher

**Bea:** 44like the art, gym, computers but art is not offered in all the grades art is only

45offered from Kindergarten to the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade

**Natalie:** 46Gives a little laugh of disbelief

**Bea:** 47at the Mercer. So those kids will never see art again. At the Michaels School they

48have art from Kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, music from Kindergarten to 5<sup>th</sup> grade,

49everybody gets it. There is more teaching across the curriculum and it's

50(inaudible) and everybody has is united through a common thread

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

When Bea says that academics are only going to improve when children are engaged in some kind of emotional outlet and with the release of energy through that outlet children are able to “pick up the information in that building” she is alluding to a principle enunciated by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007). The brain is a highly integrated organ and its multiple functions operate in a richly coordinated fashion. During one observable activity, there are many energy centers working together to release energy. In the example of oral language, acquisition depends not only on adequate hearing, the ability to differentiate sounds, and the capacity to link meaning to specific words, but on

Discussion of the Talk

In lines 30-32 Bea speaks as an informant to the group about her visit to the Michaels School. She says “parents believe that the only way the academics are going to improve is that you have to have some kind of engagement where the kids feel that there are emotional outlets in the building.” Bea connects being able to release emotional energy to children being able to “pick up the information in that building” [learning in the classroom.] Bea informs the group that the Michaels School has art and music for every child from Kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. At the Mercer, art is offered only through the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Bea believes that at the Michaels there is more teaching across the curriculum and everyone is united through a common

the ability to concentrate, pay attention, and engage in meaningful social interaction. By advocating for art, music and gym Bea is asserting children need a variety of activities that will engage their bodies and their minds. Many of these activities draw children into social encounters with other children. Ladd, Birch & Buhs (1999) observe from their research that the indirect pathway through peer acceptance is the most important path to achievement.

thread. Bea does not elaborate whether teaching across the curriculum means integrating art and music with other subjects or that everything that could be offered to a child through a curriculum is being offered. Bea speaks at length about the Michaels curriculum so it appears to be an important subject for her.

*Focus Group 10 – Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 51-62)*

**Bea's friend at the Michaels School organized parents through the parent council. With this support she requested a school report regarding what is offered at each grade level**

- Bea:** 51And the thing is like we just like we're seeing that 'cause when I met with Penny I  
52said well Penny
- Natalie:** 53Who is she?
- Bea:** 54She's the co-chair of the parent council at the Michaels School and I asked her  
55how did you get a big parent council?
- Natalie:** 56Right
- Bea:** 57and she says I did exactly what you and Nadia are going to do. I got at least two  
58members of every grade level and I sat with the principal and I said to have a  
59school report card we need to have on paper what you're actually offering
- Natalie:** 60Uhhm
- Bea:** 61we need to have a report card an agenda of what every grade level is doing so  
62parents can see what their kids are getting and what their kids are not getting.

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Committees, operations and guidelines help schools create a culture of mutual respect and collaboration. Working in a collaborative environment allows relationships to be supportive of student development and social and academic programs. The transformation to a collaborative culture is gradual but frequent in schools that work to form good adult relationships. However, activities and interactions that support social and academic learning cannot be

Discussion of the Talk

TRE 4 is a continuation of TRE 3. Bea, speaking as a parent organizer says that the strategy of recruiting two parents from each grade level to be on the parent council will build a strong parent council. This utterance develops into Bea relating that her friend with a strong parent council went to the principal and said parents need to have on paper what the school is actually offering their children. In lines 61-62, Bea translates the action of her friend into what she

carried out for very long in a school where staff members do not like, trust, or respect one another or the parents. In addition conditions of cooperation cannot be mandated (Comer, 2001).

could do. “We need to have a report card an agenda of what every grade level is doing so parents can see what their children are getting and what their children are not getting.” In TRE 3, Bea speaks about the importance of emotional outlets to enhance academic achievement. This outlet in the form of art does not exist at the Mercer School after the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. It is conceivable Bea would like to discuss this and the idea of the report card with the principal.

*Focus Group 10 – Topic Related Episode 5 (lines 63-79)*

**Not having the support to organize an inclusive talk around social-emotional development Bea tells Natalie inviting the speaker would be ineffective**

- Bea:** 63I said I'll tell you what because I can read and write in Spanish and I can translate  
64let me be the secretary because I can communicate better I can speak Spanish and  
65there's a big Spanish population there
- Annie:** 66Uhhm
- Bea:** 67and I can also meet with one of the Cape Verdean parents
- Natalie:** 68Right
- Bea:** 69to work on uhm anything that needs to be translated uhm and then Nadia can co-  
70chair so we did that  
71So I said to him in the very beginning a year ago I would like to help with the  
72student population and the parents and he said yeah if you really feel that way I
- Bea:** 73We would like to have Miss Locke attend but whereas we have not been able to  
74meet with [the coordinator] and whereas we have not been able to allocate a room
- Natalie:** 75Yeah
- Bea:** 76so then work with Miss Locke uhm it's just wouldn't really it would just really be  
77a waste of time for Miss Locke to come
- Natalie:** 78Right
- Bea:** 79And we won't be effective

Theory and Theoretical Considerations

Based on their research, Shatkin & Gershberg (2007) state that their findings suggest that where parents are given meaningful decision-making authority in schools and where principals actively facilitate parent involvement,

Discussion of the Talk

Bea is Cuban and bilingual. She can read and write in English and Spanish. When she offered to volunteer to work with parents and students a year ago the coordinator gave her a positive response and said if she really felt that

impacts on school improvement may occur. Their conceptual framework regarding impacts has two prongs. Collaborative decision making between parents and principals, teachers and school staff could lead to improved education performance if parents become more empowered and aware of the role they play in their children's education. Secondly, parent participation may have a direct influence on the physical, social and economic development of communities if participation in school governance leads parents to develop skills that enable them to take on leadership roles elsewhere in their communities. Such outcomes are dependent on parents being able to effectively participate and assert meaningful influence on decision making (Shatkin & Gershberg, 2007). Shaeffer as cited in Shatkin & Gershberg (2007) makes the distinction between participation which implies a relatively strong and active role on the part of parents and parent involvement which connotes passive collaboration. In the case of Bea and Nadia structural support is weak and their actions are heading toward passive collaboration.

way [it was okay]. Bea is enthusiastic as she recounts to the group her initial desire to help form a parent council. Her offer to the coordinator was "let me be the secretary because I can communicate better I can speak Spanish and there's a big Spanish population there" (lines 64-65). Bea also arranged for Nadia to be co-chair with her. By mid-February after several months have elapsed, Bea and Nadia do not have a room where they could keep files and make phone calls to parents so they could begin organizing a parent council. They have also not been able to meet with the coordinator to discuss bringing the speaker to the Mercer School to talk with parents and teachers about social emotional development. Bea explains "whereas we have not been able to allocate a room" (line 74) "so then work with Miss Locke...it just really would be a waste of time for Miss Locke to come" (lines 76 and 77). "We won't be effective" (line 79). The opportunity to meet with her would not be realized and the possibility of building a dialogue would be deferred.

*Focus Group10 – Topic Related Episode 6 (lines 80-90)*

**Annie becomes fearful that James will not have the emotional support of his K2 friends when he enters first grade as his group will not be staying together**

- Bea:** 80I just think it was such a very hard hard year and I would hate to have the same  
81kind of disorganization of the school next year [deleted extraneous talk]
- Annie:** 82I'm scared every day too but I have confidence in Miss Baker
- Bea:** 83But then next year who are you going to have?
- Natalie:** 84What did you say I didn't catch it
- Annie:** 85I got all the confidence in the world in Miss Baker but next year he's goin' to first  
86grade
- Nadia:** 87Yeah
- Annie:** 88And you know Kindergarten 1 they keep them they go to Kindergarten 2. Most of  
89the same friends now they going to split them up he's not going to have the same  
90friends and you know the pressure's going to be on now

### Theory and Theoretical Considerations

In TRE 6, Annie has many concerns about James' transition to first grade when he and his group of friends will be split into different classrooms. Findings from the study of Ladd, Birch & Buhs (1999) stress the importance of peer relationships leading to participation and achievement in the classroom. Children who utilize pro-social styles early in Kindergarten are more successful in forming peer relationships and peer group acceptance has the greatest impact on participation levels. Their study also confirmed that the path between classroom participation and achievement was substantial and positive (Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999). James' network of peer relationships is about to be disrupted when he enters first grade. Annie worries about this but she does not confide in James' K2 teacher. In the past Miss Baker has answered all of Annie's questions about James' academic work but Annie and Miss Baker have never discussed in depth the task of a 6 year old child forming a new support network. Swick (2008) says that in order to increase active collaboration between schools and homes, the early childhood professional should possess an understanding of the goals and experiences parents have. To have a meaningful conversation with parents, the professional must believe the family plays an important role in the process of education. A parent council would have given Annie the opportunity to articulate some of her concerns. Once articulated through the parent council it would have become a legitimate topic for further discussion with school staff.

### Discussion of the Talk

In this talk segment, the focus group participants speak about the disorganization they feel in the school. Annie feels especially unsettled. In line 82 Annie says, "I'm scared every day too but I have confidence in Miss Baker." Bea responds to this utterance and asks, "But then next year who are you going to have?" (line 83). Annie repeats that she has all the confidence in the world in Miss Baker but adds next year James is going to first grade. Nadia responds and says "Yeah" (line 87). This response makes Annie elaborate regarding the details of this situation and this causes the tone of her voice and her words to show concern. "Most of the same friends now they going to split them up he's not going to have the same friends and you know the pressure's going to be on now" (lines 88-90). Annie is aware that James thrives on his associations with his classmates. She does not know how he will cope when many of them will be in another classroom when he goes on to first grade.

### **Synthesis of the Talk in Focus Groups 8-10**

Two discussions stimulate the imagination of the mothers during this portion of the conversation. The discovery of what other nearby schools in the district are doing creatively to work with children produces a sense of cautious hope that this could happen at the Mercer School. There is also a renewed focus on the importance of social emotional development being integrated into the curriculum and finding a way to make the discussion of this topic a bridging experience between parents and teachers in terms of communication.

Nadia's discussion of her son's music class pinpoints some of the weaknesses the Mercer School has in interjecting social emotional development into the curriculum (FG8 TRE1). An activity that could strengthen social emotional development becomes an isolating experience. Children do not interact with each other. There is no activity around the sensory engagement with music that would lead children into the task of exploring their environment and developing social emotional skills. Nadia brings up the example of children taking apart the simple recorder and putting it back together again in Jamaica— a task that would absorb their attention. It is an intense interest in an object that can calm the child (Montessori, 1917); thus, planning sensory experiences that soothe and engage the child would very likely get the child ready to make social contact with another child.

Bea and Nadia focus their sights on a school event they would like to have that would bring in an expert to talk about embedding social emotional development into the curriculum (FG8 TRE4). They see this as the first step to engage with teachers about this topic. However, teachers who are in a more authoritative position within the school are apt to determine what types of contributions parents could make (Lawson, 2003). If the early childhood teacher is to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with

families, he or she must believe that families have an important role in the process of education (Knoph & Swick, 2008).

If the administration could bring teachers to a level of understanding that families do have an important role to play in the dialogue about education, valuable benefits could develop. Parents would gain confidence in themselves as partners with teachers; parents and teachers would have more meaningful involvement with the children and each other; and teachers would see parental involvement in more positive and diverse ways (Swick as cited in Knoph & Swick, 2008).

However, the Mercer School has experienced an occurrence of teachers imposing their corporate will on decisions that affect the daily routines of families and children. Up at 6:00 a.m. every morning, Annie informs the group that James' physical capacity has started to weaken and sometimes he is too tired to go to school because he does not get the eleven hours of sleep he needs (FG9 TRE2). Eleven hours is the normal amount of sleep children 4-6 year old children need (Berk, 2002). The source of this extra burden on Annie is the teachers' decision to start the school day at 7:30 a.m. to accommodate the mandated longer day without conferring with the parents. Yet, such situations are not unusual. In an ethnographic study, Lawson (2003) found that teachers characterize the way families and parents cooperate to work for the needs of the school in terms defined by the teachers. If this is the typical response towards parents who would like to engage in a dialogue, the efforts of the mothers to forge a collaboration with teachers appears a daunting pursuit.

However, the mothers are not discouraged. The efforts of Bea's friend who formed a strong parent council at the nearby Michaels School encourage them (FG10



TRE4). Just as confused as Bea was about what her children were learning, she formed a coalition of two parents from each grade level. They met with the principal to discuss and document what their children are learning at each grade level. From that beginning, the school instituted art and music for every child from Kindergarten through fifth grade to ensure that they have the means to relax, reflect, and express their personal natures.

The Mercer and the Michaels Schools are neighborhood schools in the same part of the city. Yet, one is moving ahead with the strong engagement of parents in school policy. Explaining the differences in effectiveness of parent input among schools within the same district, Shatkint & Gershberg (2007) citing Bryk et al (1997) state that research findings indicate that a principal with leadership skills and a collaborative style is the single most important factor as her influence can help offset the potential bias in decision making. This is a principal who finds ways to systematically incorporate input from parents and acts as an advocate for them.

Nadia, Bea and Annie are not engaged at this level with the institutional dialogue. However, they continue to work with the school and with their children to give their sons the best educational experience they can.

The integrative analysis that follows begins by discussing the major theme that came out of the study, the parents' desire that the school and teachers support three dimensions in their children that they believe are critical to their growth. These areas of development are the intellectual and physical development of their child and the development of the personal sense of expression their child brings to the classroom. After this discussion the chapter turns to the three mothers and a discussion of the knowledge they bring to the formal educational experience of their children due to the fact that they

have been observing them grow during the past several years. To add insight to this discussion, a chronology of language development in children up to five years of age is presented. After these initial comments, the chapter focuses on how each mother copes with helping her child make the transition into the world of formal education. Each mother anticipates that her child's ability to converse and exchange ideas will continue to develop in the classroom. In addition to acquiring formal literacy skills, reading and writing, each mother wants her child's intellectual, physical and emotional growth to be enhanced by the classroom experience. The analysis discusses the situational factors each mother must cope with as she works to make sure the school provides these opportunities for growth in her child.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **INTEGRATIVE ANALYSIS**

#### **Major Theme and Supporting Ideas**

The major theme that spans the ten sessions and is discussed in various ways in the three sections of the conversation is the desire by the parents that the school and the teachers support three dimensions of their children that they believe are critical to their children's growth. The first dimension is their intellectual growth, their ability to reason and think, and their ability to extend their language and literacy skills. Second is their physical growth that includes a well paced classroom with time built in to allow children to concentrate on a task, to work on it carefully and to complete it as best as they can and then time to rest and absorb what they have done. The third is the growth of personal expression and the child's unique way of interacting with other children in the classroom. In this regard, they would like the teacher to give the child opportunities to converse with the teacher. They believe that a teacher who is accessible and converses with children in the classroom maintains a stable and predictable environment.

In the first section of the micro-analysis, "Tension, confusion and apprehension about the early childhood literacy program," the tension and apprehension the parents feel stems from the lack of communication parents have received about the construction of the program. The administration has not discussed the broad educational philosophy behind the program; the teaching pedagogy that supports the program and the week-by-week expectations for the child that builds from the curriculum. To compensate for this

lack of information, parents use the focus group to voice their desire to interact with teachers, to converse with them about the implementation of the program. Key to the implementation is the way the teacher relates to their child. They would like to feel that the child has a robust relationship with the teacher that gives the child the opportunity to engage in a way that demonstrates his thinking and reasoning skills.

Parents would like a detailed explanation of classroom structure so they could support what the child is learning in the classroom. In particular, they would like to understand the nature of conceptual talk in the classroom. To facilitate communication with the teachers, parents would like to establish a human connection. They would like to feel that they are partners working together to support the child.

In the second section of the micro-analysis, “Probing the nature of their interactions with their children and their children’s responses to the early childhood literacy program,” parents express an overwhelming sense of responsibility for the educational needs of their children. This is caused by the tension they feel due to not having an easy relationship with the teacher to discuss the growth of their children. They believe this causes a weak emotional structure around the child. They would like a positive valence that is not colored by the tension they feel toward the program and the teacher. The relaxation of this tension would facilitate a positive attachment to the teacher and a sense of felt security and warmth in the classroom by the child and the parent.

Parents voice interest in classroom structure. Their focus is on innovative ways to engage with the child in the pursuit of productive work and play. They realize class size is too large for teachers to have individual conversations with their children; it is reported

that some children do not know how to converse with the teacher in the classroom. This causes concern.

Due to lack of communication, values and goals are not established to guide the responses of parents and teachers when different viewpoints emerge about the quality of a child's written work. Many times a teacher cannot see beyond a superficially weak paper. To correct this, parents wish teachers would engage with their child's temperament and sense of personal expression. In FG6 TRE3 Bea says, "you know ... the overall goals ... make them more uh uh fine tune them to the children." Bea would like the teacher to adapt her teaching methods in such a way that she could fine tune them to her son's responses.

In the third section of the micro-analysis, "Appreciative inquiry into understanding how social-emotional development could be integrated into the academic curriculum and finding a pathway to advocacy," mothers realize an official dialogue with teachers sanctified by the school would get them closer to the goal of engaging with teachers about key concerns. An especially important topic relates to classroom adjustments that would strengthen and balance the social and emotional dimensions of the learning experience with the concentrated attention children are asked to summon in order to focus on conceptual academic tasks embedded in the early childhood literacy program.

Parents investigate classroom structure in nearby schools. They want to find activities that would allow their children to calm down, reflect and have the confidence to engage with their natural talents. They hear of a school that provides these opportunities with the result that children perform well on academic tests. That school provides art and

music for every child from Kindergarten through fifth grade. The parents learn that strong school governance instituted these changes and that the principal played a vital role establishing this structure.

The supporting ideas that expand the major theme of the focus group talk (support for the intellectual, physical and emotional growth of their children) are summarized as follows. The lack of a strong relationship with the teacher that makes it difficult to discuss their child in a meaningful way is of critical concern. Class structure and size are important topics for discussion. Classes are too big to be efficiently effective. Parents want classroom structure and size to allow the teacher the opportunity to converse frequently with their children to nurture their children's sense of personal expression, to encourage them to become engaged, and to support the learning that needs to take place.

The relationship between parents and teachers affects the emotional valence around the child. Parents would like to relax this tense relationship so their children could have a positive relationship with the teacher that includes a sense of warmth and safety in the classroom. They would like to establish values and goals that would guide how teachers and parents react to each other when there is a difference of opinion about a child's work. In FG5 TRE3 Maria says, "How do we work together around the child? We're all committed to the child." "And I think we should always try to be (inaudible) not to be adversaries but to really work [together]." The desire to create a meaningful relationship with the teacher develops into a realization that school governance is a possible way through which an official dialogue could be sanctified by the school to begin a discussion about changes in classroom structure that would facilitate growth of their children in the three important dimensions they have articulated.

Although the Mercer School is far from reaching this ideal, the mothers continue to work with the school to make the educational experience engaging and rewarding for their children.

### **A Discussion of How Three Mothers Cope with the Situation**

The purpose of extending the discussion of the major theme and supporting ideas in this section is to elaborate upon the mothers' internal system of ideas and how this is related to the way they perceive the progress their child has made in meaning making. I discuss this in terms of a chronology I created from the works of Halliday (2004). Each mother would like the early childhood literacy program to support the continuation of this growth in terms of the intellectual and physical development of their child and the development of personal expression. Halliday's explanation of the integration of these dimensions indicates why the mothers feel as they do about the early childhood literacy program. Wanting these qualities to be nurtured in the classroom proves to be problematic, most especially in the construction of the classroom and its capacity to work with the complex nature of development and learning. This is the source of the tension the mothers feel with the early childhood literacy program.

Halliday (2004) writes in detail about the emergence of language in very young children relating how the properties of motion and the child's material being, i.e., the child's physical nature, become transformed into meaning and the child's semiotic being. I chart this progression in the chronology to show how fundamental this growth is for entry into primary school and how important it is for the child to continue this type of learning in the classroom – to be able to transform the material into the semiotic. The mothers become apprehensive about the literacy program as they appear to sense that the

expressive natures of their children realized through movement and motion is not being guided and enhanced toward maturity in the classroom.

The dilemma in the classroom that parents report relates to perceived confusion about the balance between time and motion. Tasks appear not to be matched with the amount of time children need to do them. This becomes a matter of providing the good enough environmental provision for the child. Winnicott (1965) notes that the child's growth processes move in the direction of what the environment provides. If there is a break in the good enough environmental provision and a gap appears, there is a holdup of the maturational processes. An important consideration the mothers develop from their concern is the continuation and inter-connectedness of their child making meaning through language at home and at school. This close observation of their children is supported by Halliday. Children learn about learning in general through the process of continuously improving their language skills (Halliday, 2004).

In the extended discussion of the integrative analysis, I connect the systematic ideas of these mothers to child development and educational ideas associated with grade levels K1, K2 and the transitioning tasks from K2 into first grade. As a parent informed analysis, I make inferences from their talk to these theories. I draw on key utterances to illustrate theoretical ideas. This begins with the introduction to Bea in Focus Group 1 Topic Related Episode 1 and concludes with a final utterance by Annie in Focus Group 10 Topic Related Episode 6 as she considers her grandson's transition to first grade.

### **Constructing the Educational Environment**


**Bea:** 1...okay I play outside with my son uhm but when they play outdoors – is the outdoor here  
2 different that there are more imbedded or implicit questions that I wouldn't ask my son, for  
3instance, ah Jackie – what season is it?



In this first utterance (lines 1-3), Bea states an interest in key educational constructs that she thinks are important for the development of her child who is entering a literacy-oriented world. Bea is asking what type of realistic framework should she be relating to with her son that matches in some way the question and response exchanges Jackie's teacher constructs with him. Bea is trying to understand how meaning is construed through language within the context of the formal educational experience. Bea also inquires about a child's nature to explore the natural environment. She wonders if she should be structuring that activity.

The first question that Bea raises, how meaning is construed through language, draws attention to the works of Halliday (2004) and Vygotsky (1986) on language formation and the development of meaning. The second question, how does a child explore the natural environment, draws attention to the work of Montessori (1917) and Piaget (1955) and the qualities of a child's inquisitive nature. In the extension of the integrative analysis, Winnicott's (1965) theory of the good enough environmental provision brings the frameworks of language formation and exploratory activity together to clarify how the child moves toward self-integration through these activities.

Bea concludes this talk segment with the following utterance (lines 9-15).

- Bea:** 9So my style may be different and not you know matching this supporting this so that's why I  
 10kind of like wanted to see a syllabus of what I can maximize that learning and talk about  
 11possible vocabulary
- Natalie:** 12  Right
- Bea:** 13with him language
- Natalie:** 14Right
- Bea:** 15uhm, go to the library and really get books that is going to support the classroom teachin'

The focus of this utterance is vocabulary, language and the library. Bea wants to "really get books" that will support the classroom teaching. In her speech, Bea states how she wants to use this resource. She wants to talk with Jackie about vocabulary so she can

extend his ability to manipulate words thereby strengthening his language skills and maximizing his classroom learning experience. In this talk segment, Bea reports the construction of her desired footing (Goffman, 1981) with the school as a sensitive parent who would like to understand the institution's frameworks for teaching and learning.

### **Language – The Precursor to Literacy**

From a reading of the scholarly papers of linguist M.A. K. Halliday (2004) I developed a great appreciation for his findings regarding the central and fundamental nature of language formation in every child and what this means for learning theory. Language is so elemental that every newborn engages in it from the moment of birth (Halliday, 2004). I preface the discussion of three vignettes that illustrate how Bea, Nadia and Annie deal with the ideas of language and literacy by outlining a chronology of language formation every child follows. It details how language prepares the child to engage in literacy inquiry/literacy instruction in a formal educational setting.

Halliday (2004) gives prominence to the nature of human beings as semiotic beings-- beings of meaning who use a system of signs and symbols to communicate. With this as his premise, he builds a logic regarding why language development, the ability to make meaning through language, precedes literacy, the ability to read and write. Starting with the material and concrete, Halliday substantiates that language formation prepares the child to deal with the abstract entities upon which literacy structures are built (wordings, utterances, sounds in speech, etc.). Halliday (2004) bases his theory on observances of everyday occurrences in their natural settings. He begins his observations from the beginning of life and documents how the human species is rooted in the world with two modes of being, the material and the semiotic.

Trevarthen (as cited in Halliday, 2004) recorded on film how the newborn within 2-3 weeks of birth addresses his mother and responds to being addressed. When the baby's mother's face comes into view, the baby's whole being is animated with movement of arms, legs and head and facial gestures to which the mother responds. When the mother's attention is withdrawn, the baby's movements subside and his body becomes listless and inactive. This is an exchange of meaning this sharing of attention between infant and mother (Bateson as cited in Halliday, 2004).

Such ideas are highlighted as it is the basic premise of this discussion that the purpose of language is to make meaning and that the continuation of this learning from the home into the classroom is of great concern to the parents in the focus group. The discussion takes as its framework the chronology of meaning making from birth to five years of age that I developed from the writings of Halliday (2004). The chronology identifies the time frames in which children develop the ability to create ideas, logic and meaningful exchanges of information as they learn to create language.

Halliday (2004) comes to the field of early language development in children as the result of working with teachers of English from primary and secondary schools in England. Teachers constantly raised with him two questions of concern. 'What is the students' previous experience with language?' and 'How have they arrived where they are?' As a linguist, in order to answer their questions, he had to discover the linguistic biography of an individual human child. Halliday (2004) found that the questions teachers raised were especially important at major transition points in a child's experience with language. One was the beginning of primary school.

Halliday (2004) developed his ideas from four sets of data of direct observations. The data include his own from an intensive study he conducted as a participant-observer of his son Nigel's linguistic ability from 9 months to 2 ½ years of age and that of three other similar studies of direct observations of very young children.

### **Movement and Meaning**

The following graph compiled from the work of Halliday (2004) describes a close relationship in the child between movement and meaning between the ages of birth to five years of age. The period of 8-16 months is especially critical to the development of meaning making. It is during these months that the child is learning to crawl and is able to move the vantage point from which he sees his surroundings. During this period, systems of meaning derived from activity around six functions (instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, and imaginative) develop. Within these functional domains, the baby is able to produce alternative meanings. As an example from the instructional domain such meanings could be, "I want," "I don't want," and "I want very much." The thesis that Halliday lays down is that the mastery of alternative meanings within these six functions is a necessary and sufficient condition to break into the lexico-grammar of adult speech and thought. The internal grammatical system grows out of these six functions (Halliday, 2004).

From this important period of 8-16 months, the chronology charts the steady progress of language development and meaning making. It makes clear why self directed learning about the external world is associated with movement (Piaget, 1955), why there is a gravitational pull to the adult during the process of concept formation (Vygotsky, 1986), and why the inner nature and rhythms of the child propel curiosity and are of

fundamental importance when constructing the formal educational environment of the child (Montessori, 1917). What is particularly relevant to my study is how the child reaches the processes described at age 48-60 months (4-5 years old) when the child is able to deal with abstract meaning.

**Material and Semiotic Action – How the Child Develops the Ability to Make Meaning (from birth to 16 Months)**

<b>Moving</b> <b>[material action]</b>	Agitate limbs	Reach and grasp [directed movement] Action of stretching arms and clasping fists gradually transforms to reaching out <u>Material action:</u> Directed toward some object in the visual field	Roll over [shift perspective]	Sit up [the world as landscape]	Crawl [move vantage point]
<b>Meaning</b> <b>[semiotic action]</b>	Exchange attention	<u>Semiotic action:</u> Directed toward a person	Express wonder “!” “?”	Signs as isolates; the iconic sign – it embodies a natural relationship between expression and meaning	Proto-language [primary semiotic system] There is no grammar; there are no words
<b>Comments</b>	<u>Meaning:</u> “we are together” <u>Communication:</u> “there is you and there is me”	<u>Meaning:</u> “I want to hold that” <u>Communication:</u> “Oh, you want to hold that yourself, do you?”	<u>Meaning:</u> Child realizes he can detach himself from his environment by rolling over Child has constructed first construction of self vs. environment	<u>Meaning:</u> Semiotic act is a distinct and self- sufficient form of activity created in interactive contexts. <u>Examples:</u> Grasp object and release “I want that” Touch object lightly, momentarily “I don’t want that” <u>Content-expression</u> <u>pairs</u> remain stable over a period of time; isolates are emerging into signs	<u>Meaning:</u> Sets of symbolic acts develop into systems; an act of meaning implies a certain choice “I want” “I don’t want” “I want very much” Sets of alternative meanings form systems that develop around 6 functions: Instrumental, Regulatory, Interactional, Personal, Imaginative, Heuristic
	<b>Age: 2-3 weeks</b>	<b>Age: 3-5 months</b>	<b>Age: 7-10 months</b>	<b>Age: 7-10 months</b>	<b>Age: 8-16 months</b>

**Material and Semiotic Action – How the Child Develops the Ability to Make Meaning (from 16 Months to 34 Months)**

<b>Moving [material action]</b>	Walk upright	Walk upright	Walk upright	Walk upright
<b>Meaning [semiotic action]</b>	Language [Higher-order semiotic thinking]	Begins the transition from protolanguage to language Magic gateway into grammar Transfer from functional to referential naming	Mid transition from proto-language to language Meta-functional principle Meaning is both doing and understanding	Approaching end of transition to language Emergence of information
<b>Comments</b>	<p>The system is deconstructed and reconstructed with a lexico-grammar (vocabulary) as an intermediary between meaning and expression.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Symbols become conventional – they have already been established</li> <li>·Level of purely abstract coding</li> <li>·Grammar mediates between meaning and expression.</li> <li>·Becomes possible to separate reference from analogy.</li> </ul> <p>Quack no longer the imitation of the noise of a duck Quack is the name of that noise.</p> <p>Children use words to annotate experience and have it checked out by an expert. “Bus” “Yes, that’s a bus”</p>	<p><u>Functional</u>: “Mummy,” “Daddy” = “Play with me” “I’m giving you this” <u>Deconstructing the sign</u> Separate articulatory from prosodic features Combination of proper name Mummy/Daddy with mood (seeking/finding) <u>Articulation</u>: Mummy [ama] <u>Prosody</u> Where are you? <u>Prosody</u>: There you are! <u>Mood system</u> is part of <u>interpersonal grammar</u> ·What relationship am I setting up between myself and the listener? <u>Transitivity system</u> is part of <u>experiential grammar</u> ·What aspect of experience am I representing?</p>	<p>The beginning of clause and group structures <u>Doing</u>: Prosody “I want Mummy’s book” <u>Understanding</u>: Prosody “That’s Mummy’s book” Significant aspect of meta-functional for <u>learning theory</u>: Language is the combination of the <u>experiential</u> and the <u>interpersonal</u> that constitutes an act of meaning All meaning – all learning is both action and reflection Through lexico-grammar children have a means to expand their meaning potential ·Children can elaborate distinctions such as “it may be” “it is” “it isn’t” · Children move into logical-semantic relations of ‘when’ ‘if’ and ‘because’</p>	<p>The child is imparting meanings that are not already shared by the addressed <u>Complex operation</u>: Using language to give a commodity that is itself made of language. Once children can impart information they also learn to ask for it</p> <p>Imparting unknown information and developing logical-semantic relations (cause and condition) begins in interpersonal contexts and become part of ideational grammar Warning and threats modeled for children by adults: “Don’t touch that because it’s hot” <u>Leads to development of the potential for hypothetical meaning</u></p>
	<b>Age: 16-24 months</b>	<b>Age: 19-26 months</b>	<b>Age: 24-30 months</b>	<b>Age: 24-34 months</b>

**Material and Semiotic Action – How the Child Develops the Ability to Make Meaning (from 26 Months to 60 Months)**

<b>Moving</b> <b>[material action]</b>	Walk upright	Walk upright	Walk upright
<b>Meaning</b> <b>[semiotic action]</b>	The relational clause	Learning abstract terms	Exchanging abstract meanings
<b>Comments</b>	<p>Children continue to learn to use clauses.</p> <p>Children like to organize things into common sense taxonomies on the principle one thing is a kind of another.</p> <p>Children learn to use the relational clause to make a class membership explicit “Is a monkey an animal?”</p>	<p>Abstract terms are first understood when children come to terms with strong interpersonally oriented expressions, “You’re a nuisance”</p> <p>What children could not cope with in the early stages of learning grammar is abstractness – words of which the referents are abstract entities.</p> <p>Children are exposed to books</p> <p>Conditionals (if), causals (because, so) and why questions now come to be used to exchange information</p> <p>There is <u>imagination</u> in reasoning “If a dragon bites you your bones will go crunch.” “If you fall down, you’ll just hurt yourself.”</p>	<p>Children now include abstract things among the categories of their experience (size, speed, etc.)</p> <p>Children can reason about causes and conditions</p> <p>Painter as cited in Halliday (2004) – <u>Factual generalization</u> – an obligatory conclusion from known facts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Cars go faster than bikes</li> <li>·Vans are as powerful as cars</li> <li>·So vans can go faster than bikes</li> </ul> <p>Children are becoming aware of different types of texts and that they have names</p> <p>Being able to exchange abstract meanings is <u>critical</u> to gain entry into education.</p> <p><u>Writing</u> is learned as a second order symbolic system – symbols stand for other symbols</p> <p>Learner has to learn two sets of abstract entities (word, letter) and the abstract relation between them (spell)</p> <p>In the process of becoming literate, children learn to reconstitute language into a new, more abstract mode</p>
	<b>Age: 26 – 36 months</b>	<b>Age: 34- 48 months</b>	<b>Age: 48-60 months</b>



The following discussion examines in detail the circumstances under which the mothers deal with early childhood development and educational ideas. The analysis includes Bea's struggles with Jackie's active and creative approach to learning; Miles' keen mind and expressive personality; and James' conscientious attitude toward school work but his impatience when he has nothing to do.

### **Bea: Trying to Create the Good Enough Environmental Provision**

At the Mercer School, as with any school, the transition into the early literacy program is an entry into a very formal educational situation. It is much different from the spontaneous, unconscious responses children engage in at home. Many children become self conscious when they realize they are in a learning situation (Halliday, 2004). From the micro-analysis of conversational data, Jackie, in particular, has become very self absorbed about his ability to learn.

In Focus Group 1, Topic Related Episode 4, Bea relates a speech pattern Jackie has developed that is unsettling to Bea and her husband Jack (lines 31-40).

**Bea:** 31one of the behaviors I've seen with my son is that he has this harassing thing now.  
32"Let's go, let's go, let's go." Because here [at the Mercer] he's taught "let's go, let's go,  
33 let's go."

**Natalie:** 34Go do what?

**Bea:** 35Whatever the task has to be

**Jack and**

**Bea:** 36Finish

**Jack:** 37Always going

**Bea:** 38 — He doesn't know how to change

**Natalie:** 39Pace

**Bea:** 40the, the he doesn't know how to say "when could we," "could we now

Bea's description of Jackie's behavior informs the group that his actions and responses are unnerving to her and her husband. Bea points out that Jackie constantly repeats two words "Let's go" that appear to be directed to himself and his parents and in

Bea's judgment typify his responses to tasks and activities in the classroom (lines 32-33) "here [at the Mercer] he's taught let's go, let's go, let's go". Bea observes that Jackie does not connect with his parents. He has momentarily lapsed from being able to speak in clauses that include the other such as (line 40) "when could we," "could we now" to "Let's go." According to the chronology, children learn conditional phrasings between the ages of 34 and 48 months. Thus, Jackie's lapse into this ritualistic language he has learned at school appears to be a setback for Bea.<sup>15</sup>

In the spirit of Montessori (1917) who gives a great deal of attention to the construction of the classroom environment for the spaces of time that include activity, child psychiatrist D.W. Winnicott (1965) states that maturational processes depend on their becoming actual in the child, and actual at the appropriate moments when there is a good enough environmental provision. In Focus Group 1 Topic Related Episode 6, Bea, Jack and another parent, Ali, discuss the construction of time and activity in the classroom and why a correct balance between the two should be found (lines 54-62).

- Jack:** 54Every day we go and pick him up. At the end of the day he wasn't listening, he  
55wasn't on top of it [deleted talk about attention span]
- Ali:** 56It goes back to the curriculum that she has. It's not fair for a 5 year old to go  
57through this and this and this. This is rushed and that is a mess.
- Jack:** 58Even me working I don't have a schedule like this from this to this after this to this  
59and this. I don't have this as a custodian in a school.
- Ali:** 60And when you have free time the kids get upset okay when it's time to put your toys  
61away.
- Jack:** 62How do you expect a 5 year old to do this? You don't have time.

Jack (line 62) sums up why there is frustration in the classroom. "You don't have time." Winnicott (1965) notes that being cared for well enough builds up in the child a belief in environmental reality. In the chronology of material and semiotic action, belief

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<sup>15</sup> It is also interesting that Jackie is giving directives to his mother and father and recreating/using the power relationship that he learned, i.e., teacher to student; son to mother and dad.

in environmental reality gives the child confidence to engage with objects in the perceptual field.

Montessori (1917) put the environment at the center of her pedagogical method and found ways to make it interesting. This gave her the opportunity to economize the powers of children to concentrate on objects in the environment and eventually on tasks. She learned how to channel the powers of pupils so they could move and interact with the environment in a meaningful way.

**Lack of Meaningful Conversation Prevents Bea and Mrs. Tyler from Constructing a Good Enough Environmental Provision for Jackie**

The child's nature and sense of personal expression are important qualities in the classroom. The talk segments that follow illustrate the ambiguous atmosphere being constructed for Jackie as his mother and teacher fail to communicate with each other about the learning goals each has for Jackie. The good enough environmental provision is constructed in part with the cooperation of parent and teacher. Embedded within this construction are the expectations each has for the child. The child's sense of connection to the reality of his environment cannot help but be affected by what he perceives is expected of him in the classroom by his mother and teacher.

The purpose of Jackie being in the early literacy program is to give him the opportunity to create new knowledge by extending his language skills into reading and writing. Just being a child and experiencing normal growth, Jackie has a history of constructing new knowledge to enhance his language skills. As an example, as with any child in his development, between the ages of 4 and 5, Jackie has extended his language skills to exchange factual generalizations, an obligatory conclusion from known facts. "Cars go faster than bikes; vans are as powerful as cars; so vans can go faster than bikes."

Continually refining his use of personal and experiential grammar with the people close to him, Jackie comes to understand that language is the combination of the interpersonal and the experiential and that this constitutes an act of meaning. It is this growth in language development and meaning making that Jackie has been developing with his family. Bea is now faced with comprehending the kind of meaning making Jackie is developing at school so she can be helpful. Bea is steadfast in establishing and maintaining contact with Jackie's teacher. In Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 3 (lines 44-51), Bea describes a student-teacher conference she had with Mrs. Tyler and Jackie. In this utterance, there is a sense that Bea cannot follow the meaning of the flow of the work Jackie is doing in the classroom. It appears Bea would like Mrs. Tyler to give her an outline of how the different activities Jackie engages in are developing his abilities so she could monitor this development as she does with his spontaneous activity at home. When Mrs. Tyler asks Jackie to get his work and she shows his drawings to his mother, Bea appears amazed. Apparently, Bea was not aware Jackie could speak in such detail and with such specificity before she came to this meeting. This is apparent in line 51 when Bea says, "Mrs. Tyler says he tells everything."

**Bea:** 44[Mrs. Tyler says to Jackie] why don't you get your notebook. What he did was that  
45he had we go camping we have a trailer and he put the camper and he put the little  
46fireplace outside and the little fire and you know Daddy holding on a little juice box  
47and he was just talking about that and he was talking about his sister and the two  
48dogs and then he was talking about the world series that uhm when they do all those  
49commercials then he was playing with his friend on one of those video games it was  
50his first time and he was playing with the remote control car so he drew the TV and  
51these wires. Then Mrs. Tyler says he tells everything.

Rather than engage in conversation with Mrs. Tyler about the work she sees in Jackie's notebook and how he was able to produce this work, Bea asks Mrs. Tyler about the legibility of Jackie's handwriting (lines 54-57). Bea does this as she is fearful Jackie

won't transfer to first grade if his writing is not legible. Mrs. Tyler has previously said "...if he doesn't have these skills down it may look like he will have to repeat..." (lines 54-55).

**Bea:** 54extraneous talk] remember you were saying it was not legible that if he doesn't have 55these skills down it may look like he will have to repeat and then I was so concerned 56[deleted extraneous talk] and she showed me that this is what they do. They have this 57piece of paper and they do blocks and they'll say a letter and the child writes that letter.

In this talk segment (lines 54-57), Mrs. Tyler and Bea talk at cross purposes with each other. They have not established the main goals Jackie should be working toward in K2 that they will both support. Bea cannot experience pleasure in Jackie's expressive work and that makes it impossible for her to converse with Mrs. Tyler about it. Apprehension that an overriding criterion will determine his fate to move on to first grade prevents Bea from discussing how she could work with Jackie's strengths. This leaves Bea with a sense of ambivalence about how she should smooth Jackie's path in the classroom.

Bea's response to this exchange (lines 60-64) is clouded – the flow of her thoughts goes to a tangential point about the syllabus. Due to the fact that Mrs. Tyler has not given Bea any concrete advice about how she could help Jackie with his writing, Bea asks Mrs. Tyler for a syllabus. The conversation shows how far mother and teacher have wandered from the task of providing the good enough environmental provision. No discussion has emerged that would lead to a consensus of how each could help the child grow.

**Bea:** 60And uhm you know I told her well I'm not getting any of the stuff back (said 61questioningly) you know corrected but when I had my meeting with her it was like she 62was kind of like uhm do you have uhm any complaints? [deleted extraneous talk] I had 63said well you know [deleted extraneous talk] the work is a lot so I need to feel secure 64because I have no syllabus

With such an unstable environment between mother and teacher the holdup of Jackie's maturational growth seems possible.

Yet, Bea observes that there is an interaction between Mrs. Tyler and Jackie that has helped Jackie produce an incredible amount of work. This raises questions in Bea's mind about social emotional development and how she should approach her son who is doing much more advanced work at five years of age than her daughter. She wonders out loud in Focus Group 5 Topic Related Episode 6 how she should approach her son (lines 87-92). It appears that Bea thinks Mrs. Tyler knows how to work with Jackie along the lines of these dimensions of his personality that have produced these results. However, in her talk episodes with Mrs. Tyler Bea has not established any access with her so she could discuss these points with her.

**Bea:** 87You know the theories and methodologies change with generation and generation so  
88the experience that I was holding with my daughter didn't with my son who's doing  
89the writer's notebook so then how do what techniques do I have to work with that  
90particular age level I don't know the teacher will. You know I don't know so luckily  
91Mrs. Tyler has shown me I know that I still I still have some more questions. You  
92know because I know she's there to teach the children and not teach me

In her talk, Bea implies that Mrs. Tyler has established a footing of authoritative expert with her and Bea's sense of her footing with Mrs. Tyler appears to be that she has become an uninformed mother.

Part of the difficulty Bea experiences with her reactions and responses to Mrs. Tyler is the fact that she cannot prioritize how she wants to work with Jackie. This becomes clear in the next talk segment. Between Focus Group Five and Focus Group 6 winter break has occurred. In Focus Group Six Topic Related Episode Six, Bea is miffed that Jackie's alphabet paper was not considered good work. Jackie forgot the sequence of the alphabet and did not complete the classroom assignment. In addition, Bea admits that

she did not ask Jackie to do school work during the holiday so Jackie did not practice his fine motor skills and his letter formation is not perfect. Bea reports to the focus group her conversation with Jackie about the assignment (lines 113-120).

**Bea:** 113She made him do it over and then I said, “Jackie, how do you...do you know what  
114I’m asking you to do? Yes, the alphabet, Mummy (said in a child’s voice). I said  
115well, you did it right there, right? And he said yes and I said well what do you  
116think your teacher was asking you to do?

**Natalie:** 117Right

**Bea:** 118I don’t know. I don’t know if she wants me to write like her but I’m too little, too  
119little to do it beautiful but I know what the letter “a” is and I can show you how  
120Jackie does the letter “a” so I wrote it here (on Jackie’s paper in the upper left of the

Bea reports that Jackie demonstrates many language skills. She states that he can manipulate language to make meaning at a very detailed and nuanced level. “I don’t know if she wants me to write like her but I’m too little” (line 118). He speaks in clauses showing an understanding that his teacher wants him to write in a beautiful script. “I’m too little too little to do it beautiful” (lines 118-119). He also identifies the fundamental skills that the assignment is testing – whether a child can form the letters of the alphabet. “But I know what the letter “a” is and I can show you how Jackie does the letter “a” (lines 119-120).

In his schoolwork dealing with literacy, Jackie has the basic skills Piaget (1955) found that children have around the age of three that prepares them to deal with the writing system -- they can grasp and deal with the dual representation of objects. The material object is interesting in its own right and it serves as a symbol of the object in the perceptual field. Jackie knows that the material letter “a” he constructs with his pen is part of the alphabet and in addition Jackie uses letters from the alphabet to write sentences to make meaning.

In Focus Group 7 Topic Related Episode 4 (lines 80-82) the talk segment describes a particularly creative drawing I found in Jackie's schoolwork. His work motivated him to write a sentence to describe the action in the picture. I brought this to the attention of the group to show that Jackie has the skill to make meaning with words.

- Natalie:** 80He not only drew this but he wrote something about it.  
**Annie:** 81That's what they have to do now. The picture and the story.  
**Natalie:** 82What he said was "I had a party at my house."

**Figure 7 Jackie's Descriptive Art Work**



Jackie has a sense of personal expression that at the age of five allows him to produce literate pieces of work through drawings and then he gives the drawing a title. The fact that this has not been clearly identified and acknowledged creates tension between Mrs. Tyler and Bea. This prevents each from working together to establish the good enough environmental provision that will help Jackie gain the skills he needs to transfer from K2 to first grade.



### **A Discussion of Literacy Instruction**

Bea and Mrs. Tyler face a dilemma over Jackie's fate to progress from K2 to first grade. Although Jackie demonstrates he understands what writing is and he is very creative with this form of symbolic expression, he has not proven to Mrs. Tyler that he knows the alphabet and from this we may infer that Mrs. Tyler questions whether Jackie has a good grasp of associating phoneme (sound) to letter. Without this additional skill, it appears Mrs. Tyler will not recommend that Jackie advance to first grade. Five months remain in the school year for Bea and Mrs. Tyler to find a way to work together to help Jackie. What additional information that would address each of their concerns would be helpful so they could construct a good enough environmental provision for Jackie?

#### **Mrs. Tyler's Concerns about Phonemic Awareness**

Mrs. Tyler is justified to feel cautious about Jackie's ability to keep up with first graders if she senses his phonemic awareness is weak and he does not have a good grasp of the alphabet. Juel (1988) found that six year old children living in the United States who do not comprehend there are specific sound-letter relationships to word construction are poor readers. The likelihood that these children will develop literacy skills to a satisfactory level is slight if progress in phonemic awareness is not produced in the short term.

Colthart (1983) found that being able to hear the sequence of sounds in words has shown to be a precursor to success in reading. Children who categorize words according to their constituent sounds show a correspondence to a growing awareness of learning how to use the alphabet in reading and spelling (Bradley & Bryant, 1983). Word sounds in speech are developed without using a sound alphabet – sounds that stand in one-to-one

correspondence with phonemes. Reversing this process makes it difficult for children to acquire phonemic skill. The nature of speech is such that features belonging to successive phonemes in a word overlap in time (Miller & Taylor as cited in Liberman, Cooper, Shankweiler & Stoddert-Kennedy, 1967). Yet, it is the child's task to recode the sound and recover the phoneme.

### **The Choice of Explicit Instruction**

If Mrs. Tyler were inclined to consider reorganizing part of her classroom structure to help children like Jackie she might consider adapting methods from a study by Lundberg, Frost & Petersen (1988). Their study demonstrated how the careful pacing of a year-long effort with six year old Danish Kindergarten children produced phonemic awareness in all children. Their method was very explicit. From September to the end of May children were given a daily 15-20 minute training session of exercises and games using sound and movement. Sessions began with rhyming games, using nursery rhymes and games for rhyme production. Sentences and words were introduced a couple of weeks later through games and exercises focusing on segmentation of sentences into word units.

In the second month, syllables were carefully introduced by clapping hands, first to syllables in the children's own names and then to other multi-syllabic words. Dancing, marching and walking in pace with various syllabic intonation patterns were other exercises. In the middle of the third month, phonemes were introduced only in the initial position of the word. In the fifth month, phonemes within words were introduced.

### **Children are able to Develop Schemas for Sound Recognition**

It is interesting to note in the Lundberg, Frost & Petersen (1988) study that sessions in phonemic awareness began with whole sentences and words and worked up to the distinct sounds of phonemes. On this point Piaget (1955) noted that children develop schemas for sound recognition by perceiving one or two sounds of a word that give the general dimensions of the words. Each word has its own schema and these are far more important for the child since they develop long before the perception of detail. Piaget (1955) concludes that children not only perceive by schemas but general schemas actually supplant the perception of detail.

Continuing this discussion on thought and reason and relating it to the emergence of writing and the case of Jackie, Piaget (1955) notes that the child thinks and observes as he draws. His mind attaches itself to the contents of a chain of thought rather than to a form. This is due to the nature of the child. The curiosity of children, 3-7 years of age, is concentrated on the causes of phenomena and action. The child has a spontaneous belief that everything is connected with everything else and that everything can be explained by everything else. This fits with the chronology of language development in the child. By the age of 3 the child is organizing objects into common sense taxonomies on the principle that one thing is a kind of another.

In line with Piaget's observations about schema and in defense of Bea's position that Jackie has produced quality work, the theoretical considerations and empirical observations of Ferreiro (1990) show there is another way to achieve phonemic awareness rather than the explicit one offered by Lundberg, Frost & Petersen (1988).

According to Ferreiro (1990) children construct their own theories about the purpose of writing and in so doing come to appreciate the alphabetic principle.

During this development children consider a set of written strings to discover which criteria are good ones to represent differences in meaning. This precedes any knowledge of the relationship between the sound pattern of the word and the written representation. At the next level of development children gain phonological awareness by developing the syllabic hypothesis. Some letters stand for syllables and syllables are put in a one-to-one correspondence to the sound of a word. The final level of development is the alphabetic hypothesis that the similarity of sound implies similarity of letter and a difference in sound implies different letters (Ferreiro, 1990).

Children always check their schemas to the print they see around them and constantly manipulate how they have to represent sound through their letters (Ferreiro, 1990). Children go through a process of discovering information that includes new information that invalidates their scheme necessitating that they must engage in a difficult and sometimes painful process of modifying it. At certain crucial points children feel compelled to reorganize their systems redefining some of these elements as they become part of a new system (Ferreiro, 1990). The behavior of deconstructing old and reconstructing new schemas is not new for children. They deconstructed the old semiotic system of signs to break into the lexico-grammar of adult speech and thought by the age of 2.

If Bea and Mrs. Tyler shared a vocabulary about literacy and child development that describes their impressions of Jackie and his sense of personal expression, their conversation might represent a clearer understanding of Jackie's talents and how each

could support him. If they could come to a consensus of how to work together, Jackie would be in a healthier learning environment with the possibility that each woman could guide him to the skills he needs to acquire.

### **Nadia – Apprehension of a Mother who has a 4 year old Child Eager to Learn**

The discussion about Bea and Jackie illustrated how children acquire an understanding of meaning through language development. Language as it is constructed through a lexico-grammatical structure gives the child the flexibility to reference features of experience. This is the development of higher order consciousness and it is created through interpersonal relationships (Halliday, 2004). These ideas relate to Vygotsky's conceptualizations about language and thought. Language (developed into a lexico-grammatical system) and facilitated by interpersonal relationships mediates inner speech through which individual thinking is modulated (Vygotsky, 1986).

Nadia's son Miles has reached this level of higher order consciousness. He can represent referent objects. A drawing from his Jamaican portfolio, representing work from the ages of 2 ½ - 3 ½, shows a visualization of a "bigger version of himself." Miles has drawn two versions representing his form since he wants to give the viewer a truthful comparison of his smaller self to his larger self. The ability to compare and contrast abstract forms ("bigger version of myself") is an expression of meaning that is advanced for his age. Miles is able to express abstract meaning at the age of 3 ½. On the chronological chart of language development, this is about six months in advance of normal onset.

**Figure 8** Miles' "bigger version of himself" portrait at the age of 3 ½



The ability to exchange abstract meaning is critical as it is needed to gain entry into education (Halliday, 2004). Many of the skills learned in a formal educational setting depend on the ability to understand abstract ideas. Writing is one of these skills. It is learned as a second order symbolic system, a system in which symbols represent other symbols. Miles has demonstrated he can work with symbols as mediators of meaning. He is poised to learn how to write when he enters K1 in his new school.

Miles' preparation for K1 was planned by having him attend a day care Kindergarten in Jamaica when he was 2 ½ - 3 ½ years of age. It included helping him discover how he could control his body so he can sit and listen. Nadia describes how Miles learned to settle within himself so he could focus on his work (Focus Group 1, Topic Related Episode 2, lines 21-24). She describes the eventide hours when children begin to relax from their more active schedule.

**Nadia** 21but by evening time they start doing rhymes, stories and you find the kids will do a  
 22little bit of writin' but it's a little bit more like printed paper and they get to trace  
 23letters. It's not really as stressful but what it does by the time that they reach that last  
 24year they're already settlin' down

In this utterance, Nadia mentions that Miles' Jamaican experience gave him many opportunities to help him anticipate the work he would be doing in K1. Tracing letters gave him an opportunity to develop the memory of letters. Exercising his hand and finger muscles allowed his sensory-motor system to gain an impression of the writing motion. It appears the school used some of Montessori's (1917) pedagogical methods to develop writing – working with the physical and cognitive functions of the child to develop muscular dexterity and memory. These exercises have a physical and a mental component and are preparatory activities in Montessori's pedagogy (1917).

Nadia was expecting Miles to build on this schooling experience in K1. If he had advanced to fourth year in Jamaica as a four-year-old, he would be working with printed letters of three-letter words repeating the words over and over again. This would gradually lead him to learn to spell the words so he could create words that he would eventually use to build sentences. This is reminiscent of the Bradley & Bryant (1983) study that showed the importance of identifying the constituent sounds of words by seeing the words repeatedly.

In her utterance (Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 6, lines 107-112) Nadia shows how she builds on Miles' earlier experience to guide him to the next level. She categorizes words by sound to help Miles recognize words by their initial sounds.

**Nadia:** 107apple is an “a” word, ape is an “a” word, airplane is an “a” word you know I try  
108and some “a” words you have to use capital letters because it's an important word or  
109it's a name like Arthur certain things so that way he understands what big “A” means.  
110Why is this “a” and why is this “A”? The upper case or capital A because you have  
111to tell him what that big A is. That is so much for him but the thing is he wants to  
112know why

Nadia instinctively uses the methods of the Lund, Frost & Petersen (1988) study to engage Miles in a lighthearted way with literacy tasks. Using this method, Nadia

establishes a modulated rhythm with Miles that she adheres to so he will continue to learn (Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 6, lines 107-112). Although there are many things she wants to teach Miles she keeps a pace that is not overly intense, keeping in mind that she wants to create a learning space with Miles that gives him an opportunity to ask his ‘why’ questions and there is still time for conversation.

Nadia knows she is stretching Miles’ capacity to listen and focus on the work she does with him so she empathizes with him and in the words of Winnicott (1965) she provides a good enough environmental provision by adapting to Miles’ needs. She lightens the mood of the encounter by personifying the letter as a figure that has a spirit that Miles is capable of controlling (Focus Group 2 Extension of Topic Related Episode 6, lines 113-116). Although these lines were not quoted in the data analysis, I include them here as this utterance developed during the same talk segment and documents how extensively Nadia works with Miles in a creative way.

**Nadia:** 113and he gets tired and he passes the line and I don” want to yell at him and I say can you write  
114in the line, please. I’m talking about when he is doing his letters. Miles I’ll say that’s a pretty  
115long L. I make it silly like that’s a pretty long L. The poor L just dropped off the line. You  
116should try and let him sit there

It is important for Nadia to believe that Miles is as engaged with his teacher at school as he is with her at home. She relates to the focus group her comments to a group of teachers she and Bea met with to discuss the reactions of their children to the classroom experience. In the following segment (Focus Group 6 Topic Related Episode 2, lines 25-30) Nadia tells the teachers that she is satisfied with Miles’ situation.

**Nadia:** 25I can tell you at every  
26morning my son is enthusiastic and happy to be in school. He loves his teacher. I  
27wanted my son to start school with a positive attitude. I want my child to wake up in  
28the morning and I say, “Oh, you have to be in school today because you’re going to  
29be at Mrs. Burns. He says “Oh, Mrs. Burns, okay, let me run out of bed,” which is  
30exactly what I have.



However, Miles is an energetic four year old child with a lot of energy. He does not always do what Mrs. Burns asks him to do. Nadia confides to the focus group what she did not relate to the teachers. She informs the group about her views regarding teachers who reprimand a child too sternly who cannot sit still and listen (Focus Group 6 Topic Related Episode 5, lines 93-94). Nadia's talk demonstrates one of the principles of politeness in conversational style (Lakoff as cited in Tannen, 1986). She does not want to impose her ideas on the teachers and so she creates a footing that masks her true responses regarding the active natures of children.

**Nadia:** 93When you see my child misbehave in school I'm not shocked as a  
94parent 'cause guess what my child misbehaves at home too.

Nadia backs up from her statement and says that in spite of being unruly at times the children of all the parents who send their children to the Mercer School have special qualities. She then laments that there are too many children in the classroom for the teacher to see (and work with) their special qualities (Focus Group 6 Topic Related Episode 5, lines 97-98).

**Nadia:** 97[we] also know that our kids have a lot of really special qualities about it. The classroom  
98is filled with so many kids that it's hard for that one teacher to see it.

This empathy for the teacher does not prevent Nadia from expressing exasperation during those times the teacher calls her immediately if Miles becomes difficult to control. She has a plaintive suggestion for the teacher -- find a way to communicate with her son (lines 101-103).

**Nadia:** 101give my child that avenue to explain to you why  
102he feels this way and what made them get to that point where they have to vent  
103with their peers. There is a problem. My child should be able to talk to you

In her conversation with the focus group, Nadia's utterances veer from hopeful to fearful. She compels herself to anticipate that only the best things will happen to Miles at school but she cannot escape the realization that her son received more guidance in his Jamaican school. She wants to believe that she and Mrs. Burns share a common value that her child will receive the good enough environmental provision in class as he does at home. Yet Nadia perceives a difference in the tone of classrooms between the Jamaican and Miles' new school. It is difficult for her to distinguish how this difference occurs as both schools rely on schedules. However, as she continues her utterance her tone suggests that the guidance Miles received in Jamaica has a calming effect not only on Miles but on his family. Calmness appears to open the way for inclusion. Guidance that helps children gives the school confidence to allow parents to feel included by their presence and their ability to observe classroom activity.

**Nadia:** 67See, it's amazing after the  
68first month, back in the school, and you see the kids and parents just sit back and observe.  
69There is no interfering; you know we are just there to look and see how our kids are  
70progressin'.

The school provides the calm environment for learning that Nadia provides for her son at home and yearns that Miles will always receive at his new school. Creating a stable and calm environment for learning is also important for Annie. She works hard to maintain a secure environment for James through her relationship with him and his teacher.

### **Annie's Story: The Value of a Close Teacher Alliance**

The conscientious way James directs his activity towards his school work and the strong give and take relationship he has with his grandmother is a real life example of Halliday's (2004) language based theory of learning. The way Annie engages and

converses with James about his responsibilities toward his school work gives him the self awareness and determination to see the importance of completing his school tasks.

Annie is delighted that James is incorporating her values and becoming self-directed in his approach to his homework. She monitors the progress he makes each day due to the work pattern she has established to work with him on his homework every night. James has a good memory and he remembers to follow Miss Baker's instructions about sounding out the first phoneme in a three letter word. When he does this he is able to identify the phoneme and the word. Annie explains the process to the focus group (Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 1, lines 1-2 and 8-11).

**Annie:** 1and as far as his homework it shocked me he said "no, no, no, let me do it by myself" well, go 2ahead and you know when I checked over it, it was right. There was nothing but the sound

**Annie:** 8Oh, they're like little pictures like ah "hat". You'll have "at" and you got to figure out the 9sound you have the "h" the "j" whatever up top.

**Natalie:**10Uh huh

**Annie:** 11He's excited to do it by himself. He said "hu hu hu hu H".

Miss Baker has crafted James' homework well. She knows the importance of focusing on sound as an introduction to literacy for young learners. Since the speech code has overlapping sounds, the task of the literacy learner is to capture the sound of the phoneme in order to eventually break the writing code. James demonstrates to Annie that he is well on his way to breaking the writing code.

There are more tasks James must master and Annie seeks out the guidance of Miss Baker to help her keep James on track with the pace of his learning. Learning his sight words is extremely important for entrance into first grade. Although James insists he has already reviewed these words with Annie, she persists and explains to James he has to know these words in order to be able to recognize them when he picks up a book to read. This is information that only Miss Baker could have given Annie. She has absorbed

this information and she knows its importance. As an authoritative adult, Annie reinforces what James has heard Miss Baker say in the classroom (Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 2, lines 25-27 and 29-32).

**Annie:** 25like the new words that he have to learn even though he know them we still go over  
26them every single day because he have to learn those she was telling me before he  
27gets to 1<sup>st</sup> grade. He says, "I already did that I already did that," so let's do it again  
**Annie:** 29Until you're able to do them by yourself so that we don't even need to do that. If I  
30give you a book James I said what's this word you know "the" like "me" "we"  
31"you" whatever. So he think I'm making it up no – you have to learn these things so  
32when you open up a book you will be able to read by yourself

There is no doubt James will learn these sight words. James appears to be a normal child and according to the chronology of language development in young children he has been developing language within a lexico-grammatical system since the age of 2. He continues using this structure in K2. With the help of repeated occurrences, James uses his memory to take note and remember the similarities and dissimilarities of objects in his environment. This is how James builds taxonomic systems. James uses these same skills in Miss Baker's class to categorize sounds and match them to phonemes. Due to his enthusiasm toward school work and his relationship with Annie it seems certain that James will continue to move forward.

Continuing the talk about sight words, Annie makes a reference to James' favorite storybook (Focus Group 2 Topic Related Episode 2, lines 33-37).

**Annie:** 33Goodnight Gorilla I used to read that to him every you know that's his favorite book.  
34So that's how he learned to read it because every night what book you want to read  
35he want to read that one book it's about all different kinds of animals – hyena,  
36giraffe – so he learned how to read that by hisself. It's that only one book he know  
37how to read but that one book makes a difference.

As an indication of James' powers to observe and take in information, James has memorized the words of *Goodnight Gorilla*. At a very young age, he has construed its meaning as the result of looking at the pictures during the several times he and Annie

would read the book together every night. Through this experience, Annie is able to identify three significant components about James' learning. He has a memory that activates recognition after repeated exposure to an object; he construes meaning by looking at symbols (pictures); and these two experiences move him toward an understanding that he knows how to read. This is the meaning that lies beneath Annie's utterance, "that one book makes a difference." It is not surprising that James would be a conscientious student in the classroom. A sample of James' careful and good work is his drawing "I love playing in the green grass." It shows well formed letters, well placed objects and a careful selection of colors.

**Figure 9 James' drawing "I love playing in the green grass"**



In spite of James' abilities and progress, Annie worries that James' motivation might change. She tells the group she has found a mantra that she often repeats to James to keep his spirits alive and to let him know he can always achieve what he sets out to do. As she describes to the group how she watches him while he sleeps she repeats the words of the mantra to give her the courage to always ask for help when she needs it and that is

why her relationship with Miss Baker is so valuable to her (Focus Group 3 Topic Related Episode 3, lines 35-39).

**Annie:** 35when he asleep okay I tell him education is very important you know I say you can do  
36it just keep trying “I can’t.” No we don’t don’t say you can’t you know I bought him  
37*The Engine that Could* and I read that to him all the time and I said then all the big  
38engines they said they can’t but the little engine said “I think I can I think I can” and  
39when you think you can you ask for help (help said emphatically).

Miss Baker has a strong presence in the lives of Annie and James. She represents the realization of a good education. Yet, she cannot always support James’ potential to its fullest extent in the classroom. An example is the work station component of classroom structure. Based on Montessori’s (1917) idea of making the classroom interesting by placing objects of interest in the perceptual field, the intent is to draw the child’s attention to explore and construe the meaning of these objects. In the Montessori classroom there are enough people trained to work with children so that after a period of exploration and activity children have a chance to talk about their actions with an adult.

Miss Baker does not have this assistance yet the theory behind the construct of her room is to have someone converse with children about what they are doing at their work stations. To remedy this problem, Miss Baker models what children should do so “they already know what to do” and this compromises their learning potential. Maria, the reading volunteer, explains the context in which Miss Baker is forced to teach this way (Focus Group 4 Topic Related Episode 5, lines 73-76 and 79-80).

**Maria:** 73so sometimes like they’re not doing their work in their stations and every time she  
74has a lesson she actually spends a lot of time not only teaching the lesson but  
75afterwards when they’re going to do an activity like this she actually models it for  
76them

**Maria:** 79She has everything there for them, you know and so they already know  
80what they’re supposed to do

Due to a school infrastructure that does not support her teaching one hundred percent, Miss Baker has to overlook the heuristic function of learning and this limits the potential of the child to think using more complex language structures to express ideas. It is through the engagement of dialogue that the child develops the ability to work with the flexibility that is inherent in the lexico-grammatical structure of language. Once the child has done the exploring, he builds on the language he has already developed by conversing about the referent action with an adult (Montessori, 1917; Halliday, 2004). A child constructs language and knowledge in the interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1986). The adult is not simply providing a model, the adult is actively engaged in the construction process with the child (Halliday, 2004).

Like Bea and Nadia, Annie wills herself to be hopeful and optimistic about the education outcomes for her child. At the last focus group meeting in mid-February, the three women discuss the tension they have experienced this year about the early literacy program and the necessary construction of a good enough environmental provision to support their continual development and growth.

Annie has worked hard and successfully with Miss Baker to give James enough support so he can do his work. Overall, however, Annie appears frightened about James' future due to a sense that she is becoming distanced from being included in continually providing James with a good enough environmental provision in partnership with a trusted teacher. James will be moving on to first grade. Annie has yet to be introduced to his new teacher. James' social network of peers and friends will be broken up when these children advance to first grade, however, Annie has received no information about which

children will stay together. Annie shares her concern with the group (Focus Group 10 Topic Related Episode 6, lines 82-90).

**Annie:** 82I'm scared every day too but I have confidence in Miss Baker  
**Bea:** 83But then next year who are you going to have?  
**Natalie:** 84What did you say I didn't catch it  
**Annie:** 85I got all the confidence in the world in Miss Baker but next year he's goin' to first  
 86grade  
**Nadia:** 87Yeah  
**Annie:** 88And you know Kindergarten 1 they keep them they go to Kindergarten 2. Most of  
 89the same friends now they going to split them up he's not going to have the same  
 90friends and you know the pressure's going to be on

Annie has an awareness that in first grade James is going to build on skills he learned in K2. He will develop a more commanding grasp of functional skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic. Annie knows this requires hard work and she wants to help James when he gets into trouble. Without a teacher to talk to Annie has made it clear she finds it difficult to track the progress of James. It is this doubt that takes away Annie's confidence and makes her feel unsure about the future.

### **Thoughts About the Discussion**

The discussion and analysis of Bea's, Nadia's and Annie's experiences with their children in the early literacy program illustrate how the educational theories that lie beneath the program affect the educational development of their children. Becoming involved, staying involved and finding a good enough environmental provision are complicated activities. At the heart of the matter is the personal expression of the very young child. He is placed in a formal educational situation and is expected to learn two very abstract forms of communication – reading and writing. The analysis shows that these mothers think about educational ideas and the application of those ideas to the early literacy program. They want to see the continuing growth of their children that has prepared them for elementary school. They want to converse with the teachers about the



new areas of learning their children are encountering. That is the challenge yet to be met – constructing the time to engage with parents and then using the knowledge gained from that conversation in many creative ways to work with their children in the classroom.

### **Language: The Fundamental Backbone to Learning**

The discussion of the integrative analysis through the examples of the three mothers has been about their perceptions regarding the transition of their very young children into formal education through an early literacy program. Their insight into the transition emerges from the learning their children have acquired, which is considerable, before entering a formal education situation. The work of Halliday (2004) documents what their children have learned. Four and five year old children have built up a reservoir of semiotic processes (Halliday, 2004). They engage in a system of signs that follows the adult system of their culture and this allows them to communicate with other people. This development begins at the age of 2. Progress is so rapid that children are able to enter school as young as four to learn literacy skills.

Within the formal educational setting of the classroom the child's language is extended into literacy through tasks of learning how to read and write with fluency. Although literate language is highly structured with rules and it is quite different from spontaneous speech, children are able to create discourse (Halliday, 2004), and they are able to converse about their ideas. This should provide the platform on which children could probe the intricacies of the writing system. The analysis shows that this is what the mothers are anticipating would happen in the classroom. By conversing with the teacher they are hoping the child would have the opportunity to think through the construction of written words, phrases and sentences. The reality that the act of engaging with the teacher in this exploration does not happen in a systematic way causes tension in the mothers

about the early childhood literacy program and apprehension that her child is not developing in a comprehensive way.

In Chapter 6, the Conclusion discusses and summarizes concerns parents face as they help their children engage with the early childhood literacy program. Their concerns cluster around how child development and academic development unfold in the program. Findings from the study indicate that there are conflicts between these two aspects of learning (developmental and academic) from the parents' perspectives regarding whether they sit together comfortably. Implications from the findings are discussed and there is a suggestion about using the "Good Enough" environmental provision checklist to measure the balance between academic and developmental learning in every child. This is an experimental technique that I began to develop as the result of this study. I would need to do post doctoral research (please see Addendum G) regarding this measure if it were to become applicable in the classroom.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

This dissertation is a study of concerns parents have at school entry for their children. These concerns cluster around how child development and academic development unfold in an early childhood literacy program. A parent informed study, it looks at how the program engages with children who are 4 and 5 years old from the parents' perspectives. As the study develops, the research question becomes – do these two dimensions of learning (the developmental and the academic) sit comfortably together or are there conflicts between them from the parents' perspectives?"

#### **Findings**

The study found that there are three areas of conflict related to these matters from the parents' perspectives. They are the following.

- The re-configuration of time in the classroom that encompasses the very advanced nature of the academic work and the many different academic tasks children are expected to engage in during the day is not completely understood by the parents; this causes tension about how they can best support the work of the teacher when they are at home with their child.
- In the midst of a well planned day of academic activity, the parents feel there is a need to find ways to help a child adapt to classroom protocol when a child shows a momentary disengagement from a focus on and awareness of classroom activity. Parents become apprehensive about these situations and this becomes a source of conflict in matters concerning child development and academic development.

- The school, as represented by the coordinator, acknowledges that it would be a good idea to construct a dialogue between parents and teachers; thus, supporting the parents' desire to find common goals. The first step is to invite an expert to discuss the nature of child development and the nature of academic development with the parents. However, time cannot be found for a planning meeting with the coordinator which stalls the initiative and becomes another source of tension.

A more detailed look at these findings follows. Let me state again that this is a parent- informed qualitative study of an early childhood literacy program. The study values parents' discourse which is the focus of the micro-analysis in Chapter 4. The information from which the findings emerge comes from this data. My investigation of the program and the conflict that I identify are based on ethnographic methods, aspects of participatory action research (PAR) and tools of discourse analysis as discussed in Chapter 3.

### **The Early Childhood Literacy Program and the Parents' Desires**

Let us re-acquaint ourselves with the early childhood literacy program. It has ambitious goals. Children begin the early childhood literacy program at 4 years of age when they enter Kindergarten 1 (K1). Their oral work in K1 – talking about the content of a story with the teacher – is meant to prepare them for learning how to work with print literacy – the written word – in Kindergarten 2 and first grade. In these subsequent grades they are expected to gain new knowledge by extending their language skills (oral speaking skills) into reading and writing. During these early school years (K1, K2 and first grade) the transitioning work -- recognizing corresponding sounds to letters – in order to become fluent readers -- learning how to make meaning with printed symbols

through drawings and letters -- occurs simultaneously with the child's pursuit of developmental and maturational growth. It is this developmental and maturational growth that is important to the parents in the focus group. Their desire which contributes to the conflict is their wish that this growth be nurtured in the classroom as their children are gaining academic skills. I discussed these desires in Chapter 5.

When I started the focus group study, I had a prepared research question, "How do we get our children ready every day to participate in the early childhood literacy program?" Although parents may not have a detailed understanding of the curriculum, my initial thought was they could gauge how to support the curriculum through conversations with their children about what they did in class. As I did the integrative analysis in Chapter 5, I found that the parents did not have a clear grasp of the overarching goals of the program so it was difficult for them to formulate responses to this question. As a result, early in the discussions, one of the focus group members rephrased the question and turned it around so it would focus on a major concern of the parents, their desire for the program to work with their children developmentally as well as academically.

Focus group discussions followed this evolving desire of the parents creating the research question, "Could the unfolding of academic progress in the classroom and the unfolding of the child's development in the classroom fit together comfortably? Let us consider why there might be a conflict in these matters.

### **How the Classroom Creates New Responsibilities for the Child**

In Chapter 5, I discussed that Bea, Nadia and Annie have been observing and working with the spontaneous development of their children since they were born. They

have been engaging in a developmental learning experience that all children experience – they learn about learning in general through the process of continuously improving their language skills (Halliday, 2004), by talking and conversing with adults in their intimate circle of family members. By the time their children are four they have developed many skills in their ability to communicate. They understand the meaning of abstract terms; abstract qualities are among the categories of their experience (size, speed, shape, etc.) and they are able to identify them. They are able to speak in complex conditional clauses (if) and causals (because, so). As they mature into 5 year-olds they are exchanging abstract meanings and they are able to converse and reason about causes and conditions (Halliday, 2004). Such a demonstration of being able to comprehend and express ideas through language is a considerable skill.

The classroom experience creates a different context in which the child is asked to work with his sense of comprehension and language skills. There are definite tasks the child attends to during the day and this creates the problematic of the everyday experience for the child. The focused attention required for tasks is based on a daily schedule. The child must be prepared to do the task at the specific time if the day is to flow smoothly. Engagement with the task does not emerge spontaneously as it did when the child was informally engaged in a topic of interest with his parents.

### **The Re-Configuration of Time and Task in the Classroom**

It is the re-configuration of time and task that constitutes one element in the conflict associated with whether the unfolding of academic development and the unfolding of developmental and maturational growth can sit well together. As an example, Bea tries to understand the construction of the classroom so she can be helpful

orienting her son to its demands. She is confused, however, regarding the way Mrs. Tyler has organized activities in her classroom. There are many activities in Mrs. Tyler's classroom of which Bea is not aware. As Mrs. Tyler speaks with Bea about these activities Bea cannot conceptualize how her son navigates through them. Bea reports that Mrs. Tyler explains that "beside that [phonics] packet that goes [home] to you this is the writing [notebook] and also for math they have a math notebook..." (FG2 TRE3). Bea is fascinated by what she sees but she does not comprehend how she can help her son gain mastery over literacy by helping him work through these tasks. She would like a guide that would help her organize how she could reinforce what he is learning in the classroom. "[If] it was given like a little weekly, monthly letter we are going to do these things that way I can look forward to them in the homework," (FG2 TRE5).

The way Mrs. Tyler has organized her classroom so that children could do such advanced work prompts Bea to realize she needs to understand the dynamics of social-emotional development and how it is supportive of such advanced work that a 5-year-old does. She would like to comprehend how she could work with and give her son encouragement so she could be helpful to the teacher by supporting her son. In FG5 TRE6 Bea says, "...the theories and methodologies change so the experience that I was holding with my daughter didn't with my son who's doing the writer's notebook...what techniques do I have to work with that particular age level...?" Mrs. Tyler does discuss with Bea some of the methods she uses with her son; however, Bea has other questions. Yet she knows Mrs. Tyler does not have time to go into detail about all of them with her. In FG5 TRE6 Bea says, "Mrs. Tyler has shown me...I still have some more questions, ...I know she's there to teach the children and not teach me....".

Thus, the re-configuration of time in the classroom that includes the very advanced nature of the work and the many different tasks children engage in during the day is a contributing element to the conflict that develops between the unfolding of academic skills and the unfolding of developmental and maturational growth and whether the two can sit together comfortably.

### **Helping a Child Adapt to Classroom Protocol**

Another contributing element to the conflict is the topic of discipline and a child being restive and not following the protocol of classroom behavior. Parents would like their children to have an opportunity to converse with the teacher so they could work out with her an understanding of what occurred that activated their response and the reaction of the teacher. As an example, in FG6 TRE5, Nadia says, “If my child is havin’ a problem at school...give my child that avenue to explain to you why he feels that way.” “My child should be able to talk with you.” Yet, we know that on many, if not all days, Miles, Nadia’s son, is exuberant about going to school. In FG6 TRE2, Nadia says, “I want my child to wake up in the morning and say [to him], ‘Oh, you have to be in school today because you’re going to be at Mrs. Burns.’” “He says, ‘Oh, Mrs. Burns, okay, let me run out of bed,’ which is exactly what I have.”

Nadia is very satisfied with Mrs. Burns’ management of the classroom experience. However, she is also very sensitive about her child having an opportunity to speak with Mrs. Burns, when such events occur, regarding the nature of what made it difficult for him to conform to classroom procedures, and to resolve these matters quickly with her. Thus, a second contributing element to the conflict is being able to find ways to



help the child learn the ways of classroom procedures and conversing with the child when the child finds it difficult to go along with these rules of conduct.

### **Establishing Common Goals with the Teachers – Creating a Dialogue**

A third and final contributing element to the conflict is the parents' desire to create a dialogue with teachers about finding common goals. One goal is to understand how these two facets of learning (academic and developmental) could inter-connect more successfully. Bea acknowledges in FG8 TRE6 that teachers and parents view children through different lenses. "We need someone to come in and find what the common goals are and put them together a plan for the parents and a plan for the teachers because the teachers...have an academic calendar...as parents we don't have the training to look at our children through the lens of an academic calendar...."

Within the group there is a growing sense that parents and teachers share mutual concerns about the children and a dialogue should be forming. In FG6 TRE4 Nadia says that there is a shared responsibility with the teachers for the developmental growth of their children. This happens midway through the focus group discussion when the principal invites Bea and Nadia to address the teachers briefly about how they view their children's responses to the classroom experience. Going into that meeting, Nadia reports to the focus group that she thought about, "...teachers have a really hard job here taking care of our kids that they learn, that they are comfortable in their class." "...and the parents we...have to make sure that our kids get there on time." "We have to make sure that the roof on their house...and all the other little stabilities that need to be provided for we provide for them."

Representing the school, the coordinator gives tacit agreement to Bea's and Nadia's plans to have an initial event to begin the dialogue. It is proposed that they invite someone to speak with the parents about the developmental aspects of learning. However, time needs to be found with the coordinator to plan the details. Finding time proves to be difficult and the parents are not able to make conclusive plans about the talk. In FG10 TRE5 Bea says, "whereas we have not been able to meet with [the coordinator] ... then to work with Miss Locke ... it ... won't be effective."

Thus, a final contributing factor to the conflict that arises in these matters is the need for time to plan an initiating event that would begin the dialogue with teachers around common goals.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Implications from the findings indicate a need for more communication between parents and teachers regarding the theories behind the methods the school uses for helping the child to learn. The element of balance between child development and academic development is the cause of conflict and the topic of concern. Being able to engage in a meaningful way with these topics is something the parents can do. The work of this study provides the theoretical framework from which I can say that parents are able to think about educational ideas and the application of those ideas to the early literacy program. Some areas of interest that came up in the focus group conversation were the pedagogy of Montessori (1917), the different ways children learn literacy (Ferreiro, 1990) and the importance of partnering with teachers in a meaningful way (Swick as cited in Knoph & Swick, 2008).

The specific area of concern as it relates to implications from the findings is the K2 classroom where dramatic shifts occur in the learning situation. In Mrs. Tyler's classroom, we learn of her successful efforts in FG3 TRE3 to organize time and tasks in such a way that children focus on written literacy and are able to create many different kinds of written work. We also know from the focus group discussions that the K1 coach emphasizes oral literacy in K1. In FG3 TR1 she says, "...to me [conversation] is the richest part [of the curriculum]." It is also through conversation that the mothers work with their children to help them to learn. I discussed this in Chapter 5 and related it to the observation that children learn about learning in general through the process of continuously improving their language skills by conversing with an adult (Halliday, 2004).

Thus, a strong shift toward a focus on writing in K2 and less of an emphasis on oral literacy creates a source of tension in the parents as it has major implications for the child – it changes the balance in what is expected of the child. The child has to focus more on academic learning and can rely less on learning developmentally through oral literacy. As we have seen from the discussion of Halliday's (2004) work a focus on oral literacy is closely tied to developmental learning and thus a shift away from this focus will inevitably require a re-alignment in thinking for the children. It is these intricacies that the parents would like to discuss with teachers and learn from them how they could best support the teacher and assist their child in this transition.

Another implication from the findings relates to the high regard parents have for the teachers and the value they place on forming a dialogue with them. In FG5 TRE3 Maria states "How do we work together the best of both of those two individuals [parents

and teachers] for the best of the child?” Maria repeats this thought again in FG5 TRE4 in terms of the support the parents feel from the principal and the coordinator to begin such a dialogue, “We do have a great opportunity here...with the principal, [the coordinator]...then how do we get this to grow?” The implication is that as their children are developing, the parents would like to have a dialogue with teachers about how academic growth and child development could work together.

As time moves forward for their children and they are progressing toward the next grade, parents would like to dialogue with teachers regarding the nature of the different responsibilities the two adults most important to their children, the parent and the teacher, assume and how they could work together to help the child grow developmentally and academically.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is the balance between academic and developmental learning that is producing tension in these matters of early childhood literacy for the parents. The uncertainty of where the balance is for each child is creating conflict. To allay some of this anxiety, I would like to suggest that the school consider using a “Good Enough” environmental provision checklist that would allow the classroom teacher to measure this balance in each child. This is a different way of orienting a perception regarding how a child is integrating with the curriculum and also with his or her development. In the measurement, child development includes three developmental domains and five functional areas. It is a synthetic approach that captures how the teacher and the student are responding to each other to make the curriculum relevant.

The domains are literacy development, social-emotional development and personality development. Although this is not a study of personality development, I use the phrase to point out that the child's traits reflected in temperament and personal expression help the child integrate an emerging ability to become oriented to the classroom, absorb information the teacher articulates, pursue his exploration into literacy development and acknowledge and interact with other children in the classroom.

The five functional areas in the upper portion of the chart are the activities that facilitate development in these domains. These are the internal rhythm of the child, the responsiveness to sound, the self-awareness of social activity in the classroom, the orientation to three critical perceptual fields (Halliday, 2004; Snow, 2006) and the physical strength and coordination of each child.

Ideally, these charts would be updated periodically during the year to show the progress that is being made. Another use for the charts is to give parents a comprehensive understanding of how their children are managing the balance between their academic and personal development. Two illustrative examples of this check list follow.

In Addendum G, I have written preliminary thoughts regarding post doctoral research to better understand the "Good Enough" environmental provision check list.

**“Good Enough” Environmental Provision Checklist for Teachers**  
**Illustrative Observations**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Child’s Trait</b>	<b>Student-Teacher Interaction</b>	<b>Could it be improved?</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b> How is the child adapting to the environment? How is the teacher guiding the child?	Awkward	I try to help him focus attention	I need to engage with him more effectively
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b> What is the child’s response to phonemic awareness and sound to letter association?	Enjoys oral work	I look at him when I am sounding words	I could set up a work space – so he could do oral word construction with children slightly more advanced
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b> What opportunities does the child have to engage in speech encounters with other children? With the teacher?	He likes to talk	I allow him to converse quietly with his friends	I feel this is under control
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b> How is child making discoveries in the *two dimensional writing plane *auditory speech plane *grammatical plane of meaning	Auditory speech plane: He likes to tell stories	I give him opportunities to dictate stories	I could reinforce his work with peers by giving him focused attention on his writing skills
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b> What exercises strengthen the child’s muscles; help to coordinate interaction between mind and body?	He tries hard to write with the pencil	I have observed him as he writes	He needs additional exercises to strengthen hand muscles

**How has the “Good Enough” Environmental Provision Helped Development?**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Personality Development</b>	<b>Literacy Development</b>	<b>Social-emotional development</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b>			
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b>	Johnnie is a happy child whose	oral skills are more advanced	than his writing skills.
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b>	I need to help him find ways to	make the transition to become	more engaged with his writing
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b>	skills		
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b>			

**“Good Enough” Environmental Provision Checklist for Teachers**  
**Illustrative Observations**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Child’s Trait</b>	<b>Student-Teacher Interaction</b>	<b>Could it be improved?</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b> How is the child adapting to the environment? How is the teacher guiding the child?	Conscientious	I point out different materials in class she could work with	I am trying to broaden her engagement in different work areas.
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b> What is the child’s response to phonemic awareness and sound to letter association?	Cautious – waits for instruction	I help her to participate in work groups	Her efforts need reinforcement
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b> What opportunities does the child have to engage in speech encounters with other children? With the teacher?	Shy – she engages when coaxed	She responds but does not initiate	I could construct more opportunities where she could be more spontaneous
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b> How is child making discoveries in the *two dimensional writing plane *auditory speech plane *grammatical plane of meaning	Careful with letters. Understands simple written grammar	I encourage her to be expressive with her drawings.	Sometimes she loses interest in her work. She is friendly with another child and I may put them in the same work group.
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b> What exercises strengthen the child’s muscles; help to coordinate interaction between mind and body?	Good mastery of writing motion	I compliment her on her papers	She is doing well and keeps making progress in the technical aspects of literacy development

**How has the “Good Enough” Environmental Provision Helped Development?**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Personality Development</b>	<b>Literacy Development</b>	<b>Social-emotional development</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b>	Angel is a quiet, conscientious she got to know a few children in her story telling would improve.	child. Her formation of letters and the classroom well she would	spelling are very good. I think if become more spontaneous and.
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b>			
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b>			
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b>			
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b>			

## **APPENDICES**

Appendix A: Progress Report for Pre-School in Jamaica

Appendix B: Progress Report for K1

Appendix C: Progress Report for K2

Appendix D: Good Enough Environmental Provision Checklist

Appendix E: Comparison of the Ideas of Vygotsky, Montessori and Piaget

Appendix F Participation Consent Form

Appendix G Preliminary Thoughts about Post-Doctoral Research



## Appendix A

### Developmental Checklist Ages 2 ½ - 3 ½ Jamaica Social and Emotional Development

		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
1	Asserts independence			
2	Allows self to be comforted during stressful times			
3	Able to get along with others/develops friendships			
4	Expresses feelings verbally			
5	Does not withdraw from others excessively			
6	Shows interest/attention in classroom activities			
7	Shows concern for someone in distress			
8	Shows delight for someone experiencing pleasure			
9	Waits for turn without fuss			
10	Helps another to do a task			
11	Plays parallel to others with or without objects			
12	Plays parallel to others in pretend type activity			

### Cognitive Development

		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
1	Knows name			
2	Counts to five			
3	Recognizes the primary colors (red, blue, yellow)			
4	Recognizes differences in sizes			
5	Discriminates things that are alike from those that are different			
6	Can locate an object behind, under, over, in front of, etc.			
7	Can name parts of body			
8	Knows and follows simple routine			

### Language Development

		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
1	Orally label things, places, people around him/her			
2	Follows simple directions			
3	Understands and uses action words (verbs)			
4	Asks simple questions to initiate conversation			
5	Listens/attends to short stories			
6	Speaks clearly enough for adults to understand			

### Gross Motor Physical Development

		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
1	Walks down steps alternating feet			
2	Walks down steps forward putting both feet on each step			
3	Runs with control over speed and direction			
4	Jumps over obstacles, landing on two feet			
5	Pedals tricycle			
6	Catches thrown object with hands			
7	Climbs up and down climbing equipment with ease			
8	Stands with an erect posture			

### Fine Motor Physical Development

		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3
1	Opens and closes door knobs			
2	Screws and unscrews lid of jar			
3	Is able to trace patterns			
4	Builds three-dimensional structures with five blocks			
5	Opens and closes scissors with one hand			

Rating scale: 1) Excellent progress for student's age; 2) Good progress; 3) Fair

## Appendix B

### Progress Report for K1 students James Mercer School

#### Language Rubric Level

Skill	Beginning	Developing	Secure
<b>Vocabulary</b> The number, variety and complexity of words the child understands and uses	Spoken vocabulary consists of basic language needed to follow classroom routines	Vocabulary size and richness extends beyond basic language needed to follow classroom routines	Vocabulary is markedly larger and more varied than that of most children of the same age
<b>Conversation</b> The ability to engage with other people in back-and-forth discussion	Engages in back-and-forth conversation only when another initiates; length of conversations tend to be fairly short	Initiates conversations and engages in back-and-forth discussions for more than 5 conversation turns	Actively engages in lengthy, varied, and complex conversations
<b>Using Language to Resolve Conflicts</b>	Often resorts to nonverbal means to resolve conflicts	Uses language to describe own position in conflict situations and begins to use language to solve problems	Child uses language to negotiate and resolve conflicts
<b>Using Language to Tell Personal Narrative and Engage in Play</b>	Retells simple version of past event or personal story and makes limited use of language in play	Retells partial version of past event or personal story and uses language as part of dramatic play	Retells reasonably complete version of past event or personal story and uses language to create dramatic-play scenarios
<b>Using Language to Learn Information and How to Do Things</b>	Uses and understands language that accompanies routines and immediate experiences	Uses and understands language in conjunction with hands on and recent experiences	Able to rely on language alone to learn and to gain information

**Literacy  
Rubric Level**

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Secure</b>
<b>Interest in Books</b>	Shows low to moderate interest, with engagement only during reading-aloud times	Shows moderate to high interest during read-aloud times and sometimes chooses to read books	Shows consistently high interest during read aloud times and frequently chooses to read books
<b>Comprehends and Responds to Stories Read Aloud</b>	Minimally participates in basic conversations about familiar books	Participates in book-related conversations and sometimes applies knowledge gained from book to new situations	Participates in elaborate and extended book-related conversations and often applies knowledge gained from books to new situations
<b>Meanings and Uses of Print</b>	Shows initial understanding of difference between print and pictures and beginning awareness of the uses of print	Shows understanding of print as a separate set of symbols and uses print in play	Shows understanding of many of the uses of print and uses books/print to gain information
<b>Alphabet Letter Knowledge</b>	Letter knowledge is based primarily on letters in child's own name	Letter knowledge is based on recognition of upper-case letters	Letter knowledge is based on upper and lower case recognition plus increasingly able to relate letters to the sounds they represent

**Literacy (continued)**  
**Rubric Level**

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Secure</b>
<b>Phonological Awareness</b> <u>Rhyme Awareness</u> The ability to identify, copy and produce rhymes. <u>Beginning Sound Awareness</u> The ability to recognize and isolate beginning sounds <u>Syllable Awareness</u> The ability to divide words into syllables or blend syllables to form a whole word <u>Phonemic Awareness</u> The ability to isolate and manipulate the individual sounds that make up words	Begins to copy and notice rhymes and to attend to beginning sounds. Child divides two syllable words with teacher support. Child recognizes and identifies beginning and final sounds of single syllable words.	Recognizes rhyming words even when an adult has not pointed them out. Recognizes and isolates beginning sounds. Consistently divides or blends familiar words into two or three syllables. Consistently recognizes and generates final sounds. Begins to recognize and generate medial sounds.	Easily and spontaneously produces rhymes. Generates some words that start with the same sounds. Independently divides and blends syllables, including unfamiliar and longer words. Able to detect short vowels in spoken words, and represent beginning, final, and medial consonant sounds when writing words.
<b>Early Writing</b>	Uses scribbles and unconventional shapes to write	Uses letter-like symbols and some actual letters; beginning to link letters to sounds heard in words	Shows skill in forming many letters, and gains confidence using letters to represent sounds, when attempting to spell words
<b>Early Reading</b>	Gaining book handling skills and awareness that print conveys meaning in books and environmental print	Understands how books are read and engages in pretend reading	Uses different strategies to gain meaning from print, drawing heavily on letter cues and knowledge of sight words

## Appendix C

### Progress Report for K2 students James Mercer School

#### Language Arts

	Meets Standard	Making Progress	Needs Improvement
<b>Speaking and Listening</b>			
Language use			
Beginning Reading			
Responding to Literature			

#### Mathematics

	Meets Standard	Making Progress	Needs Improvement
<b>Number Sense</b>			
Geometry			
Measurement			
Patterns and Relationships			
Data			
Problem Solving			

#### Social Development

	Meets Standard	Making Progress	Needs Improvement
Follows rules & routines			
Interacts in learning with others			
Negotiates and resolves conflicts			

#### Homework and Attendance

	Outstanding	Good	Needs Improvement
Homework			
Reading Contract			
Attendance			

**Appendix D****“Good Enough” Environmental Provision Checklist for Teachers**

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Child’s Trait</b>	<b>Student-Teacher Interaction</b>	<b>Could it be improved?</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b> How is the child adapting to the environment? How is the teacher guiding the child?			
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b> What is the child’s response to phonemic awareness and sound to letter association?			
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b> What opportunities does the child have to engage in speech encounters with other children? With the teacher?			
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b> How is child making discoveries in the *two dimensional writing plane *auditory speech plane *grammatical plane of meaning			
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b> What exercises strengthen the child’s muscles; help to coordinate interaction between mind and body?			

How has the “Good Enough” Environmental Provision Helped Development?

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Personality Development</b>	<b>Literacy Development</b>	<b>Social-emotional development</b>
<b>Internal rhythm and classroom activity</b>			
<b>Responsiveness to sounds and letters</b>			
<b>Self awareness of social activity</b>			
<b>Orientation to the perceptual field</b>			
<b>Physical strength and coordination</b>			

Describe in a couple of words how the criteria on the left as a whole have animated the child and helped develop the child's personality; strengthened the interest of the child in semiotic processes including phonemic awareness and sound-letter awareness; encouraged the child engage in speech encounters and knowledge exchange with peers and with the teacher.



**Appendix E Comparison of the Ideas of Vygotsky, Montessori and Piaget**  
**How their Perspectives Relate to the Development of Literacy in Children up to the Age of Six**

	<b>Vygotsky</b>	<b>Montessori</b>	<b>Piaget</b>
<b>Perceptual Field</b>	Speech and activity are initially undifferentiated in context of the ongoing activity. They are part of the same overall perceptual field.	Perceptual field maintains a lively reaction within the child when the stimulus corresponds to the reflex personality of the child	Mind transforms external factors in the environment so that they are assimilated in a certain conscious way into the inner fundamental self
<b>Attention</b>	Beginning as infants children seek interaction with adults through signs and gestures	The teacher has to win the attention of the child. The task is to organize the perceptual field in such a way to draw the child's reflexive response to it.	Attention to the perceptual field is self-directed
<b>Sensory Motor Connection to the Perceptual Field</b>	Sign systems develop around certain recognizable activities – instrumental “give me that,” intimate relationships, “let's be together,” cognitive/affective state, “I'm curious about that.”	Hands on knowledge of a material world through touching and manipulating objects. Children tirelessly repeat actions that lead to interesting effects.	In times of rapid cognitive change, children realize new information does not match current schemes. Once they modify schemes, they move back toward assimilation.
<b>Psycho-Sensory Organization of the Perceptual Field</b>	The infant's mind is capable of responding to physical stimuli – a gesture becomes a recognizable sign of expression and meaning at about 6-10 months	Child sees similarities and differences among shapes and objects in the perceptual field. A rectangle as a window, block, door, etc.	By age 3 most children grasp the dual representation of objects. The material object is interesting in its own right and it serves as a symbol of the object in the perceptual field.
<b>Inner Speech</b>	Gradual differentiation and internalization of speech allow language to become a mediator for the perceptual field	The child creates inner speech as the result of self absorption in the task	Words are much nearer to action and movement in the child. The child is impelled to speak as he acts. “Child soliloquy” reinforces activity.
<b>Communication</b>	Speech forms are a purely historical heritage (from Sapir). Experiences must be included in a certain category, which by tacit consensus, human society regards as a unit	The classroom is a construct of manipulative objects. The child seeks the adult after completing tasks to talk about it, to get teacher's response, to do it again with more skill	Thought is ego-centric. It seeks to observe reality and adapt but it does not communicate itself as such.
<b>Language</b>	Children listen to the informal register of their culture and learn about every day activities and concepts encoded in spoken texts	From 3-6 years the child learns to use language to describe actions with a manipulative. Development occurs when exercise continues for a long time.	Adapted information first presents itself in the form of simple, factual information. This is the only category of child language that communicates intellectual processes.

**Comparison of the Ideas of Vygotsky, Montessori and Piaget (continued)**  
**How their Perspectives Relate to the Development of Literacy in Children up to the Age of Six**

	<b>Vygotsky</b>	<b>Montessori</b>	<b>Piaget</b>
<b>Literacy</b>	Written speech enables the child to make the transition in thinking from unconscious, automatic plane to voluntary, intentional plane (Wells)	Making the literacy process interesting. The tactile sensation of handling books and holding writing instruments.	Child builds on inner speech to use accommodation and assimilation to understand meaning of graphical forms

**Appendix F****PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

Principal Investigator: Natalie Zakarian  
 Lesley University  
 Tel: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Co-Principal: Valora Washington, Ph.D.  
 Lesley University  
 Tel: xxx-xxx-xxxx

**Description of the Research**

This is a focus group study to understand how parents get their children ready for school every day to participate in the early childhood learning program, specifically the literacy development curriculum. It will require from the participant attendance at ten 90-minute sessions with the principal investigator.

**Participation**

We hope that everyone who signs up for this research study is able to arrange personal time so he or she can attend every session. If your situation changes and you have to leave the study, you have the right to do so.

Note taking often helps people to remember important points in a conversation, ideas they didn't have a chance to bring up or ideas they want clarified. Participants are encouraged to take notes during each session. Notebooks will be available at the first session.

**Confidentiality**

We will disguise all names when we transcribe conversations. We will not tell anyone about you, your child or your family. No facts that might identify you or your family will appear when we present this study or publish its results.

**Institutional Review Board**

If you have any questions about this type of research, you may call the office of the Institutional Review Board at Lesley University. The telephone number is xxx-xxx-xxxx.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have discussed with XXXXX the above information and I have asked whether any questions remain. I have answered these questions to the best of my ability.

Date: xxx \_\_\_\_\_  
 Principal Investigator's Name

I am 18 years of age or older. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I agree that I will participate in this study.

Date: xxx \_\_\_\_\_ Name  
 Signature of Participant

Date: xxx \_\_\_\_\_ Name  
 Signature of Witness

Date: xxx \_\_\_\_\_ Name  
 Principal Investigator's Signature

## **Addendum G**

### **Preliminary Thoughts about Post Doctoral Research**

To advance my understanding of the “Good Enough” environmental checklist, I would like to create a post doctoral research project that would allow me to engage with a teacher in a K2 classroom to explore the application of the checklist. I am particularly interested in using the checklist to understand how every public school child beginning the educational process gets off to a good start academically and developmentally. I have learned a great deal from reading the work of Montessori (1917), Vygotsky (1986), Piaget (1955), Winnicott (1965), Snow (2006), Ferreiro (1990) and Juel (1988) and they have influenced how I think about the art of teaching.

I am particularly interested in the different learning styles children demonstrate to gain awareness of the sound of individual phonemes and different teaching methods teachers can weave together to help children learn the technical aspects of print literacy and also the importance of conversing with children so they continue to use their language skills as they refine their sense of meaning.

I am especially interested in observing the five functional areas listed in the checklist and how interactions in the classroom affect the way the child expresses these traits over time. I am particularly interested in the modulation and balance between the child’s internal rhythm (development) and classroom activity (academic pursuits) which has been at the center of discussion of this study.

This is a synthetic integration of many variables and although the chart clearly states how the variables are being viewed its application requires some background in the teacher regarding child development and learning. I believe I would need one year of preparation to find the research site and proper funding for the project.

Once I find the research site I would engage in discussions with the principal and the teacher to reach a joint understanding regarding the fine details of the project. Two topics I would like to discuss are having a concurrent parent focus group of parents who have children in this K2 classroom and the other topic is understanding the curriculum well enough so I can work as a partner with the teacher in the classroom as we develop methods of working with the measurement of the “Good Enough” environmental provision checklist. These are my preliminary thoughts which I am sure will be amended as I speak with people in the field.

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