

An Observational Study of Print Literacy in Canadian Preschool Classrooms

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Published online: 15 September 2010
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Abstract The purpose of this study was to examine the role of print literacy in preschool classrooms. There were seven preschool teachers working in central Canada who were observed over three sessions. The process of analytic induction was used to formulate categories based on interviews, classroom observations and documents. The following categories were identified from the data: book engagement and availability, writing engagement, and print displays and materials. There were some consistencies across centres in the availability of print materials; however, variation often existed in the types of interactions with print. For example, in some preschool classrooms, teachers had a more structured approach toward writing development while in others, they did not. Such differences in practice may be attributed to different beliefs and knowledge of early literacy development. The results of this study offer insight on the role of print literacy in preschool classrooms.

Keywords Early literacy · Preschool · Reading · Writing · Early childhood education

Introduction

It is widely known that early learning opportunities are important for young children's cognitive development

(Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). For many children, then, their experiences within the preschool classroom should play a key role in stimulating such development, and early childhood educators would have a role to play in this process. As Sheridan et al. (2009) claimed, “the knowledge, skills, and practices of early childhood educators are important factors in determining how much a young child learns and how prepared that child is for entry into school” (p. 377).

In addition to children's general cognitive development, the early years are important for children's language and literacy development (Wasik et al. 2006). According to Hindman and Wasik (2008), “teachers play a pivotal role in providing children with optimal environments for early language and literacy learning” (p. 479). Indeed, early language and literacy experiences are important for supporting the development of emergent literacy skills. It is known that print knowledge is part of the development of emergent literacy skills (Snow et al. 1998) and provides support for children's later literacy learning (Purcell-Gates 1995). Print knowledge involves an understanding that print gives meaningful information and that it can be used in a variety of social transactions (Purcell-Gates 1995).

It has been suggested that there is great variability in the language and literacy environments that are provided by preschool teachers and programs (Gest et al. 2006; Hindman and Wasik 2008). Given the variability of language and literacy environments provided for young children, and that early print experiences are important for later learning, further information is needed on the role of print in preschool classrooms. Moreover, the need to consider beliefs of preschool teachers about literacy is critical, given the limited research on this topic (Hindman and Wasik 2008).

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Framework and Literature Review

Framework

This study is informed by a social constructivist perspective that maintains that learning occurs in the context of shared meaningful activities. According to Vygotsky (1978), children's interactions with the environment, particularly with other people, promotes the development of new understanding. Educators 'scaffold' for children and children's cognitive development is shaped by the more competent other and the social context (Rogoff 1990). This perspective is important for the current study because it illuminates the need for preschool teachers to have awareness of children's knowledge and experiences in order to support further cognitive development. The more knowledgeable other, or educator, is a significant part of the social interaction in which learning occurs, such as by affecting the value placed on literacy within that context. Because this study will examine educators' practices with young children, the social constructivist perspective highlights the critical role preschool teachers' play in the construction of children's early literacy knowledge.

Print Literacy Activities in Preschool

Although it is widely known that literacy acquisition is multifaceted (Whitmore et al. 2004), one means by which young children learn about print that has dominated the research literature involves the process of storybook reading with young children (e.g., Cabel et al. 2008; van Kleeck et al. 2003). It has been claimed that children's literacy knowledge can be further developed when interactions around text extend beyond the literal level, such as by creating and confirming predictions (Cabel et al. 2008). These types of interactions have been shown to relate to children's reading comprehension knowledge (van Kleeck 2006). By being read to, children are also provided opportunities to learn about concepts about print, such as book orientation and directionality (Clay 2001). Moreover, gains in children's oral language knowledge (Senechal et al. 1998) have been shown to relate to experiences of being read to. Indeed, storybook reading offers opportunities for children to improve their language and literacy knowledge.

Another aspect of early literacy that has garnered much attention in the preschool years has been children's alphabetic letter knowledge (Christie 2008). Considering the focus on it in the primary school years and knowledge of the alphabet being a predictor for later literacy achievement, particularly the sounds of the alphabetic letters (Chall 1996), some preschool teachers view it as important for children's early development (Powell et al.

2008). Moreover, in Powell et al. (2008) study phonological sensitivity and concepts about print were cited by some preschool teachers as being important for children's early literacy learning. Although there are dominant aspects of early literacy development that have been focused on in the research, considerable variation exists in the quality and quantity of attention to literacy skills across preschool classrooms and in the type of environment that is provided for young children (Gest et al. 2006; Justice et al. 2008). For example, variation often exists in attention to alphabetic letters (Stipek 2004) as well as attention to storybook reading (Justice et al. 2005) across early childhood centres.

Researchers have presented factors that distinguish high and low quality literacy environments in early childhood classrooms. In Casbergue et al. (2008) research, high quality classrooms were demonstrated by the largest gains in children's literacy achievement based on the quantity and quality of interactions. High quality classrooms often included access to abundant reading materials (Casbergue et al. 2008) as well as opportunities for children to choose their own activities and materials (Wiltz and Klein 2001). It has also been reported that teacher scaffolds of children's reading and writing efforts supported children's learning (Casbergue et al. 2008) as did interactions with teachers (Sylva et al. 2007) to promote a high quality environment. It was found that in higher quality environments "interactions with print abounded in dramatic play centres" (Casbergue et al. 2008, p. 177). Sylva et al. (2007) also found that "teachers in the highest quality centres encouraged more structured play and the more academic side of the curriculum through careful choice of materials and planned group activity" (p. 63). It has been suggested that children, in what could be considered low quality childhood settings, spent more time unoccupied (Sylva et al. 2007; Tonyan and Howes 2003). Moreover, Wiltz and Klein (2001) found that children in low-scoring classrooms mostly engaged in large-group and teacher-directed activities.

Preschool Teachers' Literacy Beliefs

In addition to examining print materials and activities in preschool classrooms, preschool teachers' beliefs about how children acquire literacy is also worth exploring considering that research has shown that preschool teachers' beliefs affect the choice of resources made available to children as well as the encouragement to explore print-related experiences (Ure and Raban 2001). Spodek (1988) suggested that early childhood educators' beliefs stem from practical knowledge rather than theoretical knowledge about children's development and that these beliefs guide practice. Indeed, there is a growing interest in early educators' literacy beliefs (e.g., Hindman and Wasik 2008;

Powell et al. 2008), with some research demonstrating variation in beliefs about how young children acquire early literacy knowledge (e.g., Hindman and Wasik 2008; Lynch 2009). Some research suggests that beliefs can vary on how children become literate by a top-down or holistic approach, a skills-based or bottom-up approach, or a combination of both of these approaches to reading (Evans et al. 2001; Voss 1996). Top-down approaches relate to emergent literacy views in that a range of activities are considered important for literacy learning and there is more of a focus on the role of the learner (Teale and Sulzby 1986). Literacy is viewed as a top-down process when children learn about literacy in a more integrated form and teaching occurs within a meaningful context. Skills-based approaches relate to a traditional view or a bottom-up approach to literacy learning where there is a focus on teaching discrete skills (Teale and Sulzby 1986), often in a sequential form.

Based on increasing, but limited, knowledge about the role of print literacy in the preschool classroom and preschool teachers' beliefs about this role, the purpose of this study was to examine preschool teachers' literacy practices, with a specific focus on print in these classrooms. The following question was the focus of this research: What is the role of print literacy in the preschool classroom?

Method

Participants

Preschool teachers were randomly selected to participate in this study from a list of registered early childhood education (ECE) centres in a large city in Canada. Each centre received a letter explaining the purpose of the study and how they were selected (i.e., from a city website). It was requested that the participant have an ECE diploma (generally a 2-year program) and be currently working with 3- and 4-year-old children (preschool age). Initially, eight female preschool teachers from different centres consented to participate in an interview based on approximately 50 invitations. Themes based on these preschool teachers' beliefs have been focused on in previous writing (Lynch 2009). As a follow-up to the interviews, preschool teachers were asked to participate in three observations of their practice and five of these eight preschool teachers consented. Coordinators at two of the three centres with preschool teachers who declined (due to pregnancy and position leave) recommended another preschool teacher at their centre to participate in interviews and observations. Therefore, a total of seven preschool teachers participated in both interviews and observations, and their beliefs about

practice and their actual practices are the focus of this research.

Procedure

Interviews

Each participant was interviewed for approximately 45 minutes in a quiet setting at the ECE centre. Of the 16 questions prepared in advance, ten originated from a study of preschool literacy beliefs in Australia (Ure and Raban 2001). Other questions were composed by Lynch (2009). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in entirety.

Classroom Observations

The observational visits occurred 1 day a week (for approximately 3–4 hours) for 3 weeks. Each visit took place on a different day of the week and varied over the hours observed (morning and afternoon sessions). The researcher also met with each preschool teacher at the end of the final visit to debrief about comments made during the interview as well as specific observations the researcher had noted during visits. This debriefing session also provided an opportunity for the preschool teacher to ask questions or make further comments, and lasted approximately 20–30 minutes.

Within the classroom, the researcher took on the role of participant observer (Merriam 1998) and did not record field notes during the first visit in order to make the preschool teacher and children comfortable with her presence in the classroom. Only minor notes were recorded as needed in further visits. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately after each visit. Specifically, teacher-child interaction around print materials, children's engagement in print literacy tasks, and the availability of print material in the classroom environment were the focus of observations. Observer commentary (Merriam 1998) was included. At the end of the third and final observation, the preschool teacher was asked if the researcher could record a map of the set-up of the classroom and all preschool teachers consented. Particular attention was made to the role and availability of print in the classroom.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed by examining transcriptions of interviews, classroom observational notes, and class artifacts. After initial coding and grouping of interview data, observational data of print interactions, and print available in the classroom for each participant, the data were organized into three main categories that record regularities and

patterns across participants using the process of analytic induction (Goetz and LeCompte 1984; Merriam 1998). Important elements of print literacy in preschool classrooms were highlighted. Formal member checking of the interview data and of classroom observations occurred at the end of the observations. “By using a combination of observations, interviewing, and document analysis, the fieldworker is able to use different data sources to validate and cross-check findings” (Patton 1990, p. 244).

Findings

Three categories were identified from the data: book engagement and availability, writing engagement, and print displays and materials. Three preschool teachers have been focused on within each category in order to provide a more detailed description of print in each preschool teacher’s classroom. These preschool teachers represented a wide range of beliefs and practices. Other preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices not presented in the study findings fall within the spectrum of the teachers’ beliefs and practices that are presented. Pseudonyms were used for the names of preschool teachers for anonymity purposes. From examining the three categories identified, Olivia’s classroom seemed to align most closely with a holistic or top-down literacy perspective, Jane’s classroom was more skills-focused or bottom-up, and Sue’s classroom seemed to incorporate a focus on both perspectives. That is, Sue engaged in some activities that were more skills-focused, while other practices aligned more with a holistic focus. Overall, classrooms were generally arranged in activity centres, which included several areas: fine motor development area (puzzles, linking blocks, pegboards, legos), arts and crafts area (paper, glue, scissors, crayons, pencils), dramatic play area (clothing, toys, kitchen arrangement), and a book centre area.

Book Engagement and Availability

Overall, across interviews, the role of book reading was generally stated as an activity that was engaged in and was considered important for children’s literacy learning. For example, Sue believed that when children discuss books with each other, it helps with their reading. She stated that during reading time, children talk about stories and sometimes the teacher will read a story to individual children. She also stated that at the end of circle time (a time when children are gathered on the carpet, usually facing the preschool teacher), they have a story. “When I find that we sit in circle time and where the children are ‘reading’ a book, they’ll talk to each other about the book” and Sue believed that children were learning about reading

during this process. In the interview, she also stated that some of the children “are looking at the pictures for example ... and they’re trying to grasp what is going on in the picture. I know at this age they are using a lot of vocabulary ... and they are talking and communicating about the books.” She stated that an explanation of what happened in the story as well as questions to see if they were listening and understanding cognitively what was happening in terms of story order, are often asked by her. “I will read a story to the children and then at the end of the story, we’ll (assistant and I) explain what happened in the story to see if they were listening and paying attention, and understanding cognitively what was going on in terms of sequence.” Sue claimed that she pays so much for books, she is afraid to put some of them on the shelf in case they are destroyed. Sue wanted more books for her classroom, stated that the books she had were limited, and that she has to out-source: “I’ll go to Scholar’s Choice and I’ll pick up books and things that may help.” This limitation could be viewed in observations of book materials in her classroom. Sue could identify books that some children liked, and did engage children with books-on-tape using puppets that children showed a strong interest in when I observed her class. Few questions were asked after this reading. Children did ask me to read to them on several occasions, demonstrating an interest in books.

Olivia, another preschool teacher, said she reads a story sometimes in circle time and at the end of the day, as well as tries to write things down when storybook reading. She stated that she asks questions to children about the book, such as prediction questions, and that children can browse the book on their own at different parts of the day. “We’ll ask them: ‘What do you think? What will happen next?’ I also do it at the end of the story” At the beginning of the story “we would read the title and say who the author is but not spell out the words so much.” Olivia’s classroom contained many different types of popular children’s literature. The book corner was in a quiet area and allowed children to snuggle up and read or browse a book. In the interview, Olivia stated that “most of our children like to sit in the book centre and look at books, but sometimes, if children tend to play in other areas, we might encourage them and say ‘Okay, let’s come over and read this.’” A book was shared once during three observations and children were very engaged. Questions were asked to extend children’s learning and a few children (2–3) did visit the reading centre during one of the class observations. Olivia commented that “reading storybooks is important for language development.”

For Jane, storybook reading, or reading to children in general, was not a major focus of her program. During the interview she stated that: “when they [children] can’t tell a story I will read a book.” The book area was near the door

where there was frequent noise. There were many books, such as board books or books on counting. Few books seemed to have an interesting plot that could build children's imagination, such as fairytales. Some children showed an interest in the book centre but visiting the centre was not encouraged in my observations. The researcher observed the preschool teacher reading a storybook once, and the teacher did not seem motivated or interested in reading it. When slightly interrupted by school staff, she did not finish the book with children. She asked the children if they liked the story at the end but there were no further questions or comments. In the interview Jane stated that she asks questions such as "did you like the story?" and explained that asking questions about understanding the story may be difficult for them. Once, during my observations, books were placed on a table for children to browse as part of free play time. However, children did not browse them. When the researcher visited the reading centre, some children visited it also and began browsing some books. Some students asked the researcher to read to them, demonstrating an interest in books.

Writing Engagement

There was a focus on writing in many classrooms, and the specific focus was generally on printing the alphabet and name writing. Sue believed that children need practice printing their names "with dots at first" and that focusing on the alphabetic letters (both lower and upper-case on worksheets) supported children's learning. She stated that she helps children with learning their shapes, colors, and sizes after letters and name writing and that numbers come later. She believed that writing needs to be more teacher-directed ("children can't learn from others") and that "once they have mastered that [tracing the alphabetic letters], they're pretty much writing on their own." During the interview, Sue stated that, for those children who had mastered how to write their names, she tries to assist by helping them "write a little bit clearer and neater." She also stated that children had workbooks: "they're blank workbooks with lined paper and towards the end when they are sort of writing on their own, we try to have them master writing between lines in small print. Because sometimes they're writing on the whole page!" From my observations and from statements in my interview with Sue, writing instruction was explained in circle time where children were shown a worksheet, an explanation was given for what they would be doing (tracing the letters), and then children were instructed to sit at small tables and the educators would circulate. For example, in circle time, "what are some words that begin with the letter W?" was asked to children, and after children's responses were shared, children were shown a worksheet to complete. Sue

claimed that children write their name on the worksheet and then begin the activity. From observations of her classroom, no explanation was given for words on the worksheets except the alphabetic letter that children were to trace. Children mostly engaged in coloring on the sheet and one child had asked me what the print (i.e., words) on the worksheet stated. The preschool teacher also stated that at free play, some children take pens/crayons/paper to play with. Sue explained that the creative block usually involves art activities and that this it is teacher directed. Sue had many labels in her classroom but did not state that she used these to support children's writing development. In circle time, however, Sue did ask children "What day of the week is today?" and pointed to it on the calendar.

Olivia, in helping children with writing development, stated that she has labels for words that children say and that she often repeats when reading words, as well as matches all bin toys with pictures and print. Olivia also stated that she asks children about what they are drawing and "writes that down exactly" as well as writes children's names on their drawings. Olivia further stated that she spells out some words when writing/reading with children and helps children to write their initials with water paint brushes. She commented:

"When they're drawing a picture, we may ask them 'What are you drawing?' or 'What's in the picture?' and see if they can tell us what they are making and we'll write that down exactly. We'll also write their names down on their drawings. And also spelling it out, so if we're spelling out each letter they get to recognize that."

Also, Olivia stated that in circle time, she sometimes writes things down that they are reading about or words children say, such as a favorite fruit. She claimed that children enjoy drawing, for example, "children have drawn pictures and they have made a book/created poems." She claimed that she models writing for children: "when we're writing it out, they're usually sitting beside us. They can visually see." Furthermore, she claimed to "call out children's names from artwork" so that children can see that she is reading it, making a connection between oral and written language. The preschool teacher told children not to use coloring books or photocopied sheets, and stated that she limits print access in the drama centre. She states that there should be more imaginative play there. In my observation of Olivia's classroom, Olivia did engage in writing children's names on their work in front of them as well as the date as children observed, and did help children with writing other words during table time. From my observations, many print interactions related to what Olivia stated in the interview. Olivia stated in the interview that "there is not a big focus on trying to write and print the

letters right now,” and there was only one print worksheet containing the letter ‘a’ and no photocopied workbook sheets or coloring books visible in her classroom. She stated that children “really enjoy drawing” and many opportunities were provided for that in her classroom.

From my observations, Jane engaged children in worksheets, paper work, and printing. She stated that she does “a letter for the week.” She also stated that she tried two letters but “it was too difficult for them.” Her focus is on recall and printing. She claimed that “I’m more used to showing them than teaching them, you know, they recognize their name and showing them to trace their name.” Now she states she has to teach them the letters: “apparently they have to know how to write their names when going to school.” Because she did not learn how to teach a child to print but is now required to do that, she finds it very challenging. She stated that she shows them pictures for the letter of the week and children would trace the letter ‘k’, for example, which I also observed from being in her class. She sends home homework, usually worksheets, for children to complete. She has posted worksheets and alphabetic letters on the wall and encourages parents to help their children, stating the earlier the better. She stated that she focuses on the alphabet and numbers 1–30 and that she teaches upper-case letters then lower-case. For lower-case letters, “you know, it’s a lot of circles, like the ‘a’ and the ‘b’; they’re very difficult for them.” In Jane’s view, “they need the direct teaching.” In observations of her classroom, children were given alphabetic sheets where they traced or wrote the alphabetic letter. During the regular art activity, some children wrote their name while for others the teacher wrote it. In an observation of table time, some children used pens/paper to draw a flower. The preschool teacher had written their names on these sheets before they received the paper.

Print Displays and Materials

Besides books, there were, in general, many displays of print in preschool classrooms and all preschool teachers could list many types of print available. There were also similarities across preschools in the types of print, including the alphabet, numbers, and a calendar. Sue stated there were many print resources displayed for children, which included postings on the calendar, including months and numbers, as well as postings of the alphabet, shapes, and students’ birthday information. Sue had asked children to place the date number on the calendar after they sang a song about the days of the week during a couple of my observations. She also stated that print opportunities were engaged in at table time, such as pens, papers, crayons, and lined paper and that “children know where these are and can help themselves. According to Sue: “I find that some of

the children take paper on their own if they want to draw a picture for their mommy or daddy.” From my observations, Sue’s classroom had much print visible on the walls, including the print content she listed. There were also centres that had print, such as a cash register with print information. When examining activities in Sue’s classroom, it was noted that a common procedure involved circle time, which included the date, weather, songs, and naming words beginning with a letter (where children would respond from previous workbook writing).

Olivia commented that her room had centres and that markers, scissors, and paper could always be used by children. “We have a free creative shelf with markers and scissors, so even though we don’t always have creative things set up for them, they can also go and play there.” She stated that her goal is to have a felt board with stories. She stated that she does not have flashcards, rulers, or templates and that she does not use workbooks with children. From observations of Olivia’s classroom, children’s work could be seen with each child’s name and the date posted on it, along with some other print (such as word labels). There were many labels throughout the classroom including those in a book corner. Olivia stated that:

there’s the dramatic centre and a sign posted ‘Dramatic Centre.’ In the block area, the label ‘Block Area’ and we also show it to the children and have them read it out. They may not be able to read them [bin toys] but we have matching pictures for all the bin toys so ... children can understand them.

Similar to other preschool classrooms, the alphabetic letters and numbers were posted. Olivia’s classroom also had reports posted for parents on how children were doing along with positive educator comments about children’s work. Weekly lesson plans were also posted. The preschool teacher laminated the letter ‘a’ and photocopied trace sheets for children and there were many written materials in the creative centre (including magazines). There was print located on pictures of different occupation and rules for children were posted in the classroom. Furthermore, a science centre also contained much print, such as a section labeled ‘What is a plant?’ There was a plethora of print materials in her classroom and much of this included children’s work.

Jane had posted worksheets in addition to other common print displays, including the alphabet. The preschool teacher reported that she had “flannel board letters and flash cards.” She also stated that she has “made up games of matching, you know with the Easter eggs. I have letters on them, and children can match them up with the letters inside them.” She also reported she has pens, paper etc. for children to use and these could be observed in her classroom. Jane’s classroom had numbers with written words beneath, and the alphabet but print display was somewhat

limited compared with other preschools in this study. In the drama centre, there was a table, chairs, and a kitchen set-up but there was limited print (just a couple of labels). According to Jane, “play is the verbal English part of learning” in her view; not the time when children learn about print. There was some children’s work posted, such as their names written in macaroni. However, there were few examples of children’s print work posted other than their names, which was linked to children’s drawing. During circle time, the preschool teacher had a calendar that was used with children and she taught words from a picture chart. During one class observation, the preschool teacher involved children in a letter matching game. She began teaching the letter by bringing photos of objects that started with that letter sound and pointing to pictures of items on a chart. Jane engaged children in much repetition and would review the alphabetic letters focused on in a previous class.

Discussion

Although there were some similarities in the type of print and engagement with it in each preschool classroom, there was also variation in preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices. The number of book shares varied when I was in the classroom, and overall, did not assume a dominant role in observations. However, most preschool teachers believed this activity was important for literacy development and they stated engaging in this practice. Further variation was seen in the types of scaffolds used to support children’s development of new knowledge during read alouds. Perhaps this was due to some preschool teachers’ uncertainty of how to scaffold children’s literacy knowledge or differences in beliefs about what children can gain from different types of print interactions. In some cases, few if any questions were asked before, during, or following the story share. Perhaps further questions, particularly after a book has been shared more than once, would assist children’s learning (van Kleeck 2006). For some children in this study, a disinterest in text may have been linked to a lack of connection with the text.

Although most classrooms had an overall common organizational structure, the reading centres and their role in the classroom seemed to vary. Some classrooms placed an important focus on it, while in other centres, it did not assume an important role. This could be assumed from the location of book centres in the classroom and from few teachers mentioning book centres in the suggestions for children in free play or during centre time. Some centres contained older books with few pictures, or books that did not include fairytales or story plots. Some teachers shared popular children’s authors’ texts but many of the teachers

did not put them on a shelf for children to browse because, as one preschool teacher stated, “they [children] will destroy them.” It is known that children need experiences in reading and writing a wide range of genres in the earliest years (Makin 2003, p. 331). Research also demonstrates that different types of text appeal to different children (e.g., Millard 2003) and such emphasizes the need to incorporate many types of text to promote children’s literacy engagement (Marsh 2003). Some children in each of the seven centres did show a strong interest in being read to when the researcher joined them in the book centre. However, many children did not go to the book centre during free choice of activities. Perhaps preschool teachers’ suggestions for practices in these centres, as well as preschool teachers’ presence in these centres—including reading to individual children (Dickinson 2001)—would support further engagement.

Some of the writing activities preschool teachers claimed to engage in were common ones reported in previous research of young children’s writing development (Clay 2001). The diversity in practices, such as name writing, drawing, and copying the alphabet on worksheets, assumed an important role in some classrooms observed, while less of a role in some others. In some classrooms, materials were provided so that children could write if they were so inclined, while in other classrooms, writing was instructed. As one teacher claimed, a more structured approach was required for children’s learning to write and preschool teachers engaged in this instruction. Research seems to suggest that, if children show an interest in writing, guiding this process is important (Schickedanz and Casbergue 2009). However, Schickedanz and Casbergue (2009) claimed, formal handwriting lessons do not belong in the preschool classroom. Morrow’s (2007) suggestion of teacher modeling writing through a variety of tasks can guide children’s early writing development.

Overall, there was very little print in play centres. Many preschool teachers believed that play time was not the time when children learn about print. Roskos and Christie (2001) outlined the importance of play for in early literacy learning in that it can support children’s understanding of the connections between oral and written language. Research seems to suggest that children can gain much knowledge about print when it is integrated into play centres or areas (Roskos and Christie 2001). Vukelich (1994) also supports literacy-enriched dramatic play for children’s learning. However, as Roskos and Christie (2001) caution, as well as Makin (2003), play should be centred in events in which literacy is a part, and not the end in itself. Some preschool teachers did not view play opportunities as important for children’s literacy and did not view print literacy as being part of this learning process. Awareness of the benefits of incorporating print

literacy as a meaningful aspect of engagement in play should be shared with early educators.

A few preschool teachers had much print in their classrooms, such as magazines and modeled writing posted in their room, while most others had some labels and print posted on children's work, particularly children's names. From my observations, opportunities for print engagement seemed to link with its availability in the preschool classroom. However, "even when environments are print-rich in terms of the quantity of the resources available, they may offer children access that is restricted to a narrow range of books, paper, and writing implements" (Makin 2003, p. 331). This may have been the case for some of the children in this study where print was posted high on the wall and where limited variations of text could be viewed in the reading centre.

Purcell-Gates (1996) describes the importance of authentic materials for children's learning. Moreover, Makin (2003) recommended widening views of literacy to incorporate more out-of-school literacy practices. In addition to the school-based activities, such as the engagement in worksheets and storybooks, it is important that children have access to materials that they may see at home, whether it is toys containing print or environmental print in their homes and communities. One preschool class in particular that stood out because of its abundance of print, contained a number of environmental print materials, such as McDonald's signs as well as menus in their play area. Authentic literacy materials can be incorporated by asking parents about children's literacy engagement at home. Indeed, "a positive environment is defined as one that is rich in oral language, interactive reading, and language play, with opportunities for children to observe and to participate in the functions of literacy" (Makin 2003, p. 334).

Limited connections between early childhood programs and results of research on early literacy development have increased awareness that young children are capable of learning more than what is experienced in some early childhood programs (Bowman et al. 2001; Powell et al. 2008). Opportunities for children to gain oral language ability, recognition of environmental print, early knowledge of letters and sounds they make, and knowledge of the mechanics of print in preschool years is important (Burgess 1997). Although preschool teachers outline a well-thought out weekly plan and engaged in various ways of supporting children's literacy development, there seemed to be little scaffolding of print literacy happening in classrooms. This could be observed in preschool shared reading practices as well as from comments made by preschool teachers, which centred on uncertainty of practice (Lynch 2009). For example, Jane had wanted more information about reading and writing. "I find that [reading and writing] really difficult myself, because you teach a lesson and then you

wonder, 'did I do that right?'" As claimed by Pianta (2006), "classrooms appear low on directionality, a term that refers to directed, designed interactions between children and teachers in which teachers purposefully challenge, scaffold, and extend children's skills" (p. 239). There is a need to support preschool teachers in their knowledge of early literacy development, including the knowledge that children's print literacy development can be supported in many ways, and that print literacy is one of many areas of development that is important for children's overall development in the early years.

There were some study limitations. For example, this study was conducted with a small group of preschool teachers over a short time frame. Some practices may occur more frequently if early educators were observed for a longer time frame. However, observed practices were relatively consistent across observations for each preschool teacher, which occurred at different times throughout the preschool day.

Conclusion

The three categories identified from this study: book engagement and availability, writing engagement, and print displays and materials, each demonstrated the role of print literacy in preschool classrooms. Based on the study findings, most preschool teachers believed print literacy was important and engaged in various literacy practices, but from the observations, some preschool teachers seemed to have missed opportunities for meaningful engagement with print. This may be due to uncertainty in their beliefs about what methods were appropriate to foster children's early literacy development (Lynch 2009) or diversity in beliefs about the role of print in preschool classrooms (Hindman and Wasik 2008). Rosemary and Roskos (2002) found limited scaffolding of children's literacy knowledge, which had some similarities to the findings of the current study.

Professional development may provide further insight for preschool teachers on knowledge of early literacy development. Professional development for early childhood educators is considered significant to the quality and types of experiences provided to children (Martinez-Beck and Zaslow 2006). When teachers have a deeper understanding of the rationale behind class procedures, including those focusing on literacy development, they can be flexible in addressing children's learning needs (Mishra and Koehler 2006). However, in order to provide professional development, new learning should be integrated with preschool teachers' beliefs and concepts (Roskos et al. 2006).

Although print knowledge in the preschool years is only one area of children's overall development, with increased knowledge of the early literacy process through exposure

to findings of current literacy research—while also recognizing that literacy learning should not be equated to literacy instruction (Powell et al. 2008)—preschool teachers will be better equipped to provide a solid base for furthering young children’s early literacy development. Further research that examines the types of print experiences that young children show an interest in, perhaps by observing and asking young children about what they enjoy in preschool, can contribute to the knowledge that preschool teachers should have about early literacy development.

Acknowledgement My thanks to the preschool teachers for their participation in this research.

Appendix

Interview Questions (Lynch 2009)

Part I

1. How long have you worked in ECE?
What levels do you teach/work with?
What is your educational background in ECE?
2. Please describe a typical day at the preschool.
3. Has your educational (academic program) prepared you for your work as a preschool teacher? If so, how (practice)?
4. What would you like to know more about when working in/teaching preschool (supporting literacy)?
5. How important is print literacy (reading/writing development) in preschool?
6. Are there any changes in an ECE preparation program you would like to see (in literacy)?

Part II (Ure and Raban 2001)

1. What concerns do you have about children’s early reading and writing?
2. Are there any children in your group(s) that are reading and writing? How do you know this?
3. What (if any) role do you consider you play in encouraging preschool children to read and to write?
4. What role (if any) do you consider parents play in encouraging the preschool age children to read and to write?
5. What curriculum experiences (if any) do you currently offer to foster reading and writing development?
6. At what age should children be encouraged to read and write?

7. What resources (if any) are currently available for children in your group(s) to experiment and learn about (a) reading, (b) writing?
8. When are these resources (if ever) used by the children: (a) reading materials, (b) writing materials?
9. How do you think young children learn to read and write?
10. Is there anything you would like to know more about young children and how they learn to read and write?

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