

A case study to explore developing a community
of practice to support emergent literacy in pre-
school children's play

By

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DECLARATION:

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa at present, Literacy is a cause for rising concern, with reading and writing competency in primary school being at an all-time low. It is a widespread belief that part of the problem lies with the lack early childhood education. Only 37% of children under the age of five attend an early childhood development centre. Furthermore, South Africa has a shortage of educators, specifically within the domain of early childhood development. With more research being done in the area of literacy, more educators concur that emergent literacy forms the foundation of formal reading and writing later on.

This study is a participatory case study, which reflects on the importance of literacy in the early years, showing the belief that pre-formal schooling, specifically emergent literacy, is directly linked to proficiency in reading and writing in formal schooling. This study also highlights how educators in early childhood development can be involved in ongoing reflective interventions through in-service training and communities of practice. This community of practice was developed as a series of focus groups, which met on a weekly basis to discuss and share thoughts, opinions and experiences surrounding emergent literacy in a preschool context.

From multiple focus groups, I found that the participants became more confident in sharing their experiences and building upon each other's ideas and thoughts. The focus groups, not only added to their understanding of emergent literacy, but enthused them and created more of an awareness in their day to day practices.

Keywords:

Community of practice, emergent literacy, focus groups, space, power

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

Early Childhood Development or ECD has sometime been overlooked in favour of a focus on Matric results. However, investing in ECD is an investment in society and as the benefits can lead to a reduction in poverty and inequality (Ngwaru, 2012.) In addition, quality early childhood education can help to provide a solid basis for later academic successes. This research focuses on a particular aspect of ECD namely the literacy awareness that children often display in their play. This playful incorporation of literacy into free play, is an indication of the literacies that the children have been exposed to in their homes, communities or care facilities, in addition these playful literacies are ways in which young children make sense of the literacies they have experienced. These emergent literacies, and in particular, educators' awareness of emergent literacies, are the focus of this study.

In my capacity as a school principal, I have had the opportunity to ask many early childhood educators their reasons for becoming early child development (ECD) practitioners or teachers and many of them have had a similar answer; they love young children and love contributing towards their growth and development as young people in all areas of learning. Clasquin-Johnson (2007) claims that the aim of ECD programmes is to do just that; to encourage a variety of learning methods in order to develop each child holistically and to ensure that each child is being cared for and nourished in their entirety. It is therefore crucial that educators encourage healthy development in all areas of learning in order to construct a stable foundation on which future formal learning can be based. This is especially true for the growth of emergent literacy in a young child. The purpose of this research is, therefore, to create a participatory forum where educators with a shared practice and interest in the holistic development of young children could explore understandings of emergent literacy, discuss emergent literacy practices in preschool settings and encourage each other to extend children's emergent literacy, using the children's own interests and ideas as a starting point. This is based on the premise that young children see the world as a whole, not compartmentalised, and by integrating literacy into all areas of learning and taking the children's own thoughts and interests into account,

literacy can develop naturally within a real context of use for authentic purposes (Bruce, 1997).

Wenger (1998) claims that learning should be placed in the context of our environment and that it is a social phenomenon. Therefore, observing children in these authentic play situations would allow participating teachers to share their observations and thoughts, in a safe and respectful environment, with other participants.

Each child is unique and develops at their own pace and it is within a play environment that their needs, strengths and interests become visible. Play forms the foundation for all learning and development in young children and this allows them to learn in a positive stress-free environment which is process and not product driven (Whitebread, 2003). Play further contributes greatly to children's physical, cognitive, social and personal development and is a means of discovery for each child (de Witt, 2009). By observing children in their play, educators will be able to take note of these needs, strengths and interests and tailor-make an environment which is real and relevant to each child and where they can actively engage with their learning (Browne, 1996). It is in this tailor-made environment that literacy can be integrated as emergent literacy into all areas and children can "develop their own strategies, initiatives and responses and construct their own rules which enable their development" (Bruce, 1997.p.10) around literacy. The key to this approach is the reciprocity between the educators, the children and the environments in which they are learning. Malaguzzi (1993) describes the relationship between the educator, the child and the environment as one which will not only assist children in the construction of their own identity and the identity of others, but one that will, in the process, cultivate their verbal and non-verbal skills.

By planning this environment, as well as activities with the focus on the individual children, educators will further stimulate the development of "imagination, creativity and all kinds of symbolic behaviour (reading, writing, algebra, roleplay and language)" (Bruce, 1997, p.49) which will encourage them to construct their own learning structures and claim ownership of their knowledge (Grace & Brandt, 2005; Bonilauri, 2014). The confidence that they will gain through the ownership of their

knowledge and skills is key in creating a positive attitude towards formal reading and writing for the future (Browne, 1996).

1.2. Background to the study

Over the last eight years that I have been principal at my preschool, I have observed that some educators are unsure of their understanding of emergent literacy, what it is and how it can be used in an early years setting. Through general discussions and observations in the past, I have noted that some educators see emergent literacy as a subject in preschool, where literacy skills are taught through planned activities and worksheets. This understanding leads to a more regimental style of teaching, one where information is passed from the educator to the learner and where the learner does not necessarily have the opportunity or time to explore their literacy in their play, mimicking the uses of literacy that they have been exposed to and taking ownership of it. This could affect learners' attitudes and motivations towards reading and writing which would in turn affect the success of their future reading and writing development (Boakye & Southey, 2008). In research completed by Lonigan, Burgess and Anthony (2000) it is indicated that how well and how quickly learners will read once they begin formal reading instruction can be strongly predicted by "preschool children's emergent skills in the domains of oral language, phonological awareness and print knowledge" (Lonigan et al. 2000, p.306).

Within this study, I wanted a space where participants could engage and reflect on the phenomenon of emergent literacy over a period of time and therefore the need to develop a community of practice. Through the forming of focus groups where we could explore the understandings of emergent literacy, my hope was that educators would motivate, encourage and learn from one another, thus extending their enthusiasm and knowledge into their classroom and to their learners. As an equal member of this community, I was also open to learning and gaining from the other educators.

1.3. Literature overview

For the purpose of this research I will explore three key areas in the literature: communities of practice, the development of in-service teachers in the ECD sector,

and emergent literacy. These three domains are specific to this study, as emergent literacy will be the focus of the community created within the school for further development and growth of all participants. I will briefly suggest what these concepts offer to my study, but they are explored in more depth in Chapter 2, the literature chapter.

1.3.1. Communities of Practice

According to Vygotsky (1962) learning is a social activity that is built upon through interaction with other learners. Smith (2003) agrees, stating that learning is not purely an individual pursuit, but that it is a more social activity, one that comes largely from daily life participation and experience. According to Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Association for educators (2015) in America, a large part of continuous educator development is working together, sharing knowledge and experience and showing support to fellow educators. Lave and Wenger (1991a) discussed this process of participation as a 'community of practice'. This term refers to "groups of people who share concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.1). Simply put, a community of practice is therefore a sharing forum, one which allows for a generative space of trust and engagement where all are welcome and put at ease.

Although the group of participants share a common interest, this is not merely an interest group. A community of practice includes three crucial elements: the domain, the community and the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991a). The domain is the general area of interest which creates the common ground between participants. It inspires, guides and gives meaning to participation and it is therefore implied that every participant is committed to the domain. Being part of a community can create a strong social fabric which encourages the participants to share ideas and information and support each other. Learning Forward (2015) extends the notion of a community of practice by having prerequisites for effective learning communities within an educational setting. They state that every educator should be ready to share information and experiences, as well as to learn from others, which would acknowledge the fact that each educator has a different background and level of experience. In addition, educators must tolerate each other's viewpoints, methods of

teaching and learning. This will allow them to learn from one another and extend their field of knowledge and good practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991b). Finally, the practice is the “specific focus around which the community develops, shares and maintains its’ core of knowledge” (Lave & Wenger, 1991a). Participating in the community discussion is a way for participants to share their practice, ideas, stories and resources, as well to solve problems. Comber (2016) suggests collaborative learning stems from participants ability to negotiate their observations, understandings, as well as what they would like to represent.

In reality, a community of practice can be small or quite large; they may be purposefully created or accidental. No matter how they are created, most communities develop their practice through a variety of activities: problem solving, sharing of information and experience, questioning, coordination of resources, encouragement and growing confidence. The community can further develop their practice through the documentation of projects, visits to programmes of interest, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps in knowledge and practice (Smith, 2003).

In a community of practice, learning is an active process, where “newcomers” and “oldtimers” build relationships around a communal interest (Lave & Wenger, 1991b). Initially the “newcomers” would join and learn on the periphery of the group. Their tasks may be less key to the community, but as they become more involved and competent they would move from “peripheral participation” to “full participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991b). Learning is therefore, not seen as individually acquired knowledge, but rather as a “process of social participation” (Smith, 2003), which is key to this study. In order for the community to be strong and reliable, the participants need to build their community on mutual respect and trustworthiness.

Communities of practice are quite common and many businesses, organisations and institutions have made use of these groups in order to improve their performance (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In schools, the first applications of these communities have been to encourage, enrich and build upon teacher training (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). More recently, administrators and governing bodies have made use of this system in order to focus on educational experiences, linking the school to the broader community and how to serve the lifelong needs of the students (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Hord (2004) claims that this allows

educators to become more accountable and aware of the needs of the children, therefore creating a common purpose for the educators, school and community.

In the context of this study, the community consisted of preschool educators who gathered in an informal context in order to share understandings and thus develop in the domain of emergent literacy. Through this research I trace the process of building a community based on trust and a common concern and interest in literacy.

1.3.2. Development of in-service teachers in ECD

Although there are ECD courses available, a large number of preschool educators have learnt their trade through experience and in-service training. In a study conducted by Jahangir, Saheen and Kazmi (2012), they hypothesized that the perception of young trainees, regarding the qualities of a good teacher, would change significantly as a result of in-service teacher training. They maintained that being a teacher of today, is not only about being interested in learners' skills and knowledge, but is a holistic awareness of their total development. Through in-service training programmes, trainee educators not only learn about the theory of how children develop, but are able to witness that development first hand. According to Learning Forward (2015), professional development and learning promotes teacher and educator effectiveness, which in turn leads to more involved learners and an increase in children's results. Anderson, Reder and Simon (1996) claim that educator instruction needs to occur in socially complex situations and that abstract training is of little use. One of the strategies implemented by Learning Forward (2015), is learning communities, where educators are joined by a common goal and are committed to continuous improvement. Although there are definite advantages to having a theoretical background, specifically in the area of child psychology, in-service training and professional development offers experience in the practical day to day skills of working with young children and their parents (Jahangir, Saheen & Kazmi, 2012). In-service training not only provides educators with practical training, but provides them with a community in which they will feel safe to reflect on their teaching processes and practices and to raise concerns. Professional development and on-going educator training plays a vital role in the continuous improvement of education (Jahangir, Saheen & Kazmi, 2012).

According to Richter (2016), the increased demand for teachers in South Africa, has put pressure on both the infrastructure and staff of higher education institutions. In a study conducted by Richter (2016) he evaluated a South African university which has implemented a school based training model in order to create accessibility for more prospective educators. In his study, he describes the implementation of the school based training model, as well as its advantages and challenges. According to Richter (2016) this school based model, also known as “workplace-based training” (Department of Higher Education & Training, 2011, p.8), allows student educators to have the best of both worlds, “being trained as teachers, while at the same time, affording them practical exposure as assistant teachers in a school” (Richter, 2016, p.1).

1.3.3. Emergent Literacy

Emergent literacy refers to the knowledge, practices and attitudes which are displayed by children in informal, as well as adult-directed instruction prior to formal reading and writing skills which are acquired from Grade 1 (Department of Education, 2011; Sulzy & Teale, 1991; Stahl & Miller, 1989). It includes any aspects of ‘playing’ to read or write in any form and usually reflects the literacy practices that the young child has been exposed to and found meaningful.

Malaguzzi (1993) wrote a poem describing the ‘hundred languages of the child’, in which he describes the many ways that children learn and express themselves in a holistic environment. He follows up on his poem by explaining that there are many ways of learning, and in this case, becoming a symbol user. These include writing, dancing, drawing, music and using mathematical symbols. Writing is one part of becoming a symbol user which results from the exploration of many other factors, such as drawing, mark-making and using scissors (Bruce, 2011). These are the emergent literacy skills which are generally focussed on in an early childhood setting.

By encouraging emergent literacy in an early childhood setting, the educator not only supports each child in their current development, but also lays a firm foundation for literacy yet to come. Gunn, Simmons and Kameenui (2004) further extend this definition to include specific areas of literacy knowledge. This includes: conventional

literacy (reading, writing and conventional spelling), conventions of print (semantic and structure of text), the purpose and function of print, as well as phonological awareness (the ability to detect and manipulate sound and the awareness of sounds in spoken words). Additionally, emergent literacy is often a social process and occurs in various settings and experiences (Gunn, Simmons & Kameenui, 2004). Emergent literacy is a reflection of the literacies that children have seen enacted around them and these are the literacy practices that can be observed in their play (Brice Heath, 1983; Leung & Street, 2010). Examples of such experiences would include children using marks to 'write' out shopping lists in their home corner or pretending to read a menu that has been placed in the restaurant role-play area. Choosing to play with emergent language and literacy highlights the children's awareness and use of print, as well as of the verbal and non-verbal language that is linked to it. For example, in writing a shopping list, children are not only 'writing' but 'reading' their marks back to one another. This highlights the fact that reading and writing are complementary and their understanding that writing is meant to be read.

In their preschool years, children who are exposed to varieties of literacies are offered diverse print and language experiences. This not only forms a basis of their understanding, but also encourages an awareness of phonics, letters and print. Depending on their circumstances, many children are also exposed to extended vocabulary through frequent opportunities to listen to language in use. Sulzby and Teale (1991) suggest that reading, writing and oral language develop parallel to one another and are interrelated in young children. Whitehurst & Lonigan (1998) agree, adding that early reading, writing and oral language appear to be associated with children's word decoding abilities later on, thus emphasising the importance of providing opportunities for literacy engagement and allowing for emergent literacy to develop.

In a study conducted by Gunn, Simmons and Kameenui (2004), they discuss the relationship between early childhood emergent literacy experiences and subsequent reading acquisition. In their summation, they found that although literacy experiences are influenced by social contexts and conditions, successful reading acquisition was linked to children's literacy background and classroom instruction. Firstly, they noted that experiences of print help develop an understanding of purpose, language functions and conventions of print. They found that the use of

language with others who model the functions of language help to apply knowledge to a variety of literacy situations. They also commented that phonological awareness and letter recognition support initial reading strategies. Lonigan, Burgess and Anthony (2000) concur and further state that these reading skills “provide a crucial piece of the foundation for children’s academic success”. They maintain that the emergent reading skills and attitudes with which they enter formal schooling have a direct impact on children’s acquisition of knowledge in other academic areas later on (Lonigan, Burgess & Anthony, 2000). In a South African study of eight schools across four provinces, de Witt, Lessing and Lenayi (2008) found that although the learners had attended grade R, they were not competent in basic early literacy. This study was in cooperation with READ Educational Trust and a number of schools were from disadvantaged areas. de Witt et al. (2008) state that early literacy is the foundation of reading and writing proficiency in formal schooling and the lack thereof should raise concerns for educators. They further state that when learners enter formal schooling with the basic literacy knowledge displayed in emergent practises, the teachers could concentrate on more formal literacy practises, such as phonemes, syntax and lexicon.

In order for children to develop their language optimally, Vygotsky (1962) advocated a rich play environment; one where children have the freedom to interact with each other, generate ideas and make use of their language in an informal setting. Play allows children to make use of all their senses in order to explore the world around them and it is through this exploration that children develop their cognitive, creative, physical, as well as personal, social and emotional skills (Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 2004). Moyles (2010) agrees, stating that “[p]lay is an effective medium for stimulating language development and innovation in language use” (p.38). Vygotsky (1962) further believed that a child’s knowledge and language development is socially constructed and that, as social beings, interaction with adults and peers is essential. Malaguzzi (1993) reiterated this point by commenting that children’s interactive experiences strengthen their sense of identity, as well as giving light to their ideas, exchanges and dialogues. The value of their communication is enhanced by the group which, in turn, opens many unanticipated portholes of observation for the educator.

The educator's observations of emergent literacy activities provide the educator insights into learners' thinking and practices. This is valuable as they are "charged with designing and delivering ... instruction that not only builds on what the individual child knows, but also accommodates the myriad individual literacy backgrounds present in the classroom" (Gunn, Simmons and Kameenui, 2004). By creating an environment that encourages play and the use of the imagination in literacy development, the educator is allowing the children the tools necessary to build on the children's own knowledge and learning, providing the scaffolding that is critical in the formation of learning (Pearce, 1977).

1.4. Statement of problem

Given the importance of emergent literacy as a foundation for later literacy success, it is an important area for those in early childhood education to explore. Some early childhood educators may be unaware of the children's emergent literacy practices that manifest in their free play time and therefore miss opportunities to build on this. This study hopes to extend understandings of emergent literacy through engagement around this practice.

Play is vital in the development of young children's language and literacy abilities. According to Bruce (2011, p.86), "when children play at writing, they treat it as a problem-solving adventure...it may seem to take longer and even to waste time, but taking a long-term view leads to steady and lasting progress." For the purpose of this research, the observations made by the educators are key in supporting this development by deepening their understanding of allowing appropriate play environments where children can 'play' at literacy. There does, however, seem to be a gap in the observation of children's 'play time' and their 'adult-directed time'. This gap could cause an educator to miss children's literacy practices which would highlight their literacy ability, interests and needs.

1.5. Significance of study

Through a participatory case study, this research highlights how educators can be involved in ongoing reflective interventions. It is hoped that the creation of a community of practice around the shared domain of emergent literacy will provide

insight into how change is affected in in-service educators' literacy teaching practices and create a supportive ongoing interaction for educator participation and growth.

1.6. Research questions and aims

The following research questions and aims guided this study.

1.6.1 Research question and sub-questions

- How can the development of an ECD community of practice facilitate the understanding of the importance of emergent literacy in children's play?
 - What are the teachers at Yellowridge school's understanding of emergent literacy?
 - How can a Community of Practice be developed around observations of emergent literacy practices?
 - How can changing spaces support focus group participation?
 - What are the possibilities for emergent literacy practices?

1.6.2 Research aims and objectives

- To explore how the development of an ECD community of practice could facilitate the understanding of emergent literacy in children's play.
 - To explore the understandings of emergent literacy of the teachers at Yellowridge school.
 - To explore how a Community of Practice can be developed around

observations of emergent literacy practices

- To explore how changing spaces can support focus group participation
- To explore the possibilities for emergent literacy practices

1.7. Methodology

For the purpose of this research, a case study with a qualitative research design has been chosen. This case study examines a particular situation of ECD educators' engagement around emergent literacy. As such it would form a specific community of practice which would be bounded in a place and time as defined by the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Within this case study early childhood practitioners, within a specific setting, were invited to work together in a collaborative manner to explore understandings of emergent literacy. These participants share a common domain, community and practice (Maxwell, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991a). In this case, all educators from the preschool were invited to participate in the community of practice. This community would provide the group with understandings of educators' concepts of emergent literacy and how this could be extended to the classroom settings. They have a variety of educational and teaching backgrounds, some as teaching assistants, and others as new or experienced teachers. They work together at a private preschool, where I am the principal. This in itself provided me with a challenge of being seen as an equal to the rest of the group. Although I did not foresee any issues of power, I found that it did indeed present itself once the focus groups took place, as the participants looked to me to lead the sessions and 'teach' them, rather than being part of a discussion. This preschool caters for middle to above income families, with learners from 3 months to six years old. The preschool is co-ed and bilingual, with a variety of ethnicities. It is also fairly well resourced allowing for easy access to educational resources and play equipment. By carrying the research out in a naturalistic setting as opposed to a more experimental situation the focus is interpretivist (Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

As the notion of a community of practice is central to this case study, interactions within the preschool community will contribute to the qualitative data of the study

(Lave & Wenger, 1991a). It is critical that this process of interaction and engagement throughout the study is as important as the outcome (Mouton, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The focus groups took place over five sessions during convenient times as chosen by the participants.

1.7.1 Data generation methods

Three forms of data collection provided the findings for this study, namely focus groups, my own field notes, and structured interviews with participating educators. These are explained in the following section.

Focus group discussions played a key role in the collection of data and took place throughout the duration of the study with the group of educators. These focus groups were spaces for informal conversation, initially guided by their questions and thinking around emergent literacy. In addition, there was space for, - “the questions (that) emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of events; there is no predetermination of question topics or phrasing” (McMillan & Schumacher 2010, p.355). The value of using this approach is that it allowed participants to bring their own questions thus allowing a generative space in which participants’ voices and concerns were recognised. This approach also allowed me to take on a facilitative role and to walk the journey with the participants.

As the educators were participants in the research, they played a vital role in deciding what to observe and share on a daily basis. Focus group meetings took place over approximately half an hour once a week. The thirty-minute-long session often varied due to how much the participants shared and in allowing all participants time to share and comment on each other’s observations. The weekly meetings allowed the participants time to observe, select and reflect on what they wanted to share. Educators’ contributions and perceptions were noted and used as reference for the following days’ observations on free play.

Verbal discussions were recorded and transcribed and initial records in the form of field notes were also kept by myself. My field notes recorded ‘snapshots’ of what was said, as well as my initial thinking regarding each focus group. These notes were made throughout the sessions and annotated immediately afterwards if I had any further thoughts. These may be useful in understanding shifts and changes that

occurred throughout the process, in addition to subsequent data analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

In addition to the focus groups, structured interviews took place at the end of the research period. This allowed the individuals to reflect and share their journey with me specifically. A predetermined interview guide provided the questions. (See Appendix E)

Once the data had been collected and transcribed, it was interpreted through thematic analysis and analysing discourse (Mouton, 2011). Analysis refers to the 'breaking up' of data into identifiable themes, topics, patterns and relationships. According to Mouton (2011, p.108) "The aim of analysis is to understand the various constitutive elements of one's data through an inspection of the relationships between concepts, constructs or variables, and to see whether there are any patterns or trends that can be identified or isolated, or to establish themes in the data." Through transcription and coding, categories can be formed which will in turn show any patterns which may have emerged (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). This will lead to the interpretation of the data, which 'builds' the data into larger wholes showing whether there is a connection to any existing theoretical frameworks, and "whether these are supported or falsified by the new interpretation" (Mouton, 2011, p.109). In particular this 'breaking up' of the data will allow me to see trends and understandings around emergent literacy that might develop in the course of the study.

1.8. Elucidation of concepts

ECD: Early Childhood Development

Emergent Literacy: This refers to the "knowledge and skills that precede learning to read and write as taught formally in Grade 1" (Department of Education, 2011).

Community of practice: A community of practice broadly refers to a "group of people who share a concern or passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

In-service teacher development: This refers to training that a teacher receives by their school or education department whilst being employed. In-service training

allows teachers to reflect on their knowledge, keep their skills up to date and to develop their knowledge and skills further (MASHAV, 2016).

1.9. Conclusion

This research study was designed to investigate educators' current knowledge regarding emergent literacy in a preschool setting. As a foundation phase teacher with experience in early years education, I have an interest in emergent literacy and recognise how emergent literacy provides a foundation for later literacy development by spending time with other early years' educators in regular focus group discussions, I hoped to develop a community of practice in which all participants shared their knowledge and experience, and gained from the rich knowledge and experience of other educators. This research is the story of the journey of a community of passionate and enthusiastic educators as they deepened their understanding of emergent literacy.

1.10. Outline of study

Chapter one focuses on the introduction and the research problem. It also describes the research methodology, as well as the context of the study.

In chapter two, various research articles, literature and previous studies are explored. These provide a theoretical basis as well as further context and supportive research and thus establish a foundation for this research.

Chapter three discusses the methodology of the research project. It looks at how the community of practice was introduced, the process of developing the community, as well as the research problem and design. The chapter also explains the procedure of the study and the data collection methods examining their affordances and limitations.

Chapter four and five look at the data that emerges from the focus groups and the interviews as a means to answer the research questions. They provide an analysis of the data in order to answer the research questions, as well as a summary of findings and results.

Conclusions of the study in relation to the research question and recommendations that can be made to enhance future studies and programmes are also discussed.

Examples of transcripts of focus group interactions, as well as various ethical documents are included in the appendices. These documents provide contextual support and a data trail to add to the validity and credibility of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter the background and motivation for the study was explored. The concept of emergent literacy as a marker in children's literacy development was explored as well as the possibilities of setting up communities of practice among pre-school staff. In this chapter, I will explore research around literacy and because teachers are the focus I will explore communities of practice, as well as how space informs these communities and teacher training and development. Emergent literacy is a key area of the group discussions, so other literature that informs this study includes language and literacy emergent literacy, situated literacy and literacy in play.

2.2. COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As communities of practice was central to this study, I will focus on this concept, it's theoretical origins and application in educational contexts. For this study the development of a community of practice provided both a process of engagement and an explanatory possibility for discussing the engagement.

2.2.1. Communities of Practice

According to Wenger (1998) as humans we are constantly engaged in various pursuits and enterprises. As we engage with these pursuits, we are interacting with the world and those around us, changing and evolving to fit with our context. "In other words, we learn" (Wenger 1998, p. 45). Wenger (1998) goes on to theorise that that social practice is key in our learning and developing who we are and who we will become.

Wenger explores the fundamental way by which we learn as a 'process of social participation' (Wenger, 1998, n.p). Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that this process of participation in a group practice could be viewed as a 'community of practice'. This term refers to "groups of people who share concern or passion for

something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.2).

Smith (2003) agrees stating that learning is not purely an individual pursuit, but that it is a social activity, one that comes largely from participation in daily activities and life experience. Learning Forward, The Professional Learning Association in America (2015) add that, for educators, a large part of continuous educator development is working together, sharing knowledge and experience and showing support for fellow educators. A community of practice is therefore a sharing forum, one which allows for a generative space of trust and engagement, where all are welcome and put at ease.

Communities of practice can be considered as a part of daily life and are everywhere. It could be argued that a broad understanding of communities of practice could range from a Bible study group to a crochet group, a Drama club to an alcohol abuse group, a study group at university to a team leaders’ group at work. All these groups share a common interest, a common goal and the need to learn more and extend themselves within that field of learning (Wenger, 1998). Although the group of participants share a common interest, this is not merely an interest group. Group of participants often originate from the same workspace, with an interest in further developing their professional or working practices, as was the case in this study.

A community of practice includes three crucial elements: the domain, the community and the practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The domain is the general area of interest which creates the common ground between participants. It inspires, guides and gives meaning to participation and it is therefore implied that every participant is committed to the domain. According to Wenger (1998), “[p]articipation refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process. It suggests both action and connection” (Wenger, 1998, p.55). Being part of a community can create a strong social fabric which encourages the participants to share ideas and information and support each other. This engagement is enabled by mutual respect and a feeling of ease at each meeting. For example, by adding beverages and snacks to the meetings, the participants may feel more relaxed and inclined to share their thoughts and opinions without the fear of judgement. The

setting or location of the meeting may also lead to a more formal or informal context, where participants may or may not feel they have the freedom to speak honestly (Wenger, 1998). As our focus group meetings took place in different spaces, the use of space will be explored later in my literature review. If freedom to engage and participate is developed, then participants may more easily learn from one another and extend their field of knowledge and good practice.

Finally, the practice is the “specific focus around which the community develops, shares and maintains its core of knowledge” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Participating in the community discussion is a way for participants to share their practice, ideas, stories and resources, as well as solve problems. All three of these elements needs to be nurtured and developed in order to cultivate a community practice.

Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Association for educators in America (2015) extends the notion of a community of practice by having prerequisites for effective learning communities within an educational setting. They suggest that educators must be completely committed to the learners, seeing them as the basis for learning. Every educator should be ready to share information and experiences, as well as to learn from others, which would acknowledge the fact that each educator has a different background and level of experience. In addition, the educators must tolerate each other’s’ viewpoints, methods of teaching and learning (Learning Forward, 2015). These were all key elements in developing a community orientation to the research around emergent literacy in this study.

In reality, a community of practice is most commonly formed within a similar work setting, or the same profession. It can be small or quite large; it may be purposefully created or accidental. No matter how they are created, most communities develop their practice through a variety of activities: problem solving, sharing of information and experience, questioning, coordination of resources, encouragement and growing confidence (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The community can further develop their practice through the documentation of projects, visits to programmes of interest, mapping knowledge and identifying gaps in knowledge and practice (Smith, 2003).

In a community of practice, learning is an active process, where “newcomers” and “oldtimers” build relationships around a communal interest (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Initially the “newcomers” would join and learn on the periphery of the group. Their

tasks may be less key to the community, but as they become more involved and competent they would move from “peripheral participation” to “full participation” (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Being on the periphery allows the ‘newcomers’ to be involved in an approximation of participation, having exposure to actual practices and initial observations before engaging fully in the practice (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) states that peripheral participation allows for “lessened intensity, lessened risk, special assistance, lessened cost of error, close supervision, or lessened production pressures” (Wenger, 1998, p. 100). Learning is therefore, not seen as individually acquired knowledge, but rather as a “process of social participation” (Smith, 2003).

In a study conducted by Condry and Sampson (2016), a community of practice was formed in an urban multigrade school, where three grades were in one class. These learners would learn from and support one another, with the stronger learners supporting the weaker learners, regardless of their grade. In some cases, a weaker grade three learner would be assisted by a stronger grade two learner, thus supporting the concept that learning is a social activity. In order for the community to be strong and reliable, the participants need to build their community on mutual respect and trustworthiness, encouraging each other to move from the periphery and take an active role. What is noteworthy is that those on the periphery are welcomed and valued and are recognised as ‘legitimate’ members of the community.

Communities of practice are quite common, and many businesses, organisations and institutions make use of this theory in order to improve their performance (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In schools, the first applications of these communities have been to encourage, enrich and build upon teacher training (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). More recently, administrators and governing bodies have made use of this system in order to focus on educational experiences, linking the school to the broader community and how to serve the lifelong needs of the students (Wenger and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Hord (2004) claims that this allows educators to become more accountable and aware of the needs of the children, therefore creating a common purpose for the educators, school and community.

In the context of this study, the community consisted of preschool educators who gathered in an informal context in order to share understandings and thus develop all

in the domain of emergent literacy. In order for this community to work effectively with trust, encouragement and equality, space and the physical context of the meetings would need to be taken into consideration.

2.2.2. Space within the community of practice

According to Foucault (2002) every exercise of power is linked to space. Within any context, the space in which people are placed or have placed themselves, allows them to feel more, less or equally as powerful as those in the space with them. An example of the use of space to promote power, would be that between an interviewer and interviewee. An interviewer may be behind a large desk or on a larger chair, whereas the interviewee would be relegated to a smaller chair in a more confined space, immediately dictating the expectation of authority within the future employer-employee relationship. Similarly, in a classroom a teacher has more space than the learners, and controls who sits in which space (Dixon, 2011).

Foucault (1977) recognized this use of power in prisons between the guards and prisoners, commenting on their use of space as power and reflecting on the way in which guards stand and hold their posture whilst giving orders. He referred to the vertical as a dimension of power, rather than simply of space. "It dominates, rises up, threatens and flattens" (Foucault, 1977, no pagination). Likewise, in a staffroom of teachers, although the chairs may be the same or laid out in manner showing equality between most of the staff members, there is often a chair that the senior teacher prefers, and others naturally avoid. These exemplify the power that space has in contributing towards our thinking and how people are positioned in specific spaces. According to Leander (2011) material, social and symbolic resources, such as furniture, building structures, lesson plans, classroom layout and even timetables, are absorbed and interpreted by learners within their context. Dixon (2011) theorises that space and time are interlocked and should not be treated separately. Dixon (2011) continues by adding that classroom management and discipline is encouraged through both the use of physical space in the classroom, as well as through the use of temporal space, relying on routine. May and Thrift (2001, p.3) refer to time as being "irrevocably bound up with the spatial constitution of society". Within the context of this research, the rooms chosen for the focus group to meet could have contributed to enabling or disabling participation, learning, literacies

and critical thinking. By moving into different rooms or spaces, which the participants chose for themselves, I have attempted to transverse institutional boundaries, both physical and power-based, encouraging the participants to speak more, feel more comfort and share their thoughts in a space of trust (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Massey (2005) sees spaces as changing, requiring negotiation. Sometimes spaces silence us; however, spaces can also open up dialogue. Space positions people and reflects different facets of power, therefore by moving into different spaces, the participants and myself, could take up different roles as well as see things differently. Using different spaces would allow the space to become generative, one where new ideas could be explored and take hold. Massey (2005) views space as being “an arena for possibility” thus leaving “openings for something new” (Massey, 2005, p.109). In this study we made use of five different rooms in the school, some classrooms, others auxiliary rooms.

Curry (2007) reflects on space as, not only being a state of physicality, but also reflecting well-established binaries within education, such as educator or student, researchers and research participants, research and practice or classroom and home context. According to Flessner (2014) the gap between these binaries presents challenges and one way to bridge this gap and engage educators would be to introduce the third space theory. This theory allows for the recognition of the two binaries involved, as well as the creation of a new space for reflection. Curry (2007) agrees with Flessner stating that the lines between spaces can be blurred with the introduction of the third space and that together with a recognition of the funds of knowledge that learners bring to the interactions, “such notions can align and help shape students’ experiences in educational settings” (Curry, 2007, p.127). Funds of knowledge refers to learners’ previous knowledge, skills and experiences, the accumulation of explicit and tacit knowledge from lived experienced in homes and communities (Moll, 1992). Amanti (2005) refers to the transformative power of funds of knowledge, seeing it not as “replicating what students have learned at home, but about using students’ knowledge and prior experience as a scaffold for new learning” (Amanti, 2005, p.135). Curry (2007) continues by saying that the effective combination and use of third space and funds of knowledge relies on the agency of the educators involved. The educators’ ability or confidence to create these spaces may be based on their previous training or experience. In this study it was also

important to draw on the educators' varied funds of knowledge and bring these into the community of practice and in this way recognise and value all the knowledges in the group. In the following section therefore, I will explore teacher training, specifically in the area of Early Childhood Development (ECD).

2.2.3. Teacher training in a community of practice

Development of in-service teachers in ECD

According to the Department of Education (DoE) Republic of South Africa (2005), South Africa has a shortage of qualified teachers. Richter (2016) comments that together with a small number of private institutions, only 26 higher education institutions are responsible for training teachers, with the majority of them focusing on Foundation, Intermediate and Senior level teachers. These institutions currently deliver approximately 13,000 new teachers annually, where, according to Masinga (2013) the demand for teachers is growing, with about 18,000 teachers being required in schools each year. This number has placed a great strain on higher education institutions in order to deliver the necessary number of qualified teachers (Richter, 2016). From a survey conducted in 2017 of the offerings of higher institutions of education in South Africa, there are some independent higher institutions who do offer courses focusing primarily on early childhood development, however these are few and can be costly. Many higher institutions, specifically universities, do not offer stand-alone early childhood development courses, but have included them as additional modules within a degree qualification or post-graduation specialisations. This does not, however, make allowances for educators who only work in the early childhood sector or who do not want to or cannot afford to study a full degree course (Neuman, 2011). According to South Africa's National Development Agency (SANDA, 2014) mid-year population survey, estimates that there are **8, 207, 723** million children from birth to 6 years old in South Africa, with the provision of training for specialist educators being poor, specifically in the rural areas. The cost of training at independent higher institutions, as well the general lack of freely accessible training, could be some of the reasons that a large number of preschool educators have learnt their trade through experience and in-service training (NDA, 2014). In a study conducted by Jahangir, Saheen and Kazmi (2012),

they hypothesized that the perception of young trainees, regarding the qualities of a good teacher, would change significantly as a result of in-service teacher training. They maintained that being a teacher of today, is not only about being interested in learners' skills and knowledge, but is a holistic awareness of their total development. Mokgalabone (1998) states that educators need the opportunities to collectively analyse and reflect on their own teaching, legitimising their methodologies and teaching models.

Through in-service training programs, trainee educators not only learn about the theory of how children develop, but are able to witness that development first hand. Teaching practices provide ample opportunity for the student educators to do just this. The University of Western Cape provides a ten-week teaching practice for the trainee educators (Parker & Deacon, 2003). Their reasoning behind this is that teaching practice is intended to rather "promote self-conscious reflection upon practice than to focus on evaluating student teachers' classroom performance (Parker & Deacon, 2003, p.11). Learning Forward: The Professional Learning Association (2015), provides standards for professional learning in America. They view professional development as a holistic and continuous process.

According to Learning Forward (2015), professional development and learning promotes teacher and educator effectiveness, which in turn leads to more involved learners and an increase in children's results. Anderson, Reder and Simon (1996) claim that educator instruction needs to occur in socially complex situations and that abstract training is of little use. One of the strategies implemented by Learning Forward (2015), is learning communities, where educators are joined by a common goal and are committed to continuous improvement. Although there are definite advantages to having a theoretical background, specifically in the area of child psychology, in-service training and professional development offers experience in the practical day to day skills of working with young children and their parents. In-service training not only provides educators with practical training, but provides them with a community in which they will feel safe to reflect on their teaching processes and practices and to raise concerns. Professional development and on-going educator training plays a vital role in the continuous improvement of education (Jahangir, Saheen & Kazmi, 2012).

2.3. Language and Literacy Development

As this study is looking at emergent literacy, understanding how language and literacy plays out with young children is a key element. This section will focus on how language and literacies are learnt. It will look at language and literacy, situated literacy, emergent literacy, literacy development in a play, as well as literacy in a South African context. Unpacking these elements, will promote further understanding in the focus group discussions.

2.3.1. Language and Literacy

According to Bentzen (2005), one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the human species is our ability to communicate and make use of language. In fact, Gardner (1993) refers to our linguistic ability as one of eight intelligences which we as human beings have. From early development in the womb, a hearing child is engaged in the life-long journey of developing and improving his/her linguistic ability, gaining vocabulary, discovering types of speech and using it to make meaning (de Witt, 2009).

In this research, a community of early years' educators was formed in order to share and discuss their understanding and confidence in promoting emergent literacy in preschool children's play. It is therefore important to discuss how early language and literacy develops.

2.3.1.1 Language development

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) which is the national credentialing association for speech and language professionals, defines language as being "... made up of socially shared rules". These rules include what words mean, the making of new words and putting them together, as well as what combinations of words would have the best results on a given context. They further define speech as the verbal form of language, including the use of voice, articulation and fluency (ASHA, 2016).

As a child continues to grow and develop, so too does their use of language. Dahlgren (2008) states that learning language is developmental, moving from understanding to talking and finally to reading and writing. According to Adams (2002) a child needs to progress through certain milestones in order to become

proficient in the spoken language. These milestones begin with pre-verbal turn-taking at just a few months of ages and by the time a child has reached three and a half years, they should be more accomplished in maintaining topic-specific conversations with adults and making basic clarifications and adaptations for the listener (Adams, 2002). This serves to demonstrate their awareness that they have been understood by the listener. By the time a child has completed their preschool years, at approximately five years of age, they should be adept in making corrections and clarifications when they have been misunderstood by the listener, as well as demonstrating more intent towards their listener (Adams, 2002; Kennison, 2014).

Browne (1996) states that a child's ability to speak fluently by the age of four signals their capacity to learn and that speaking and listening are a means of learning both in and out of school. As they near school-going age, a child could know anything from 2000 to 10000 words, depending on their background and economic status (Crystal, 1987, Dahlgren, 2008). Tabors, Snow and Dickinson (2001) states that vocabulary in preschool correlates with reading comprehension in formal school later on. These language skills serve as a tool to further extend and develop their cognitive development in making new discoveries, experiment with the world around them and make connections between what is already known and what is new to them (Browne, 1996). The skills of listening and speaking, not only enable life-long learning, but also enable social interaction to take place. This builds on Vygotsky's premise (1962) that learning happens within social environments, where children have the freedom to interact with each other and generate ideas. The idea of social learning will be further explored in the section on situated literacy.

By understanding the value of speaking, Browne (1996) states that educators will be able to support their learners in articulating and satisfying their curiosity, reflecting on what they already know and what they still need to know and gradually take more ownership of their learning. By recognizing that their learners need to actively engage with their learning and to talk through their thought processes, educators will also be recognizing each child's abilities and attitudes towards their individual life-long learning journeys (Browne, 1996).

2.3.1.2 Literacy development

Alongside children's language development, they are simultaneously being exposed to a world of literacy. The written word is all around them (Snow, 1998). From the road signs to food labels in the home and the shops where their parents buy their groceries, children are constantly being exposed to letters and words. These early experiences are closely linked to their future reading and writing development (National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC, 1998). The NAEYC (1998) states that "From their initial experiences and interactions..., children begin to read words, processing letter-sound relations and acquiring substantial knowledge of the alphabetic system (NAEYC, 1998, p.3). They go on further to say that as they learn, children only continue to consolidate this knowledge, allowing for fluency and automaticity in their reading and writing (NAEYC, 1998). Snow (1998) says that during this time of learning in their early years, children "tend to create many and varied texts and display different kinds of writing systems" (Snow, 1998, p.59).

According to Neuman, Copple and Bredekamp (2004) the key to a child's success in school and later on in life, is his/her ability to read and write. "One of the best predictors of whether a child will function competently in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level to which the child progresses in reading and writing" (Neuman et al. 2004, p.1). They go on to state that though the ability to read and write continues to progress throughout life, the most important period for the development of literacy are the early years, from birth to eight years old.

Research has revealed that children take their first steps towards reading and writing very early in life (Browne, 1996; National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC, 1998; Neuman et al. 2004; Wilkinson, 2003). Although to what extent can vary according to the child's ability, background, family context, economic status and even geographical location, children are exposed to the basic concepts of language, literacy and their functions from very early on (Neuman et al. 2004). Before children begin their formal reading journey, they can recognise symbols and understand that they are being used to convey meaning. The recognition of the link between, objects and spoken words, pictures and spoken words and then symbols and spoken words, acts as a solid foundation on which to build formal reading and

writing later on (Dyson,2016). As children continue to progress in their communication skills, be it verbal or through symbolism, they begin on their journey of reading words (Snow, 1998; Neuman et al. 2004; Wilkinson, 2003).

2.3.1.3. Linking language and literacy

According to Montessori (1917) in Stephenson (2006) children are born scientists, researching and discovering the world around them. Maria Montessori (1917) recognised as far back as the turn of the century, the potential power of children's learning, suggesting their need to question, observe and explore, setting them on a journey of experimentation, beginning with their need to communicate with those around them (Browne,1996; Stephenson, 2006). Within the first few months of life, babies are already playing with sounds, attempting to imitate the rhythms and tones of their caregivers and inferring the meaning of language by linking it to facial expressions and gestures (Berk,1996). As they grow and develop, young toddlers take great delight in listening to and joining in with action rhymes and songs, allowing them to link gestures to relevant words in the jingles. Listening to stories with key phrases, repetition and rhyming also contributes to a child's linguistic awareness. Bryant et al. (1990) suggest that it is these roots of language and literacy awareness which acts as a predictor of reading success later on. Through stories, rhymes and day to day conversation with older children and adults, children soon grasp the use of language and grow in their vocabulary. A child's language itself, moves from being solely needs-based to being used for communication purposes, sharing thoughts, ideas and feelings (Browne, 1996). Once they begin to feel confident in their command of language, children begin to feel comfortable in discussing the stories, rhymes and songs that they have learnt, such as retelling stories and requesting their favourite songs. According to Dickinson and Smith (1994), it is these conversations that give the stories and rhymes power, linking them to each child's own life. It is also through these interactions with books, that children become more aware of the written word and their meanings.

The recognition that words carry meaning, encourages children in their own writing, through mark-making and symbolism (Snow 1998). These marks carry their own meaning for children, often representing an entire story for the child (Wilkinson, 2003). As children become more aware that stories are made up of words and that words are made of individual letters, they too begin to experiment with word- and

story building by placing familiar letters together to create their own words and stories. These are often letters that are familiar to them through their own names or names of close friends. Research shows that children as young as five years old, can grasp phonemic awareness – their understanding and awareness that speech is comprised of identifiable units: words, syllables and sounds (Neuman et al. 2004). By exposing children to large amounts of print and bringing the children's attention to the words and letters that make up those letters, children become more aware of alphabetic and spelling principles, as well as concepts of print (Wilkinson, 2003). Within a preschool context, the concept of print can be explored through the use of shared texts and would not only communicate that print carries meaning, but would also share common reading and writing rules. Examples of this are that in the English language, we read from left to right, top to bottom, that stories are made of sentences, sentences are made of words and spaces come between these words and the use of punctuation (Neuman et al. 2004). These features can also be modelled by the teacher in shared writing, an activity that allows the class to write a text together, observing the teacher using skills that they have previously discussed. These skills are later imitated by the children in their own texts, leading to confidence in their own writing ability. A study by Read (1971) found that without formal instruction, young children are able to use their inferred knowledge and basic phonemic awareness to invent spelling for words that they wish to write (National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC, 1998). According to Clarke (1988) and Beakas (s.d) children benefit from using invented spelling far more than if the teacher simply provides every correct spelling for them. This process encourages children to actively engage in letter-sound relationships and the building of their words (National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC, 1998). Beakas (s.d) states that invented spelling further allows children more freedom in writing creatively and making use of a larger vocabulary of words. The NAEYC further state that "Classrooms that provide children with regular opportunities to express themselves on paper, without feeling too constrained for correct spelling... also help children understand that writing has a real purpose (National Association for the Education of Young Children-NAEYC, 1998, p.5).

2.3.2. Situated Literacy

Barton and Hamilton (2000) present the theory that literacy is a social practice, one that focuses on social engagement and encourages the collaboration with individuals and communities. Edwards (2012) supports this theory stating that literacies are situated within specific contexts and social relationships on a regular basis. This conceptualises the “link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.7). Essentially literacy practice is what one does with literacy, how one utilises the skills of reading and writing in day to day living and ones’ awareness of it. These uses connect people and allow them to share ideas, identities and ideologies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) and involve attitudes, values, feelings and relationships (Street, 1993). These practices can be influenced and shaped by external factors such as social rules which may control production, distribution and access to texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Barton and Hamilton (2000) continue by adding that literacy events maintain a key role in these practices. These are activities where literacy plays a role. These may be a text which is discussed within a community, such as a book club or study group. Events such as these emphasise the “situated nature of literacy, that it always exists in a social context” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p.7). Lemke (1995) echoes this thought in his assertion that the starting point of verbal language should be the social event of such interactions. This can be clearly seen in the interaction between a mother and her infant who is beginning their journey of verbal development. The physical eye contact and body language support the meaning behind the language, allowing understanding to pass between the mother and infant.

In a study of a three-year-old Chinese girl in her family restaurant, Guofang (2001) found that the literacy practices of the young girl were influenced by her home context and experiences. These experiences, communal, oral and constructive, were different from traditional schooling practices and therefore Guofang (2001) suggests that there is a need for teachers to re-evaluate their classroom practices to help with home-school transition. By focusing on literacy as a situated practice, Guofang (2001) refers to the give and take and interaction between meaning and action with other individuals as a “social dance”. Novack (1990) affirmed that this

“social dance” is a back-and-forth relationship between techniques, ideas and the people or institutions involved in participating, creating and watching it. For young children this would involve the interplay of ideas, language and learning in their everyday lives, beginning with their primary caregivers and preschool educators (Guofang, 2001). This “dance” is emphasized in early childhood literacy, where children’s “language socialization patterns at home and community, are important factors contributing to their early school success or failure (Guofang, 2001, p.58; Sulzby & Teale, 1991).

2.3.3. Emergent Literacy

According to the Department of Basic Education in South Africa (2011), “Emergent Literacy refers to the knowledge and skills that precede learning to read and write as taught formally in Grade 1” (Department of Education, 2011, p.3). It is the earliest phase of reading and writing, where a child would begin to show an understanding of what reading and writing is and that print holds meaning. It is during this stage that children begin to understand that print is a form of communication (Department of Education, 2011). Wilkinson (2003) agrees with this definition, stating that emergent literacy starts from when children are first exposed to print in the environment within the context of each child’s community. By observing their parents making grocery lists, taking notes or typing texts or emails, children begin to observe the use of print and begin to experiment with marks themselves, believing that these marks carry similar meanings to that of their parents or caregivers (Wilkinson, 2003). Although young children are unable to read or write in the conventional sense in their preschool years, Hiebert (1988) maintains that their attempts to read and write shows steady literacy development. Gunn et al. (2004) states that this stage is a prerequisite to formal reading and writing, highlighting knowledge, skills and attitudes towards early reading and writing conventions.

Emergent literacy holds within itself the skills of emergent reading and emergent writing, both different sides of the coin, but each undeniably linked to the other. Sulzby and Teale (1991) believe that reading and writing develop concurrently and are interrelated. Gunn et al. (2004) claimed that there are various areas of knowledge within literacy which all develop simultaneously within the early years and affects the ease with which children learn to read and write later on. Van Kleeck

(1990) categorised these areas of literacy knowledge as the following: print awareness, the relationship between speech and print, structure of text, phonological awareness and naming of letters and letter formation.

Understanding the purpose of print allows children to realise that print conveys a message and that written words carry meaning (Gunn et al. 2004). This creates a bridge between written and spoken language, supporting the idea that reading is a sociable activity. Conversely children need to also develop the ability to translate spoken language to writing (Gunn et al. 2004). Due to the variance of exposure that young children have to print, dependent on their contexts and experiences, their knowledge of print functions, as well as vocabulary would vary considerably (Gunn et al. 2004). Weir (1989) felt that competencies in print functions within preschool literacy play a role in facilitating literacy related skills later on. According to Wilkinson (2003) children need certain opportunities in order to encourage a love and confidence in emergent writing. They need an environment which encourages purposeful writing. They need to have ownership of their writing, choosing what and how they want to write, with their own reasons and context. Children need to view writing as a sociable activity, one that encourages talking, reading and listening, and finally they need to feel that their writing, no matter what stage of development it is at, is valued (Wilkinson, 2003).

According to Gunn et al. (2004) print awareness refers to a child's knowledge of the conventions of print, as well as its purposes and uses. Children begin to show conventions of print in their early writing and mark making. Within emergent writing there are different stages of mark-making, signifying the level at which each child is at within their emergent writing journey. These often begin with large sweeping movements before moving to more definitive rounded circular shapes and horizontal or zig-zagged singular marks (Wilkinson, 2003). These marks begin to take on the characteristics of a writing system including directionality and linearity (Gunn et al. 2004). They may then begin to experiment with more 'letter-like' shapes which include round and straight-line combinations until finally they begin to use more recognisable letters within their mark-making activity, generally ones belonging to their own names (Wilkinson, 2003; Gunn et al. 2004). Browne (1993) says that understanding how writing looks and is used from a child's point of view, will enable educators to plan appropriate emergent literacy activities. By adopting a

developmental approach to writing, educators can encourage children to 'have a go' and take ownership over their own writing. This serves to encourage confidence in each child's own writing skills, allowing them to enter their school years as experienced emergent writers (Wilkinson, 2003).

Alongside emergent writing and mark making, children embark on a journey of print mindfulness and discovery. Bromley (2003) compares the relationship between a child and a book to that of a friendship. She goes on to say that friendships include good times and bad times, and so too should books. Books are able to add humour and light-heartedness, as well as provide comfort in times of need. Just as a child would be able to rely on their friend, so too should children build a relationship with books that provides them with stability and support. Bromley (2003) suggest that educators should choose the books in their class libraries or book areas, as if they were choosing friends for their learners. Ones that would encourage interest and that children would want to get to know better. These books will then be enjoyed with much affection and pleasure, the outcome of which would be that children begin their formal school years with a positive attitude towards reading, which would in turn increase their success as readers (Bromley, 2003; Boakye & Southey, 2008). Grabe and Stoller (2002) state that how successful children are as readers in their formal school years is directly influenced by their willingness to participate in reading activities. This positive attitude is linked to their previous experiences of print, reading and its purposes. According to Grace and Brandt (2005) encouraging children to read in a developmental approach is not only essential for literacy development, but also sets them on a life-long journey of learning and reading for enjoyment. Children must experience pretending to read as something that they find enjoyable, useful and would want to repeat (Grace & Brandt, 2005).

Prior to formal reading, children are required to first gain understanding of the conventions of print (Grace & Brandt, 2005). Children need to learn how to hold books correctly, gaining a sense of directionality in the print and space between them and the book, as well as between the words themselves. They also need to understand that each story has a basic structure, a beginning, middle and end, as well as containing characters (Grace & Brandt, 2005). At times, a child would be able to build a relationship with or draw a connection between themselves and a character, adding to the positive experience of reading and allowing them to gain

appreciation that reading is not only useful, but also enjoyable (Bromley, 2003; Grace & Brandt, 2005).

By designing and adapting their class activities to meet the needs of each individual child, educators are able to include these conventions of print in emergent reading activities and begin to introduce phonological and phonemic awareness skills (Grace & Brandt, 2005). Letter recognition and phonological awareness supports reading acquisition by developing letter and word recognition strategies later on (Gunn et al. 2004). The National Institute for Literacy (2001) defines phonemic awareness as the ability to think about and work with separate sounds in spoken languages. Guofang (2001) goes on to say that before children learn to read they need to gain awareness of sounds and how they work. This can also be integrated into early writing (Guofang, 2001).

According to Snow et al. (1998, p.5) "The majority of reading problems faced by today's adolescents and adults are the result of problems that might have been avoided or resolved in their early childhood years". Whitehurst and Lonigan (2001) believed that where children were lacking solid grounding in early literacy abilities, they were more likely to be poor readers in the long term. These poor reading skills would in turn hinder their learning in other academic areas which depend enormously on reading (Lonigan et al. 2000). Lonigan et al (2000) believe that this link between emergent literacy and later reading is connected by the foundational knowledge of oral language, print awareness and phonological processing, claiming that those learners who were exposed to print early and had more experience with the foundational knowledge of reading, read early and with more confidence (Lonigan et al, 2000; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001). In a study done by Lonigan et al (2000) it was demonstrated that the origins of children's reading skills in kindergarten and first grade, were found in their preschool period. "Together, phonological sensitivity and letter knowledge accounted for 54% of the variance in kindergarten and first-grade children's decoding abilities" (Lonigan et al. 2000). This was as a result of emergent literacy skills that were developed in their preschool years. The findings further indicate that there is significant growth in phonological sensitivity within the three to four-year-old age group. Connor et al. (2006) further state that evidence reveals that high-quality emergent literacy activities in the preschool years may lead to both long- and short-term social and cognitive gains, including the

reduction of grade repetition and juvenile delinquency. This preschool intervention would also lead to stronger reading outcomes in the later years, specifically for those at risk of underachievement, thus reducing the number of referrals into special educational programmes.

Lonigan et al (2009) state that literacy skills form the foundation for acquiring knowledge and skills throughout school and life. These skills have become undeniably important in day to day life, as well as in the employment market. In order to provide adults with the literary skills needed for daily living, it is key that they received the necessary training in their formative years. This begins in their early years with emergent literacy (Lonigan et al 2009; McDonald Connor, 2006). Lonigan et al. (2009) summarise emergent literacy skills as a “critical and significant educational achievement for children in a literate society” (Lonigan et al, 2009, p.306).

2.3.4. Literacy development in a play environment

Malaguzzi (1993) claims that the child’s learning environment should be seen as the third teacher, as children are constantly learning from the world around them.

Vecchi (2010) of the Reggio Emilia philosophy describes the play environment as one which “expresses ideas, not only about space, but about its inhabitants, their possible relations with the environment and with each other” (Vecchi, 2010, p.82)

She goes on to say that an environment which is lovely and carefully constructed generates psychological well-being for both the children and adults working and learning in that environment (Vecchi, 2010) While some may argue that children at play are simply doing whatever they want to, Rose (2009) states that in good practice an environment carefully and thoughtfully created by practitioners, both indoors and outdoors, creates a strong platform for the children to further their learning through their play (in Moyles, 2010)

For children, play is a time for them to be themselves. A time for them to enter a magical world where they can explore and discover without any pressure or outside interference (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010). It is during this time that they grow as humans and set the track to where they are going on their life long journey of learning (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010). Play is an imperative part of every child’s life and is recognised as their right in the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (1989). Kostelnik (Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 2004, n.p) believed that “A child’s play is ultimately his exploration of his world” and it is through this exploration that children learn inherently and develop their cognitive, creative, physical, as well as personal, social and emotional skills.

Armed with the knowledge of the importance of play, as well as how children play, every early years’ educator should be equipped with the tools necessary in order to promote natural learning and development in their class. It is to the benefit of the educator to understand the stage at which his/her age group is at within their play. This will provide context for an educator to encourage a language-rich, play environment specific to the children in his/ her group of learners. (Parten, 1932. Gray (2011) promotes mixed- age play, maintaining that children should play with children of different ages, learning from the different stages of play. Gray (2011) draws a link between Parten’s stages of play and Vygotsky’s (1962) zone of proximal development, whereby the younger children can be drawn into collaborative play by the older children, and the older children can provide emotional and language support for the younger children (Gray, 2011).

Parten (1932) looked at play through a lens of social development and skills and noted that children developed their play at different social stages. She found that within each of these stages, children begin to learn social norms and patterns, as well as beginning to respond to others’ feelings and perspectives. Within Parten’s stages of play (Parten, 1932), children develop from unoccupied play, where a child is simply observing, to solitary play. Onlooker play precedes parallel play, whereby a child plays separately from others, but mimics their actions or ‘game’.

At approximately two and a half to four years of age, children fall in the stage of Associative play. Within Associative play, pairs and groups of children play together and share toys, resources and materials, but cooperation and negotiation skills are rare. The children are interested mainly in their peers and being with their’ friends and are not too concerned with their choice of activity. Four-year olds overlap into the next stage of Cooperative play, where they become more interested in the type of activity, as well as who is involved. The activities become far more organized and roles are assigned to the participants through negotiation. It is also at this stage that a group identity may be starting to form within a friendship circle (Parten, 1932).

Likewise, Smilansky (1990) found that children develop through different stages of play and distinguishes four types of play: Functional, Constructive, Dramatic and Games without rules (de Witt, 2009). From three years, she places the children in the Dramatic play stage. At this stage children can be observed enjoying pretending to be someone or something else, making use of actions, words or objects to represent other things or situations. Pearce (1977) stated that the imagination used and developed, particularly in this stage, is critical in the formation of intelligence. Pearce believed that imagination is the means of “creating images that are not present to the senses. The whole crux of human intelligence hinges on this ability of the mind” (Pearce, 1977, p.120)

Through the provision of time and a positive learning and play environment, in which the children can initiate their own play, a practitioner is encouraging each child the opportunity to discover and internalise their own learning without the pressure of being right or wrong, allowing them to experiment and explore their environment with power and competency (Broomby, 2003). Being available, as educators, to support their activities, without interference, provides them with a feeling of safety, especially for those who are more insecure, while the provision of opportunity to reflect upon their earlier play encourages the children’s recall as well as the development of their vocabulary (Broadhead, Howard & Wood, 2010; Bruce, 2011).

This is especially true of literacy. By creating a written and spoken language-rich environment, children are absorbing and interacting with literacy concepts constantly and growing in their command of language (Browne, 1996). In order for children to have a positive relationship with the environment around them, early years educators need to plan their classroom and outside environment with plenty of thought and care (Vecchi, 2010). By attentively developing their learning environment, the educator will create an abundance of opportunities for language and literacy development.

Children need exposure to books. From a young age, babies and toddlers begin to take notice of text and link it to the pictures below it. By having language rich texts and physically attractive pictures, as well as “confident practitioners who follow the children’s interests and enthusiasms” (Whitehead, 2010, p.89), children begin to see reading as an enjoyable activity. By adding to this and creating a special space

where children can enjoy these books, either on their own, with friends or with a practitioner, children will further link reading to positive feelings (Whitehead, 2010). It is these positive attitudes and emotions that will encourage the love for reading, build their confidence and serve as a strong foundation for formal reading later on (Whitehead,2010).

Role-play, home corners and interest tables also serve as exciting backgrounds for text. These areas within the class environment are often based on themes and therefore offer a range of vocabulary and information to the children. By making these environments rich in print, the teacher encourages children to make use of new language and grow in their vocabulary. According to Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp, (2004) young children acquire a basic understanding of literacy concepts and functions long before they begin formal reading and writing. They go on to say that “[c]hildren learn to use symbols, combining their oral language, pictures, print, and play into a coherent mixed medium and creating and communicating meanings in a variety of different ways (Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp, 2004, p. 4).

In their free-play, children will often mimic the thematic language available to them, using it in their conversation and showing their comprehension of the vocabulary. Nicolopoulou, McDowell & Brockmeyer (2006) suggests that story-telling and narrative play are intertwined in young children’s development, “promoting early literacy-related skills (Nicolopoulou, McDowell & Brockmeyer, 2006, p.126). Van der Mescht (2014) describes play as being “spontaneous, exploratory, creative and flexible” (van der Mescht, 2014, p.182) and describes activities, such as playing house or school, as a social activity, where children can imitate literacy interactions. This can be inspired by providing the space to encourage their mark-making and writing within these areas. For example, writing a shopping list or restaurant order. Allowing children to read back their own writing shows them that their marks, no matter how simplistic, also has meaning and is important to the reader. This will, again, build on their confidence and motivation to read and write (Neuman, Copple & Bredekamp, 2004). Smilansky (1990) found that young children who had been involved in socio-dramatic play, were unrivalled in literacy by Grade two.

Van der Mescht (2014) highlights the difficulties of practising literacies at home, in South Africa. Lack of literature, or literate family members is especially problematic in the disadvantaged communities. In order to assist these young learners in their literacy journey, Van der Mescht (2014) supports the notion of peer-learning and highlights the concepts of 'playing school'. This concept involves older siblings, who are already in school, pretending to be teachers and teaching their younger siblings. This idea of peer learning through play echoes Gray's (2011) notion of mixed-age teaching, as discussed early, and extends upon Paley's (2013) observations that play examines the children's thoughts and extends their knowledge.

2.3.5. Literacy in a South African context

Literacy proficiency of school-aged children in South Africa has caused rising concern due to the number of children who do not have access to continual education. According to StatsSA (2012), the number of children attending school from the age of seven is only 74.1%, meaning that nearly 25% of school-aged children are not attending a schooling institution on a regular basis (StatsSa, 2012). The truly disturbing statistic, however, is that only 37% of children under five are attending an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre of any type (StatsSa, 2012).

While various factors, such as children's socio-economic background or parents' educational status may be the cause of poor reading and writing skills in school, another cause could be the lack of formal education available to children under the age of five (de Witt, 2008). Early literacy skills are vital as a foundation to children's formal reading and writing proficiency later on (McConnell and Rabe, 1999; Wilkinson, 2003; Bromley, 2003). According to the South African Democratic Teachers Union, SADTU, (2000) early childhood development is paramount.

"We believe that ECD as a pre-formal school experience is directly linked to efforts to increase efficiency in the schooling system. It literally lays the base for future educational gains: there are about one million learners aged five/six who are not in school and have no access to ECD: the importance of ECD is beyond question" (SADTU, 2000, p.1).

In a study done by de Witt, Lessing and Lenayi (2008) at Unisa, in cooperation with READ Education Trust, they found that only 35% of Grade R learners met the

minimum criteria for early literacy and were ready to move into formal education the following year. This indicates that the majority of Grade R learners do not have the essential concepts or skills needed in order to progress with formal reading in Grade 1 (de Witt, 2007). Pretorius and Machet (2004) state that “literacy forms that backbone of scholastic success at primary, secondary and tertiary level” (Pretorius & Machet, 2004, p.129) This is substantiated by an evaluation of grade 3 learners done by the Department of Education (2005) who found that 54% of learners were not on par regarding reading competency in English. According to de Witt (2007) the solution to this problem seems to be good quality early years education.

Access to books, listening to stories being read or told in a child’s early years, is strongly related to early reading success and has a remarkable effect on children’s expressive language, vocabulary development and comprehension (Pretorius & Machet, 2004; Vivas, 1996). Mason and Sinha (1993) highlight this by stating that learners who start their schooling as efficiently literate are the product of literacy strong activities in their early years. The activities are seen as emergent or natural and allow the child to explore literacy material with an educator as a mediator (de Witt, Lessing & Lenayi, 2008).

This is context specific, middle to upper class, as a private school would be in the top quintile which would have specific literacy practices.

2.4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, literature has been reviewed that has direct bearing on this study. This study is conducted in a community of practice and so literature regarding the functionality of a community of practice, the space in which it is conducted, as well as the use of communities of practice as a teaching technique, has been investigated.

The focus of discussion within the community is the development of language and literacy in early years, as so this is examined in great deal, looking at the development of language and literacy as situated literacy. The age of the children in the focus groups also requires a study of how literacy emerges through their everyday play.

To sum up this chapter, literature regarding literacy in a South African context has been studied, looking specifically at early literacy development.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

As indicated in the previous chapter this research draws on the notion of community of practice as a way of investigating teachers thinking about emergent literacy. It also draws on space theories, as space informed the way that the data emerged and was shaped throughout the data collection. In this chapter, the focus is on the methodology, specifically the use of successive focus groups within different spaces. As indicated in the previous chapter, space played an important part in understanding the discussions and thinking that was shared in our focus groups here. Thus, focus groups are an important part of the methodology that contributed to this case study.

I will start this chapter with the paradigm of the study, and show how it aligned with my methodological position, I then discuss the particular context of the research before presenting the particular participants. I will then move on to data generation, specifically the use of focus groups, field notes and interviews. Finally, I will discuss the ethical considerations and validity of this study.

3.2. Paradigm

The paradigm of this research is interpretivist. Within an interpretivist paradigm there is a recognition that becoming familiar with the experiences of participants takes time and in a more naturalistic setting (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). Because this type of research is focused on an in-depth understanding of the participants' experienced, it often requires "a prolonged process of interaction (Taylor & Medina, 2013), to understand the lived experiences of said participants. So, in order to understand perceptions and thinking it was necessary for me as the researcher to move from my office and principal position and walk alongside my staff as together we explored understandings of emergent literacy based on instances and examples they brought to share with the group. Interpretivism requires making sense of the data and Patton (2014) suggests that as it involves making carefully considered judgements it requires both a critical and creative approach

3.3. Methodology

In this section the research design of this study will be outlined. Thereafter I will discuss the choice of case study with qualitative research, as well as its qualities. The context and setting of this case study will follow, as well as a discussion of the participants and their role within the study.

3.3.1. Research Design

The purpose of this research was to primarily understand emergent literacy as noted by the participants. Another purpose was to develop a community of practice among the participants and, within this community, to discuss and unpack understandings of emergent literacy, therefore a case study with a qualitative research focus, seemed appropriate. Qualitative research allows the researcher to approach the world around them allowing them to “understand, describe and sometimes explain phenomena” (Barbour, 2007, p.xii). Barbour (2007) states that “Qualitative research takes context and cases seriously for understanding an issue under study” (Barbour, 2007, p.xiii]. Barbour (2007) goes on to say that case studies are appropriate for qualitative research, as they recognise the importance of context in what is studied. This focus on context was a way of recognising the particular features of this particular case. Patton (1990) reminds us of the value of the case study that no matter the unit of analysis, the case study seeks for ‘depth and detail, holistically and in context’ (Patton, 1990, p.55). So a case study approach allows for in-depth understandings within the specific context being studied. Yin (2009) states that a case study would be the preferred research method in a study which asks ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions and is focusing on real-life phenomena. In this study, understandings of emergent literacy were the unit of analysis as understandings of this were explored and extended through the process. This case study examines a particular situation of Early Childhood Development (ECD) educators’ engagement around emergent literacy. As such it has formed a specific community of practice which was bounded in a place and time as defined by myself, the researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). As the notion of a community of practice was central to this case study, interactions within the school community contributed to the qualitative data of the study (Lave & Wenger, 1991). It was critical that this process of interaction and engagement throughout the study was as important as the

outcome (Mouton, 2011; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Data collection took place over five weeks at times which were convenient for the participants. This was usually in morning sessions where teaching cover was organized to allow for the focus group members to be out of their classes. By carrying the research out in a naturalistic setting as opposed to a more experimental situation the focus is interpretivist and authentic, depending on each participant's understandings and experiences (Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

Within this case study, early childhood practitioners within a specific setting, a pre-school, were invited to work together in a collaborative manner to explore information which is particularly relevant to my research questions and aims. These participants share common domain, community and practice (Maxwell, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Table 1 recognises the Qualities of Case Study in relation to this study (Merriam, 2009).

Table 1: Qualities of Case Study

| Single Case Study | Examples from this study |
|---|--|
| Researchers are interested in awareness, discovery and interpretation | As a fellow educator, I journeyed alongside the participants in our discovery of emergent literacy. I applied my insights to the data collected based on the literature I have reviewed. |
| Is a phenomenon that is specific to a case | The phenomenon of this study is the development of a community of practice in order to support emergent literacy in young children's play. |
| Units of analysis | Unit one: Repeated focus groups |

| | |
|--|---|
| | Unit two: Field notes Unit three: Structured interviews |
| Occurring in a bounded context | The context was a preschool with participants who were educators for different age groups, over a period of six sessions. Five sessions were focus group discussions, one session was interviews. |
| Contains rich, thick description | The participants' comments during the focus group discussions, my field notes and the interviews were described and analysed in their entirety. |
| Does not claim specific data collection or analysis methods. | <p>The data collection for this study was in the form focus group transcripts, personal field notes and individual structured interviews.</p> <p>The data was analysed according to the participants involvement in the focus groups, as well as their knowledge and opinions of emergent literacy.</p> <p>These were selected as appropriate for this study.</p> |

3.3.2. Context

The context or setting in which this research took place, is a private pre- and primary school, where I am the principal. The preschool was founded in 2009 while the Grade 1 class was only added in 2012. The school has grown by one grade each year thereafter. As of 2016 there are twelve classes, catering for learners from three months to five years old in the preschool, and Grade R to Grade 3 in the primary

school. Class sizes range from twelve to eighteen learners, with both a teacher and assistant in the preschool classes. As the primary school is still new, most classes have between eight and ten learners. The school is co-ed and English, while the preschool is co-ed and bilingual. The language of instruction at the primary school, however, is primarily English. Both departments of the school, the preschool and primary school, include learners with a variety of language backgrounds and ethnicities, with children that are both local and international (from Zimbabwe, China and India). This school caters for middle to above income families, and is situated in a middle-income area in the southern part of Port Elizabeth, South Africa. The school is also fairly well-resourced allowing for easy access to educational resources and play equipment.

The school also provides the service of being a full-day, all-year round school. The doors are open from 6:30 until 17:30 and are only closed for a month each year. This serves as support for the many working families within the area. Included in the fees, the school also provides two meals a day, breakfast and lunch, which ensures that the children are able to take part of each day's activities and tackle all tasks to the best of their ability.

3.3.3. Participants

In this case, all educators from the preschool and younger primary school classes were invited to participate in the community of practice. From an invitation to seventeen preschool teachers and assistants, eight responded positively that they would like to join the focus group. This community provided me with the opportunity to come to understand what the educators understand by emergent literacy and how this could be extended to the classroom settings. These educators have a variety of educational and teaching backgrounds, some as teaching assistants, and others as new or experienced teachers. Their qualifications also vary, ranging from no formal qualification, only classroom experience, to university degrees. The need for qualification is dependent on their role within the school, as well as the age which they teach, as educators of young toddlers are not required to hold qualifications. They also vary in age, with the youngest being twenty-two years old and the oldest being forty-nine years old.

Although all of the participants speak fluent English, five of the eight participants

have Afrikaans as their home language and are able to converse fluently with both English and Afrikaans children and parents.

The following table provides more detail on the participants' education and their current teaching responsibilities. (all names are pseudonyms) As seen in the following table, the participants are representative of the majority of age groups/grades at the school.

Table 2: Participants' roles, qualifications, experience and responsibilities

| | Names | Job description | Teaching Qualifications | Experience | Ages groups/ Grades taught | Current age group/ grade |
|---|--------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 | Sophie | Teacher | none | 11 years 4 years as an assistant 7 years as a teacher | 1-4 years | 2 to 3 years |
| 2 | Matilda | Teacher | none | 13 years | 1 to 4 years | 2 to 3 years |
| 3 | Hermione | Teacher | NQF level 5 | First year as teacher 2 years as assistant | 2 to 3 years 3 to 4 years | 3 to 4 years |
| 4 | Dorothy | Assistant | none | 2 years | 3 to 4 years, Pre-R (4 to 5 years) | Pre-R |
| 5 | Charlotte | Teacher | none | 2 years as assistant 3 years as teacher | 3 to 4 years, Pre-R (4 to 5 years) | Pre-R |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----------|-------------------------------------|--|---------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 6 | Madeline | Teacher | NQF level 5 | 4 years | 3 to 4 Pre-R Grade R | Grade R |
| 7 | Nancy | Teacher/ Librarian | B.Psych PGCE Foundation Phase | 4 years | Grade 2, Pre-R to Grade 3 | Pre-R to Grade 3 |
| 8 | Alice | Teacher/ School Administrator | none | 8 | 2 to 4 years | School Admin |

3.4. Methods used

Three forms of data collection provided the findings for this study, namely weekly focus groups, my own field notes, and structured interviews with participating educators. These are explained in the following section.

The data has been collected and transcribed and it has been interpreted through thematic analysis and analysing discourse (Mouton, 2011). Analysis refers to the 'breaking up' of data into identifiable themes, topics, patterns and relationships. According to Mouton (2011, p.108)

“The aim of analysis is to understand the various constitutive elements of one’s data through an inspection of the relationships between concepts, constructs or variables, and to see whether there are any patterns or trends that can be identified or isolated, or to establish themes in the data.”

Through transcription and coding, categories have been formed which will in turn show any patterns which may have emerged (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Through this study and the literature reviewed, categories of space and time emerged. This led to the interpretation of the data, which ‘builds’ the data into larger wholes showing whether there is a connection to any existing theoretical frameworks, and “whether these are supported or falsified by the new interpretation” (Mouton, 2011, p.109). The ‘breaking up’ of the data allowed me to see trends and understandings around emergent literacy that have developed in the course of the

study. Such understandings included that of play in an early years' setting, areas of learning and stages of literacy development. Concepts of space and power were used to understand the discussions and interaction that developed in the focus groups. These are further explained under data generation.

3.4.1. Focus Groups

Focus groups are a recognised way to generate data in qualitative research. Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) maintain that focus groups consist of four key elements. Firstly, they are focused by nature, gathering information from participants which is specific to a situation. Secondly a focus group requires interactions between the group's participants, allowing for discussion, agreements and disagreements and to generate information. The knowledge that is generated within a focus group is seen to be in-depth and goes beyond simply gleaning surface information and is able to "elicit the emotions, associations, and motivations that influence particular behaviours (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007, p. 11). Finally focus groups are classified as humanistic, including the interactions of the participants and providing a space for openness, empathy and active listening (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). According to Taylor, Bogdan and de Vault (2015) focus groups use "group dynamics to yield insights that might not be accessible without this kind of interaction" (Taylor, Bogdan & de Vault, 2015, p.132). They also suggest that the purpose of focus groups is not to reach consensus but to explore perspectives. Focus groups also allow people to feel empowered and supported by the group and thus may be more likely to share (de Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2011). As this study was centred on creating a community among the educators at this school, sharing in focus groups seemed like an appropriate practice to introduce. Krueger and Casey (2015) suggest that focus groups work well when participants feel comfortable with each other and do not fear being judged. It is therefore incumbent on the researcher, of focus group facilitator, to create an encouraging and supportive atmosphere in which all contributions are welcomed. Krueger and Casey (2015) support the elements as suggested by Stewart, Shamdasani and Rook (2007) and summarise focus groups as having certain characteristics, namely that they are comprised of small groups of people who possess certain attributes, who together in focussed discussions help to understand the topic being researched (Krueger & Casey, 2014). I have explained how these

characteristics apply to my research in the following table.

Table 3: Characteristics of Focus groups in relation to this study

| Characteristics of focus groups | Focus groups in this study |
|--|---|
| Small group of people | Our group consisted of eight participants. |
| Shared attributes | All of the participants work at the school in the early years department and have a shared interest in preschool education. |
| Focused discussions | Our discussions were focused on Emergent literacy in early childhood education. |
| Provide qualitative data | Focus group meetings consisting of in-depth discussions with participants sharing their experiences and observations were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were taken. |
| Topic being researched | Developing a community of practice within a preschool setting, in order to support emergent literacy in young children's play. |

Focus group discussions played a key role in the collection of data and took place throughout the duration of the study with the group of educators. These focus groups were spaces for informal conversation, initially guided by their questions and thinking around emergent literacy. According to Barbour (2007) focus groups rely on the generation of interaction amongst participants, rather than more formal question and answer interviews. In addition, space was made for, - "the questions (that) emerge from the immediate context and are asked in the natural course of events; there is no predetermination of question topics or phrasing" (McMillan & Schumacher

2010, p.355). The value of using this approach is that it allowed participants to bring their own questions thus allowing a generative space in which participants' voices and concerns were recognised. This approach also allowed me to take on a facilitative role and to walk the journey with the participants, at times offering examples and personal anecdotes (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

As the educators were participants in the research, they played a vital role in deciding what to observe on a daily basis and share with the group. These groups therefore, took on a mostly nondirective approach, allowing the participants more opportunity to explore, discover and generate ideas and information in a more spontaneous environment, rather than having a specific framework outlined for them, however some steering questions were used in order to “nudge the group back on the main research questions, following excursions into other areas” (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007, p.84; Struwig & Stead, 2001). Focus group meetings took place over an hour once a week over five weeks. The hour-long sessions varied depending on how much the participants shared, allowing all participants time to share and comment on each other's observation, without running over the specified time as agreed by the participants. This shows respect to the participants, as well as to the study, as extended discussion may lose relevance (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). The weekly meetings allowed the participants time to observe, select and reflect on what they would like to share. Multiple focus groups allowed for shifts in understanding (Adams, 2013) and the development of a community orientation and appreciation of emergent literacy. Educators' contributions and perceptions were noted and used as reference for their next week's observations. Verbal discussions were recorded and transcribed by myself, allowing me to become familiar with the data, as well as allowing me to experience the frustration of neglecting key leads or clarifications, which will allow for me to be a more attentive facilitator in the future (Barbour, 2007).

3.4.2. Space and facilitation

An integral part of this research is the community of practice and therefore the idea of equality was important in each meeting. Regardless of each participant's experience or qualification, it was of utmost importance that they had an equal voice in the discussions and felt reassured that their opinions would be valued (Kingry,

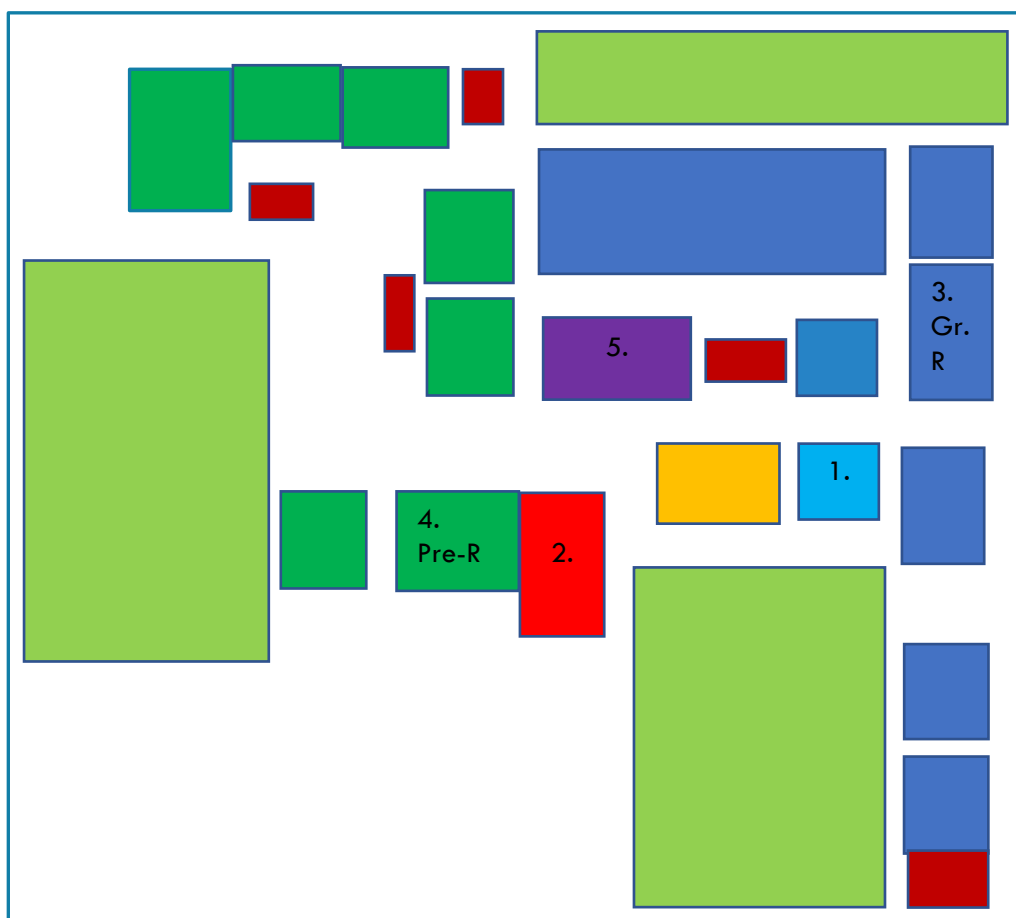
Tiedje & Friedman, 1990). It was especially important that they felt this way with me. As their principal, I was very aware that I was entering the group on an uneven keel and it was important for the participants to feel that I was one of them, walking the journey with them, rather than teaching them or enforcing my ideas onto them. As such a conscious decision was made as a group for the facilitation of each meeting to be led by a different participant each week. Although I would comment on their thoughts, ask steering questions or share my own anecdotes, the facilitator of each meeting would ensure that each participant had time to speak and would watch the time (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). This facilitator also chose who would facilitate the following meeting.

As well as having a different facilitator each week, we also decided to meet in different areas of the school. This was decided as a group at each meeting. At times, we simply chose the classroom of the following facilitator, whilst at others we chose an area that was directly linked to the topic which we had decided on for the next meeting. This use of space was a way of deflecting authority from me to them into their spaces, rather than being in my office. According to Dixon (2011) power and authority is able to circulate, being held by various people at different times. We had met in my office on our very first meeting and we joked about how stuffy and formal it felt, as it was a space for official meetings where roles or positions were established and therefore participation was constrained. According to Stewart, et al (2007) leadership can be influenced by situational variables, including location and spatial position. From then on, we all made a conscious effort to keep our discussion informal, at times even including tea and sweets.

The table below indicates the arrangement of our meetings. It reflects the different venues and facilitators as well as the particular focus of each meeting. These decisions were made on a week to week basis to allow for fluidity in our thoughts and ideas.

Table 4: Focus groups: spaces and facilitation

| Session | Facilitator | Location | Time | Length of focus group | Focus as chosen by participants |
|---------|-------------|--------------------|----------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 | Tammy | Principal's office | 10 am | 30 min 19 sec | Introduction to Emergent Literacy |
| 2 | Nancy | Art Room | 10:30 am | 31 min 17 sec | Book corners |
| 3 | Madeline | Grade R classroom | 10 am | 27 min 4 sec | Role Play areas |
| 4 | Charlotte | Pre-R classroom | 10 am | 19 min 3 sec | Role Play area/ Self-Registration |
| 5 | Tammy | Staff room | 10:00 am | 20 min 44 sec | Self- Registration |



Key:

-  Primary School classes (Grade R -3)
-  Baby Centre and Preschool classes (0 – 5 years)
-  Principal's office
-  Office
-  Art Room
-  Library
-  Staff room and kitchen
-  Playgrounds
-  Bathrooms

Figure 1: Map of the school and the order in which we used the spaces.

3.4.3. Field notes

Initial records in the form of field notes were also kept by myself. These notes allowed me to observe how participants reacted to each other's views or opinions, which, in turn assisted me in my interpretation of the data at a later stage (Struwig & Stead, 2001). My notes recorded some of what was said, as well as some reminders of what we had decided for the following meeting. This was useful in keeping track of our meetings, setting up reminders for each facilitator and observing both what we had already discussed, as well as what we would be discussing in the following meeting. These notes therefore served as a point of reference to structure the meetings and a way of triangulating the whole research journey.

3.4.4. Interviews with the teachers

In addition to the focus groups, structured, focused interviews took place at the end of the research period. These interviews assumed a conversational manner with open-ended questions, however were formal in structure and did not change from one participant to the next, which allowed me to remain neutral (Struwig & Stead, 2001; Yin, 2009). These interviews were conducted one on one, so as to allow the individuals to share their specific journey with me, rather than as a group (Barbour,

2007). A predetermined interview guide was provided with questions, allowing participants time to think about their answers. These interviews took place in our school library, providing a quiet, peaceful space with a literary element. (See Appendix E)

Later in the year follow up interviews took place with the participants. These interviews were informal, taking place in each participant's classroom and based on the interactions and learnings that emerged throughout the study, as well as reflection of the process and the applicability in the classroom in the future. These interviews revolved around the central question of "What have you found applicable from our focus groups?" and were conversational in nature, allowing the participants to speak freely and give examples without the concern of critique (Patton, 2003; Yin, 2009).

3.4.5 Reflective process

According to Agee (2009) in order to understand the experiences and perspectives of others, continuous questioning and probing is necessary. These questions should be fluid, growing, changing and becoming more refined as the research unfolds (Agee, 2009). Reflection was integral to this study. Time was spent in each focus group, reflecting on the previous meeting and deciding in which direction to move for the following one. Cooper (2014) suggests that "[e]valuation based on collective, reflective dialogue has the potential to provide an evidence base of good practice, enhance staff well-being and improve practice outcomes" (Cooper, 2014, p.563). Post group sessions, I spent time reflecting on what was said, evaluating my steering questions and the space in which it took place. Creswell (2007) proposes that questions change throughout a research study, in order to reflect a growing understanding of the problem. Through the reflection of the focus group sessions, I was able to redirect and reformulate my thinking and questions for the following session (Flick, 2006). It therefore, became a navigational tool for this research journey, allowing me to move in the right direction and change course where necessary (Agee, 2009). As the principal of this school, this engagement in research allowed me space to reflect and through this reflective process I have come to new understandings of teacher training, focus groups and emergent literacy. It enabled me to look at the educators, children and school with new eyes, not as a teacher, but

as a researcher informed by literature.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The relationship between ethics and research is crucial. It refers to the moral principles that underpin the study and regulate research practice (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). According to Struwig and Stead (2001) “[r]esearch ethics provide researchers with a code of moral guidelines on how to conduct research in a morally acceptable way (Struwig & Stead, 2001, p.66). The principles of ethics include: gaining consent for the involvement, in this case, of the educators, inviting participation but not coercing it, providing the participants with full knowledge regarding the nature of the research and treating all participants fairly, with consideration and respect (Mukherji & Albon, 2010).

For the purpose of this study, the seventeen available educators, both teachers and assistants, received a letter regarding the nature of the research (Appendix B). The educators were informed in full of any and all expectations, as well as their right to leave the research at any time without prejudice or consequence (Struwig & Stead, 2001). This was done in a respectful manner, clearly explaining any and all expectations on their part, as well as mine, in order to reduce any anxiety at the thought of participating (Patton & Cochran, 2002).

I gained informed, written consent to be a participant and for their participation in written and voice-recorded evidence from the eight educators who became participants (Appendix C). Prior to the written consent, I met with them to ensure that they have a full understanding of the purposes of the research and what the information gathered will be used for, as well as why I have asked them to volunteer and the length of commitment (Patton & Cochran, 2002). I also ensured that all the educators understood that they had a right to the data collected and that they would remain anonymous if they would like to be (Mukherji & Albon, 2010). I chose to make use of pseudonyms for all participants.

Research was conducted in line with the ethics standards of Nelson Mandela University and I received ethics clearance as indicated by the ethics number that I received. (H16-EDU-ITE-011, Appendix A)

Besides adhering to the prescribed ethical procedures, it was also important to follow the spirit of ethical guidelines. Although as the principal I have a position of power, I see myself as fully democratic and educators had complete freedom to choose whether they would like to participate in this study or not, without any prejudice (Barbour, 2007; Struwig & Stead, 2001). I have worked alongside my fellow educators and have taught with some since this school started and we have learned many lessons along the way. Within this research, I was again a learner and I encouraged the participants to see me as fellow learner, being part of the journey with them (Patton & Cochran, 2002). My goal in this study, was to simply develop a community of practice, a safe generative space with no judgement, where I could understand the educators' alertness to possibilities of emergent literacy and their understandings of this practice.

3.6. Validity and Rigour

In order to demonstrate that my study is valid, I have made reference to Shenton's (2004) four strategies for achieving a trustworthy research study.

In table 5, I describe the four strategies (credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability), their definitions, as well as individual strategies for this study.

Table 5: Strategies for Trustworthiness

| Strategy for a trustworthy research study | Definition of strategy | Strategies for this research study |
|--|---|---|
| Credibility | a) Use of well-established research methods b) Development of familiarity of participating | a) Field notes, focus groups and interviews are well established methods (Struwig & Stead, 2001). b) Having been involved in the school from the beginning as a principal and educator, I am |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| | organization | well aware of the ethos and rules surrounding this school. I received permission from the directors of the company. |
| | c) Triangulation: making use of different methods of data collection | c) In order to corroborate my data, various techniques of collection were use: focus groups, field notes and structured interviews. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim. |
| | d) Tactics to ensure honesty from participants | d) Participants were invited to participate and were given the opportunity to refuse to be part of the study with no judgement. They were encouraged to be honest about their thoughts and comments throughout the process. The participants were assured that their relationship with me, their principal, would in no way be compromised by their participation. Participants have been given pseudonyms in order to preserve confidentiality in this report. |
| | e) Reflections of researcher | e) Throughout the process, I reflected on the validity and effectiveness of my data. This reflective process enabled me to group information into themes, unpack them and see how they link to the literature. I was able to read and analyse |

| | | |
|-----------------|---|--|
| | <p>f) A detailed “description of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Shenton, 2004, p.69).</p> | <p>the data in terms of the research in the literature chapter and in terms of my particular context in school and case.</p> <p>f) In chapter 4, I describe in detail, the data I collected in the focus groups, my field notes and interviews. I have employed a reporting style in order to give reliability to the reality of the situations.</p> |
| Transferability | <p>“...demonstrating that the results of the work at hand can be applied to a wider population” (Shenton, 2004, p.69).</p> | <p>I acknowledge that this is a small case study, individual to the eight participant’s own thoughts regarding emergent literacy. While the concept of community of practice and reoccurring focus groups may be applicable in other similar settings, their knowledge of the topic would be unlikely. I make no claims to the generalisability of this study.</p> |
| Dependability | <p>“If the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained” (Shenton, 2004, p.71).</p> | <p>To increase dependability, processes and methods are reported in detail. This would enable future researcher to repeat the study as close as possible. I do recognize, however, that my data is tied to this specific context and that different results would be probable in a repeated study. that different results would be attained</p> |

| | | |
|----------------|---|--|
| Confirmability | “...is the qualitative investigator’s comparable concern to objectivity” (Shenton, 2004, p.72). | I admit that I am subjective. I am immersed and invested in this study. I cannot switch off my personal interests and concerns regarding early childhood literacy. |
|----------------|---|--|

Kyburz-Graber (2004) argues that case study research is more than an in-depth description, but rather a valid scientific method of research, conditional on the fulfilment of certain criteria. Kyburz-Graber (2004) states that the validity of a case study is dependant on whether or not bias has been described, triangulation is ensured by the use of multiple sources and the case study itself has been fully documented and reviewed.

3.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the methods chosen for my study, as well as my explanations thereof. The appropriacy of a case study in this instance was explored as was the use of multiple focus groups. In addition, I show how an awareness of the power of space informed the choice of venues for the focus group discussions. Lastly, I described how I have endeavoured to provide a study that is trustworthy and credible in its nature.

In Chapter 4, the data generated from the various research methods is presented and analysed.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter followed the methodology that was used in this study. I explored focus groups as a way of establishing a community of practice and answering my research question. I explained that we met as a focus group on numerous occasions, as a community of practice needs time to develop (Wenger, 1998).

In order to successfully answer my primary research question, “How can the development of an ECD community of practice facilitate the understanding of the importance of emergent literacy in children’s play?”, I will look at three areas per focus group session. Firstly, I will discuss the focus group sessions as the community of practice. These focus groups were arranged around space and facilitation, examining the participants’ positioning within the various spaces. This is in response to the literature reviewed in chapter two, regarding positions of power, as well as the fluid levels of engagement within a community of practice (Foucault, 1977; Lave and Wenger, 1991). I will then discuss the participants’ opinions and ideas in detail, as gained from transcripts of the focus group discussions. Finally, I will add my thoughts on each session as field notes.

Secondly, I will discuss the structured interviews which took place once we had concluded our focus group sessions. These are linked primarily to the participants’ understanding of emergent literacy, as well as their comfort in space.

Finally, I analyse observations that I have made since the conclusion of our focus groups, regarding their internalisation of the subject matter.

4.2. FOCUS GROUPS

The following checklist from Krueger and Casey guided my thinking in preparing for the different focus groups. As all of the participants are colleagues at Yellowridge school, the introduction to each session focused more on orientating the participants

to the focus on early literacy which was the topic of the research. In subsequent focus groups different aspects of early literacy in terms of setting and practices encouraged a deeper focus. Nevertheless, all of the checklist items were useful reminders when preparing for each meeting.

Table 6: Focus groups checklist

| Advance Notice | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select initial location, date and time that is convenient for participants (future locations, dates and times to be decided in focus groups)• Contact participants at least week prior to first session, regarding initial location, date and time |
| | |
| Questions | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Questions for the first focus group session to be planned• Unstructured questions should flow naturally, in a logical sequence• Use follow-up questions as needed |
| | |
| | |
| Logistics and Responsibilities | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrive early• Ensure the space is satisfactory (size, enough seats, comfort etc.)• Check background noise so it doesn't interfere with audio recording (ie. Windows are closed if near a playground)• Have digital recorder ready• Have stationery available for note taking• Have any necessary visual aids available• Have sweets ready |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| Moderator Skills | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Practice welcome and introduction of focus group without notes• Know key questions• Be well rested and alert• Be welcoming, creating a comfortable, positive environment• Manage time• Make sure everyone is involved |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |
| | |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Immediately after the session | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check to see the recorder captured the comments |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Download and backup digital audio files |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add any relevant comments to field notes |

(Krueger & Casey, 2015, p. 130-131)

4.2.1. Session 1: Wednesday 25 May 2016 – My office

The first focus group session revolved around the questions “What do you think Emergent Literacy is?” and “Where can we see it within our contexts?” The first focus group had a structure as the introduction to emergent literacy. I made use of prepared pictures and focal points for discussions and had questions prepared in order to provoke the thoughts of the participants. This was not the case for the other focus groups. (The photographs, which were used as prompts to initiate discussion, were not from my school. The images were freely available and were taken from Google images)

4.2.1.1. Space and facilitation

The first session took place in my office, a natural choice for any meeting held at the school. It is quiet, light and large enough for us to be seated comfortably. It is not an overly formal office, with pictures drawn by children hanging on the walls, a large, colourful wooden train for children to sit on and teddy bears on shelves to entertain little ones, however my large desk is the first thing that is seen on entering. Office chairs were placed in a messy horseshoe with a small table in the centre with a bowl of sweets. Leander (2011) suggests that material, social and symbolic resources, such as furniture and room layout are absorbed and interpreted by those within its’ context. This proved true in this context, as I naturally sat in my chair that was next to my desk and I noted that there was a gap between myself and my colleagues, making it feel more like a staff meeting, where I speak and they listen. I promptly made a joke about it and endeavoured to shift closer throughout the meeting. On reflection making use of my office was not a good choice. Although I endeavoured to maintain the role of researcher, it was clear that the participants still saw me as the principal and that they were therefore subordinates. This did not, therefore, allow me to properly establish a sense of equality from the first focus group. Stewart et al.

(2007) comments that the location and space used within focus groups can affect the leader and how they are viewed by the other participants. This was also noted in how the participants grouped themselves when they arrived. They sat naturally within their friendship groups, which were also the age groups in which they taught. Those that work more closely with me, sat closer to myself, while the only assistant to join the group chose a seat closest to the door. I quickly acknowledged that there was a power element at play and addressed it in the start of our session. This did not, however remove the perceptions of power. This confirmed Foucault's (2002) belief that every exercise of power is linked to space and my position within the room only added to their perception of power, rather than diminishing it. In an effort to mitigate power positions we negotiated the venue for the following focus group and agreed that every focus group session would have a different facilitator chosen by the previous week's facilitator and that each session would take place in a different venue within the school.

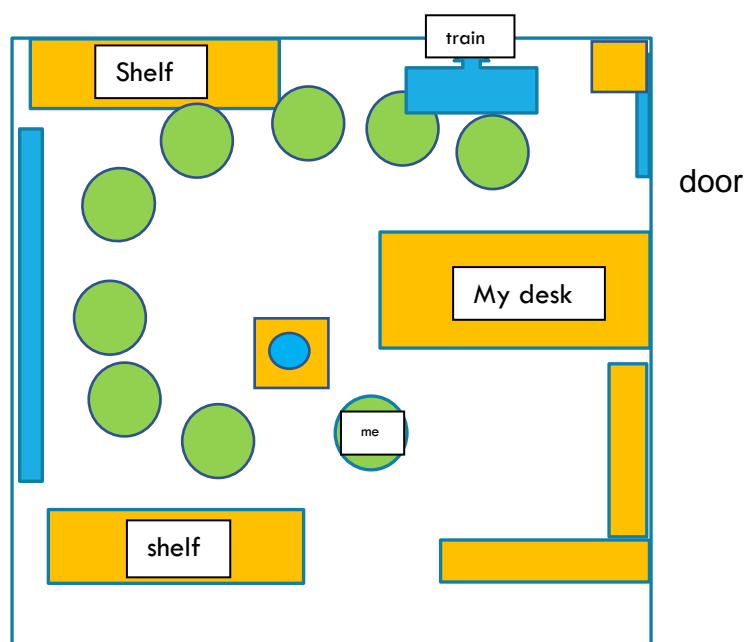


Figure 2: Spatial arrangement of principal's office – the venue for the first focus group meeting.

4.2.1.2. Focus Group Discussion

To begin with the participants seemed a little unsure of how the focus groups would take place. It seemed that many of them assumed it would take the form of a

general staff meeting or training session, where they would listen and take notes, rather than interact freely. I set out to make them feel as comfortable as possible and engaged them with friendly banter, however I could not avoid the fact that I am the principal. I was open about this problem with the participants, explaining that I understood that as principal, I come with a certain leadership position, however within the focus groups, I would like to be seen as an equal, journeying with them to discover more about emergent literacy, where we can find it in our daily teaching and how we can use it to encourage children in their early language and literacy development.

Tammy: "This group is not a study or a test. It is purely for us to discuss what we know about Emergent Literacy, what we can do with it and what we see. I don't want you to see me as your boss or anything like that, I am a teacher."

To begin this focus group, I made use of a tablet to show the participants an image which had caught my eye as being particularly strong in emergent literacy. I passed the tablet around the room and asked them to look at the picture and tell me what they thought children would learn from the activity.

The image showed the letter 'm' made out of playdough, in both upper and lower case. My initial thoughts on this activity was that children would be learning to make and match upper and lower-case letters. This is tainted by the fact that I have a keen interest in Grade R, where that is part of the curriculum. The participants, noted the literacy element, however focused on the fine motor element of this task. This was perhaps due to the strong concentration on fine motor activities in the younger preschool classes.



Figure 3: Playdough activity

Sophie: I would say its' like umm fine motor development.

Charlotte: It's literacy. They are making the letter 'm' and manipulating playdough.

In order to probe existing concepts of emergent literacy, participants were asked to discuss their understanding of this term in groups. Thereafter the groups could report on what they had shared. The following transcript reflects the perceptions of emergent literacy that participants brought to the initial focus group.

Nancy: I remember what this was from varsity. I think it's the background of literacy, the introduction of sounds.

Dorothy: Exploring literacy

Nancy: Doing activities that form the foundation using their whole bodies- whole body learning.

Nancy: I'm not sure if this is right (laughs)

This group was tentative in their suggestions and built on each other's ideas cumulatively. There was a concern with being correct and how they might be perceived which could also indicate their awareness of who had power and position to judge them.

Madeline: We think it's the start of where children start developing literacy skills and concepts and by teaching practical ideas that they can become involved with in each activity.

Dorothy: The start to explore themselves and by drawing

Sophie: How to create something that is cheap or free for learning or something like that

Charlotte: Where kids see something and think what they can do with that and then they try to make something with that.

Tammy: So using knowledge they already have to use something?

Here the participants presented their understanding as shared by using 'we' thus avoiding any one person claiming knowledge. It also suggests that they came to this understanding together in their small group discussion which individuals then added to. Charlotte's contribution recognised that children's actions are a reflection of what

they have been exposed to and how it is a way of trying out a literacy practice. This indicates a recognition that literacy is a situated practice, in line with Barton and Hamilton's (2000) assertions that literacy is meaningful and occurs within contexts of use.

Nancy: In my mind it is forming the foundation of literacy, whether it's reading or writing. And I think by using your different learning areas. It's using their whole bodies to learn something where writing an 'n' again and again is not really teaching them, but teaching them with their whole bodies in a fun environment will.

Tammy: Alice, you mentioned something about learning styles?

Alice: Yes with texture. A lot of children when you write something on the board they do see it, but when you give it to them they are learning in a different way. I, myself, if someone tells me this is how you do it, I wonder if I'm going to remember it, but if they come to me and show me this is how to do it, I remember it better.

At this point, the participants' comments on emergent literacy seemed to be more pointed towards the age group with which they worked. Nancy, a Foundation Phase teacher, commented on handwriting, while Alice, a teacher of two- and three-year olds, focused on texture. This was very telling of their classroom experiences. When participants were asked if they had seen examples of emergent literacy they shared the following.

Charlotte: I saw Zeke last week. He took some sand and put it on the table and drew pictures in the sand.

Madeline: Mine like puppet shows and singing with the puppets.

By this stage, I was already seeing them draw on their own observations in a space where their observations were valued. This is part of what I wanted to develop in this community of practice. I saw an awareness amongst the teachers of what the learners were doing and what this would signify in terms of emergent literacy which is what my question below prompts.

Tammy: What do you think they learn through that?

After a few one-worded responses, Alice made a connection to emergent literacy which sparked more stories amongst the others.

Alice: Communication skills, cause they communicate with the whole audience, their friends.

At this point a younger teacher who had been fairly quiet added a humorous story about one of her children who enjoyed 'playing teacher' and often mimicked her, especially when 'reading' a story to her peers. This opened the door to stories about their children's connection with books. Many of their stories revolved around strong emergent literacy activities, that some seemed to have been taken for granted. As the discussion progressed so the stories became more pointed towards emergent literacy and less generalised.

Sophie: My kids like looking at books. Shelley... went to Adam and told him "You take a book and hold it like this" and showed him how to hold it the right way around.

Alice: They don't know what's written there, but they love to 'read' the story with their friends.

Madeline: They love to. There is always one who sits on a chair and pretends to be teacher and reads the story.

Alice: It's also what they can remember. If it's a story you've read, then they take pieces.

Nancy: Some of them even know the stories off by heart.

In a study by van der Mescht (2014), she describes the above as 'playing school'. She goes on to say that many of the participants in her study saw reading as an adult pursuit and therefore that imitating adults in reading gave the children a sense of power. One of her participants stated that "pretend play school made me feel very proud of myself and led me to like reading books" (van der Mescht, 2014, p.189). She further went on to say that in playing school, some children took on the role of their teacher, and as a result developing "strong identities as teachers and successful readers" (van der Mescht, 2014, p.189)

By this stage all of the participants were actively involved in the discussions and sharing stories. The sharing of stories was an important part of this study, giving me insight that I may not have gained otherwise. This diminished the need for the participants to give a 'correct answer' and rather share their thoughts and opinions on the topic, which is one of the focus group goals.

Prompts became an important part of the initial focus group meeting, being used to spark interest and give visual cues regarding emergent literacy. Stewart et al. (2007) comments of visual prompts and aids as being useful to encourage interaction within focus group discussions. Four images were shared with the group. I chose these images as they showed a broad range of emergent literacy activities, which could be used and adapted in all preschool age groups. After spending time looking at the images, the participants shared their views on the pictures below.

Picture 1:



Figure 4: Jolly Phonics literacy table

Picture one features a literacy table focused around a phonic program. This table includes objects and words which are specific to the program, as well as interactive activities for the children to partake in. This table would be relevant for the five to six age group, however could be adapted for younger children.

Nancy: [I like the] Jolly Phonics table. I like that it's interactive and has the words of the objects so they have to think of what the sound is of the object and then match it to the correct letter. It's very interactive and fun.

Alice: Ooh yes. The children would love to pick up all those things and feel them.

Here Alice's comment echoed a comment that she had made earlier, regarding the tactile nature of learning literacy.

Picture 2:



Figure 5: Shopping role play area

The second picture portrays a young child, approximately four-years-old, playing in a role-play shop. This image is ripe with emergent literacy experiences.

Matilda: I like this one (the shop) All the different stuff ...and they open and close.

Charlotte: Yes she is playing shop-shop so is even reading numbers and counting.

Despite all the literacy reasons why I had chosen this specific picture, not once had it occurred to me that numeracy or fine motor would be suggested. This further highlighted the fact to me that I was on a learning journey along with the participants of the focus group.

Madeline then made a remark linking this image to emergent literacy and it encouraged further discussion.

Madeline: Do you think she is 'reading' the labels? I mean trying to? Pretending. I think she is seeing all the words and reading.

Nancy: The packets are there with the shop name on them. Groceries have labels.

Discussion further ensued around how even young children recognise and 'read' the logos of well-known brands. To some extent children can be seen as reading these

labels as they are recognised and meaningful to the reader. Vivian Paley (2004, p. 8) believes that, in early childhood, “fantasy play is the glue that binds together all other pursuits, including the early teaching of reading and writing skills.”

We further discussed how we could extend literacy in role-play shops by adding packets from familiar stores and real-life grocery boxes.

Picture 3:



Figure 6: Threading pasta on straws in playdough

Picture three was chosen as it was more focused on the younger age groups, however could also be adapted for the older age groups. It includes manipulation of playdough to encourage finger and hand strength, as well as fine motor stability in placing the straws in the playdough and carefully threading the macaroni onto them.

Dorothy: I like this one.

Sophie: Hand development putting the noodles on the straw and also she is putting on less and many.

Nancy: Yes measurement. That's a very nice Maths activity. There is even balancing with the straws.

Here, the participants observed a number of things. They were drawing together the ideas of fine motor and the manipulating of small objects and these combined reiterate emergent literacy. Again, I was interested to hear many of participants commented on amounts and quantities. This reiterated that different people see

different things in different pictures. The pictures encouraged them to have their own opinions and perspectives and they were encouraged in the differences.

Picture 4:



Figure 7: Alphabet posting activity

Picture four was chosen as it was an effective emergent literacy activity for the older and younger children. It combined fine motor posting, with lower-case letter recognition.

Hermione: I thought it was good for helping the kids to recognise letters and also learning the colours. Lots of sorting ideas.

Nancy: Yes you could even take a peg or something to sort them.

By this stage the participants were no longer simply saying what they saw, but were extending the activities and sharing ideas what would create many learning opportunities for their learners.

In summary of our session one discussion, we discussed what emergent literacy would look like in a class situation, as well as what we already knew about emergent literacy. It became clear that each participant had come into the focus groups with their own interests and perspectives on early childhood activities. For example, those who favoured numeracy as a learning subject, noticed the mathematical concepts within activities very quickly. In the course of discussing the picture prompts, the participants' comments moved from a description level to an applied understanding of how these practices could be extended in classroom settings.

4.2.1.3. Field notes

Field notes were written immediately after the session to capture my initial thinking about the group interactions. By their very nature they are subjective as they indicate my perceptions and efforts to understand the thinking behind the comments. In addition, the field notes together with the transcription were used together at a first level of analysis to position participants either closer to the centre or the periphery which is in line with the thinking behind a community of practice. This rather simplistic tool allowed me to gauge and map – as indicated in the diagram below – to what extent there were shifts in the thinking around the concept of emerging literacy. During the first focus group session, I observed that some participants were more confident to share their insights than others. This could be due to different personalities as much as confidence in their knowledge of the topic. They did however make contributions as they became more comfortable. The participants were sorted into three groups, according to their willingness to contribute and confidence within the group. As a participant and learner with the other participants, I have included myself in the table as I noticed that I spoke fairly often. This may have been due to the perspective that I was still entering the focus group as a principal, rather than as a researcher and an equal.

Table 7: Participation groups: Session 1

| Group | Participants | Group information |
|-------|----------------|--|
| A | Tammy | As this session was an introduction to our focus groups, I found that I was very much at the centre of discussions, encouraging others to speak and replying to their comments |
| B | Nancy Alice | These participants work closely with me and are comfortable speaking with and in front of me. Nancy is academic by nature, being an avid reader and interested in psychology and education. This may increase her confidence in discussing the topic of literacy. Alice has a long history of teaching in early years and now works closely with me to ensure good practice at our preschool. Both of these participants |

| | | |
|---|---------------------------------|--|
| | | were eager to share their ideas and opinions, encouraging the others to join in and asking supportive questions in silence to get the discussion moving. |
| C | Madeline Charlotte Sophie | All three of these participants second guessed themselves at some stage in the discussion, commenting that they were unsure of whether they were right or not. These three, gained confidence in their contributions as time went on and when encouraged. |
| D | Matilda Hermione Dorothy | These three participants have varied experience and backgrounds. Matilda is very shy to contribute in groups, as is Hermione. Matilda has much experience, where Hermione is in her first year as a full time preschool teacher after completing her NQF certification. Dorothy has been working as an assistant for two years and is a natural in the classroom. She is eager to learn as much as possible in order to move into a teaching position. Throughout this discussion, these three were mostly quiet, making short comments on occasion, but sharing with each other in the small group discussions. Hermione and Dorothy made written notes throughout the discussion. Perhaps they thought they would need them or had the perspective of this group being that of teacher-learner, rather than an equal discussion. |

The following diagram illustrates each group's, as divided above, initial position of contribution within the first session of our community of practice. This diagram takes into consideration Lave and Wenger's (1991a) theory of peripheral participation and the value thereof, expressing that a community of practice should maintain a certain amount of fluidity, allowing participants to move in and out of the centre in

accordance to their experience, confidence and knowledge of the subject matter. This movement within the community of practice has been documented throughout the study showing the fluidity of the participants. In addition, personality should be taken into account as some participants are shy and therefore more comfortable on the periphery. This does not mean that they will not contribute or that their contributions would be of any less value than the other participants.

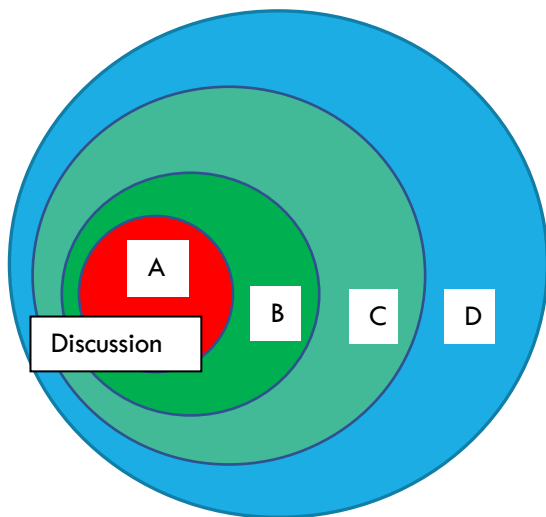


Figure 8: Diagram portraying the participants' position of contribution within the group in relation to the discussion.

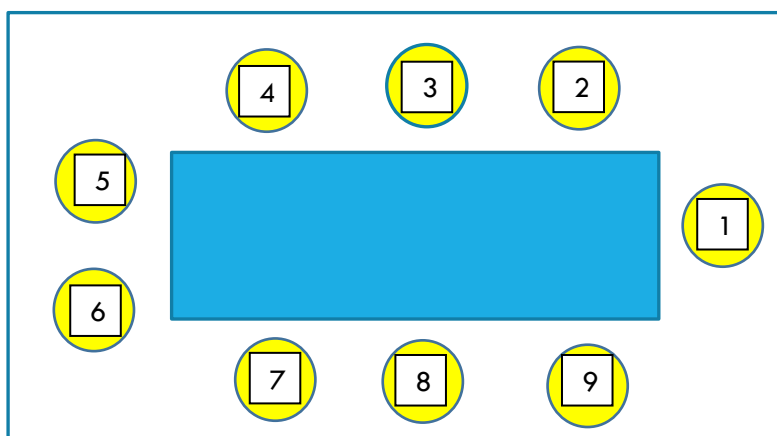
This diagram helped to plot the positions of the participants in relation to the topic and who is on the peripheral of the discussion. According to Smith (2003, 2009, p.3) “[L]earning involves participation in a community of practice”. This participation allows the participants to construct their identities within the community. Smith (2003, 2009) goes on to explain that initially when joining a community of practice, one learns at the periphery, being slightly less involved in the discussions or tasks than seasoned participants. Wenger (1998, p.90) described this participation as that of ‘newcomers’ and ‘oldtimers’. According to Lave and Wenger (1991a) the relationships between the “newcomers’ and ‘oldtimers’ are dependent on one another. The above table and diagram speaks to this, as it indicates that the more experienced participants positioned themselves as closer to the centre whilst the lesser experienced participants, watched and took notes. Matilda was the exception to this, as she has much experience with young children, however she seemed less confident to contribute to the group discussion.

4.2.2. Session 2: Tuesday 31 May 2016- Art Room

The second session took place in our atelier (our art room). This room is set out according to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, encouraging a free space for learning and developing children's creativity. This approach encourages children to explore their surroundings. It is argued that by following their curiosity without time restriction or formal boundaries, children can develop new skills and make connections with the world around them (Vecchi, 2010). According to research by Brunton and Thornton (2007), children are naturally creative and so should be given free space and time to encourage and develop that creativity (Van der Mescht, 2014).

4.2.2.1. Space and facilitation

As the atelier is a room to inspire creativity and free thinking, it seemed an appropriate space for the next focus group to meet. In the venue, we sat around a large workshop table on tripod stools. Nancy, who was the facilitator of the second week's focus group, sat at the head of the table, while the others took up places around it. This placement marked her as the natural leader for the session and the other participants turned their seats to face her. In contrast to the previous meeting where I was seated in a position of power, I waited for all the participants to choose their places then sat down in the last seat available. This allowed me to partake more in the small group interactions, hearing their initial thoughts, rather than only the ones they felt confident in sharing with the full group.



- 1- Nancy
- 2- Hermione

- 3- Sophie
- 4- Charlotte
- 5- Matilda
- 6- Madeline
- 7- Dorothy
- 8- Tammy
- 9- Alice

Figure 9: Diagram of the seating arrangement in session 2

This time the participants were much more relaxed in choosing their seating. They were more evenly spread out and it seemed that they sat anywhere.

As the facilitator for the second focus group, Nancy took command and ensured that every person had an opportunity to speak. She felt confident to accept the position of power within the group and took over the role of asking questions so that participants would elaborate on their answers.

4.2.2.2. Focus Group Discussion

In preparation for this session, participants with classrooms had focused on a book corner; those without classrooms looked for an equivalent or 'book-corner-like' space. Examples of the latter were Nancy and Alice who were based in different contexts. Nancy is the librarian and so was able to observe a variety of age groups, from five years to ten years old within the context of the library. Alice is based in the office, so has fewer opportunities to observe children in a classroom situation, however she made special effort to observe children in and around the school. In her observation of children's literacy practices outside classrooms, she drew attention to the ubiquity of literacy in real-world contexts and the recognition that it is far broader than a classroom practice (van der Mescht, 2014).

The discussion began with Nancy welcoming all the participants and reminding them of the focus for that session. She then began the discussion by commenting on what she had observed with a Grade 1 class in the library that week.

Nancy: ... Leonard and Allan were reading a story together... they were acting it out as it was in the book and they were really laughing and enjoying it. ... Zingce

was looking at a book by herself and she was making sound effects and talking in funny voices.

Tammy: Were they trying to read any of the words?

Nancy: Leonard and Allan were reading the words, well trying to read... Zingce, it was a comic book with lots of different pictures and speech bubbles and so she was talking in funny voices.

There was some comment on the observation that she had shared.

Nancy then went around the table, encouraging each participant to share some kind of anecdote, regardless of how small. Some did not share a recent story, but rather one that stood out in their minds from the past. Hermione shared a humorous story about a child who sat in the book area, role-playing a teacher who wanted to read to the class.

Hermione: ...Anita said "SShh, I'm going to read you a story... Once upon a time..."

At this point the participants recognised common phraseology that is used in books and the important role that they play in children's early story-telling and emergent reading. Phrases such as "Once upon a time", "They lived happily ever after" and "The end". Alice commented that the phrase "The end" was possibly the most important to the children, as it is often exaggerated and added by them if the teacher did not say it.

Sophie shared her observations next, sharing how her two-year olds would frequently act out the pictures that they see in books, adding sound effects and occasionally engaging their peers around them.

Sophie: Johan had the one with shapes... he would turn to Heindrich and say, "Look the aeroplane goes joooooooo" with the book in his hand. Hlombe had the one with colours and she can point out all the colours. "This is red, this is orange, this is blue" and she was pretending to read the story and show the class the colours in the book.

Charlotte had a similar observation in her class of five-year olds. She noticed that they would spend time looking at books, showing each other pictures and discussing what they saw.

Madeline commented further on this by saying that her six-year olds, would do similar activities.

Madeline: They like to show each other the pictures. "Look at this, look at this. What is this? What is this again?"

The participants commented on the social nature of reading books and how the conversation and language developed as the children got older. The younger children seemed to be simply stating what they could see, whereas the older children developed conversation with one another and built a story around what they saw.

Matilda shared her observation of a young toddler who loved 'Barney the dinosaur' and who repeatedly pointed at Barney in a book, before turning the book into a steering wheel and 'driving' it around the classroom. This showed that he not only perceived books as a literature-rich, provider of information, but also as that of a toy or plaything, which supported his role-play. According to Dyson (2016), popular culture plays a large role in supporting early literacy. In an interview done by Ciciora (2009), Dyson makes reference to a five-year-old child who is able to spell the name "Hannah" simply from having a love from the television series, "Hannah Montana". Dyson (2016) explains that by encouraging popular culture amongst young children, their interest will be piqued, expanding their language and encouraging their early literacy skills.

Madeline commented that her youngest daughter, age 18 months, would imitate her sister, age five, by holding a book and babbling. She went on to say that she had noticed that in her Grade R class, she was frequently aware of children imitating her as a teacher, be it in a game of teacher-teacher or simply in the way they would discuss pictures in a book on the mat in their free time. She continued by adding that they loved making use of new words that she had used and became very excited about learning new words. Alice added to this by sharing that while transporting a group of Madeline's boys on a field trip, they became very excited about reading well-known signboards, such as Pick 'n Pay, MacDonalds and Toys R

Us. This demonstrated Alice's awareness that literacy is not only presented in school, but is functional in society.

It was noted by the participants that as the children got older, so they became more serious and excited about the written language. Browne (1996) comments on how older preschool children begin to use the knowledge that they have acquired from exploring the world around them to 'read' common signs, as well as to create their own written language. They make use of the signs and symbols around them to write their own stories, lists or even party invitations (Browne, 1996).

Dorothy then shared an anecdote regarding an instance where she was reading a story to the class and was continuously corrected by a little girl who wanted her version of the story.

Dorothy: Ayla... started telling the story to everyone. But it's really funny the things they take out of the book. They try to tell you, the teacher. ... They try to make a different story and push in down on you. "But teacher, the story is that way, not your way!"

Nancy commented on this by adding that she enjoyed making use of stories based on traditional tales, but with different endings or twisted plots.

Nancy: I notice with the older kids, Roald Dahl's Revolting Rhymes, creates a lot of hour and shock cause the twist in it is completely different to the original tale. It is still the same stories, the same characters, but its told in a very funny way and is sometimes wildly inappropriate. The younger kids wouldn't get it at all.

The educators of the younger children agreed. Madeline commented that traditional tales could be extended by adding props or puppets for free-play time.

Madeline: You could even have puppets for them to act out the story. One could even narrate it while the others act it out.

Alice: You can make a puppet. Take a paper and let them stick on clothes like for Little Red Riding Hood. And put a wolf there.

By encouraging extended activities, the participants are not only extending the language gained from the stories, but also extending the children's enjoyment thereof.

These comments provided a sense of excitement amongst the participants as we discussed how we could promote reading activities in our book areas and within our daily routines, therefore extending the children's use of language gleaned from stories read.

As the meeting concluded, it was suggested by Nancy that observations of the dress-up corner should form the basis of the next focus group discussion. Madeline, who didn't have a permanent role-play corner, wanted to set something up and was concerned that it would feel forced.

Madeline: I'm trying to read stories and let them act out, but then they just get so hyped up that they start getting out of hand so I just have to stop. Sometimes even the puppets, you know they are loving it, but in five minutes they will be jumping around.

We discussed ways in which we could encourage children to take part in drama activities, specifically in the older pre-school classes where it could be planned.

Nancy then asked Madeline to be the next facilitator. This would allow us to have our next group meeting in her classroom, where we could see her classroom layout, specifically how she set up her short-term role-play corners.

4.2.2.3. Field notes

This session flowed very naturally. Nancy ensured that everyone knew what was expected of them from the start by explaining and then modelling. She kept the conversation fluid by simply nodding or smiling at participants to encourage them to share. I found that I spoke much less than I had in the first session and simply responded to what others had shared or if they had asked me a question directly. I did, at times, ask some steering questions to extend their thinking on a subject, a practice that Nancy quickly picked up on as facilitator and took over the role of asking questions so that participants would elaborate on their answers. This allowed me to feel more part of a team than the leader that I felt in the first session.

Subtle shifts were also noted in the participants' participation. Dorothy, the assistant, was more self-assured in sharing her story, as was Hermione. Both of them were seated between the more confident speakers and so this may have boosted their own confidence in speaking in front of the group. This added to my thinking that

spatial positions may contribute to participants' confidence. The most noticeable change in participation was that of Madeline. During this session, she was much more involved, asking questions and giving opinions and ideas. This can be seen in table 13 which indicated the number of times each participant spoke. Charlotte, however, seemed quiet and simply made notes and listened.

As indicated earlier, after the first session I grouped the participants according to whether they positioned themselves close to the center or on the periphery as legitimate peripheral participants. Those closest to the center were grouped as A and those furthest as D. As indicated in the Table below, I followed the same process after the second meeting to track the shifts in positioning.

Table 8: Participation groups: Session 2

| Group | Participants |
|-------|-------------------------------|
| A | Nancy Tammy |
| B | Madeline Alice |
| C | Dorothy Sophie Hermione |
| D | Matilda Charlotte |

The table above illustrates the groups as divided by each participant's contribution.

4.2.3. Session 3: Thursday 2 June 2016 – Grade R classroom

Session three took place in Madeline's Grade R classroom. It is a brightly coloured classroom, set out in a manner to provoke creativity and encourage learning. There are two square tables, set out in a rectangle with coloured plastic small preschool chairs around it.

4.2.3.1. Space and facilitation

The tables and chairs in the Grade R class are child's height. When we were preparing for our meeting, I enquired if the participants would prefer adult-sized

chairs, however they all responded by saying that they are quite comfortable on the little chairs as they were used to sitting on them in their classrooms.

Below is a photograph of the Grade R table set up. The participants sat in seemingly random positions around the table.



Figure 10: The Grade R classroom

Madeline was the facilitator for the third session. She admitted to me prior to the session that she was a bit nervous, however she was happy to “give it a go” if I was there to support her. She greeted everyone and encouraged them to make themselves a beverage before we started.

4.2.3.2. Focus Group Discussion

After greeting the participants, Madeline reminded the group that the focus of the session was on observations of emergent literacy in the role play corner. She began the session by sharing two role play activities that she had specifically set up in her classroom to observe. The first role play activity was that of a shop.

Madeline: I brought all the containers from home and as soon as they saw me setting up, they rushed through all their activities, so they could start playing. With Aviwe, whose first language isn't English, I noticed that she started talking and saying, “Ooh pay me more, that's not enough.” So it really helped her language develop.

In this comment, Madeline shared her knowledge of how children can develop their language within their role play, drawing on language that they hear in everyday life. She also commented on how, in a non-stressful environment of play, children who may not normally contribute, suddenly find their voice and are more confident to try

out new language. Madeline went on to share that the children had since taken it upon themselves to set up their own shops and had extended the activity in their own ways, not only adding more language, but also adding elements from other learning areas as well. She commented on how she would like to extend that knowledge even further.

Madeline: Today also Lawrence set up his own shop. Yesterday I set it up, but today he did. All my stationery was there and being sold. I thought next time they could put labels on the stuff, marking how much they want to sell it for.

Her second role play corner was more improvised. Her learners had recently started attending library classes with Nancy and so showed huge interest in the library system.

Madeline: I did a little library today. Rachel was our librarian and she was writing the person's name and then stamping. Chris was coming up and taking out a book. That was her (Rachel's) own. (pointing to a library sign)

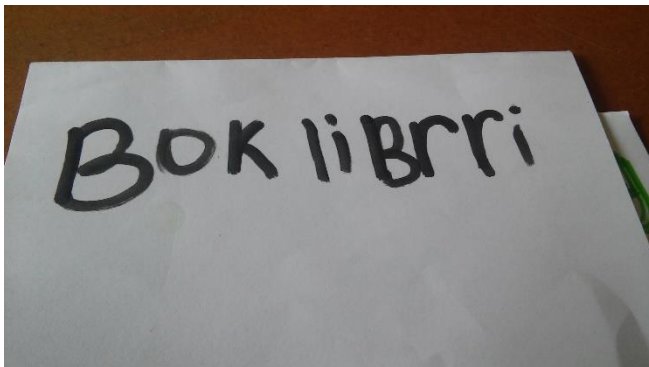


Figure 11: Rachel's library sign

This sign raised excited discussion about Rachel's use of letters. I felt this sign deserved further discussion and so discussed Rachel's choice of letters.

Tammy: Do you see how she has used lower case, but her b's are in capital. Now her surname is Baron, so she has only learnt a capital B so far. So she has managed to put that in even though it's in uppercase.

Madeline: I often see them (Grade R learners) writing and looking at what's on the walls. (pointing to her Jolly Phonics letter freeze and word wall)

Sophie: Like a kid in my class yesterday, she looked at my alphabet chart and said "a is for apple" She said the whole alphabet just like that.

This discussion exhibited an awareness that had developed amongst the participants, that although the topic for discussion was specifically regarding their observations of a role play corner, they were aware of other emergent literacy activities taking place amongst their learners.

Our discussion then moved towards emergent language in the role play corner. Many of the participants had anecdotes about their learners pretending to be someone or something else.

Charlotte: Michelle was telling everybody who they are going to be. "I'm going to be the mom. You are going to be so'n'so" Then she unpacked everything from a bag and said this is her nappy bag. She even packed snacks. Then she played.

Hermione: Anine and Aisha had blanket around them pretending to be princesses. They were playing with the pots and pans and they took my playdough and pretended to make food and then bring it to me. They kept on asking me if I wanted tea. I think I drank about three cups of tea.

This discussion showed an awareness of how children acquire language from everyday activities that occur around them. This touches on Vygotsky's (1962) theory that language acquisition is a social activity, where children gain new vocabulary and develop their use of language from those around them.

Alice commented further on vocabulary development amongst young children.

Alice: You know actually kids remember quite big words. I know with Ryno the other day ... he came into the office and there was a picture of a dinosaur on the computer and he said "that's a dinosaur" and he gave me a long name.

As Ryno is Matilda's son, she continued the discussion by adding how the theme of dinosaurs had influenced Ryno and his two brothers' language and literacy development in their play at home.

Matilda: All of a sudden all he wants to do is play Jurassic Park. At home Edward (age 11) will write and draw Ryno (age 4) a map for him to go there and see a T-Rex and then even Adam (age 2) as well. He knows what a t-rex is. He will say "Mamma, t-rex"

This further reiterates Dyson's (2016) theory of how popular culture influences language development in children.

We then discussed further ways in which we could enrich our role play corners, as well as the class to encourage emergent literacy.

Nancy: So maybe in a theme of my school you could label the things around you. Like the table, door – things around the class. Think labels. A restaurant with menus and a book for taking orders, your library, a shop.

Madeline: You could take them outside and give them a list. They could even trace it. "What did you see?" and they must tick it off.

This discussion showed the participants' awareness of the importance of input available to the children in and around their classroom environments. Cartmill, Armstrong, Gleitman, Goldin-Meadow, Medina, Trueswell (2013) state that the development of vocabulary is greatly influenced by the exposure that children are granted in their early years, saying that continuous exposure, not only allows a child to acquire a new word, but allows the child to retain that word on a long-term basis.

In response to our discussion regarding environmental input, we decided to observe the role play area again, this time extending it and adding some labels. Madeline asked Charlotte to be the facilitator for the following session, allowing us to explore the pre-R class and her set up of the role-play area.

4.2.3.3. Field notes

Although initially nervous, Madeline was confident in leading this session. She was relaxed in her own space, comfortable in her own surroundings. Madeline did not ask the others as many questions as Nancy did in the previous session, but rather shared more of her own stories and observations. She did however, encourage the other participants with ideas, sharing what she had done and giving examples of how her learners had participated in the activities. She did ensure that all of the participants had a chance to speak, however she shared the most, whilst the other participants seemed to enjoy being more passive participants, simply enjoying listening and adding in comments periodically. (As seen in the tracking table in

Chapter 5). The gap, therefore between the participation of group A and the other groups were quite large.

Table 9: Participation groups: Session 3

| Group | Participants |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| A | Madeline Tammy |
| B | Nancy Alice |
| C | Sophie Hermione Charlotte |
| D | Matilda Dorothy |

The table above illustrates the groups as divided by each participant's contribution.

4.2.4. Session 4: Tuesday 19 July 2016- Pre-R classroom

As much as we had every intention of meeting on a weekly basis, the reality of school life did not allow for it. Participants became busy with reports, followed by the school holidays. On returning from the holidays, the participants who were involved in the school holiday club, took their leave. After much discussion, we agreed to have session with two of our participants absent, Nancy and Dorothy. Both of these participants were aware of the group meeting in their absence.

The fourth session took place in Charlotte's Pre-R classroom.

4.2.4.1. Space and facilitation

Charlotte's classroom is a bright welcoming space, with many areas and corners to encourage learning. Her classroom encourages emergent literacy at every turn, with labels for every area and resource. This once again confirmed her understanding of the importance of labelling and providing strong language input for the children in her class, as explained by Cartmill et al. (2013). This space provided the participants with a very practical example of creating a language-rich environment.

Below are photographs of Charlotte's role-play corner as this was the initial subject of our discussion.

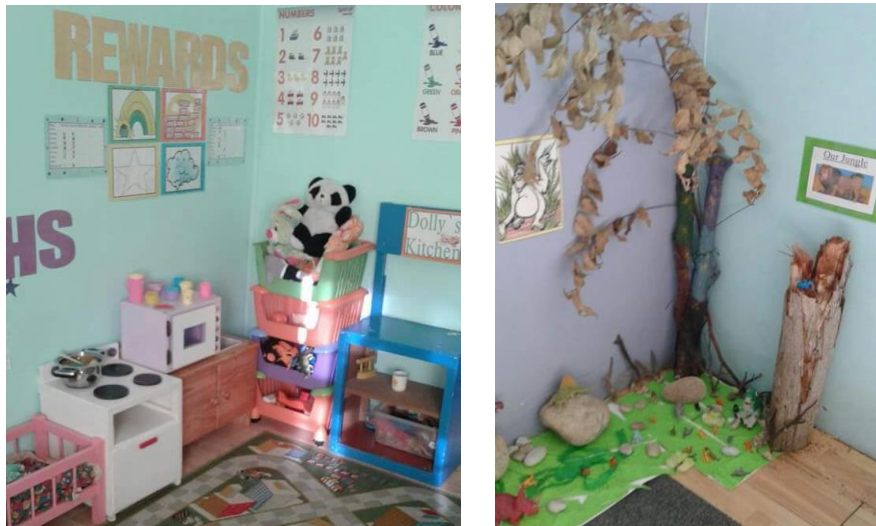


Figure 12 & 13: Language-rich areas within the pre-R classroom

As Charlotte's classroom was arranged for more informal learning in a younger age group, her tables were smaller and only seated four per table. She made use of brightly coloured plastic preschool tables and chairs, so while all the participants were comfortable sitting on the smaller chairs, it was not as comfortable to sit around the tables. The participants moved chairs as they found comfortable, some moving away from the tables, keeping their notes on their laps, while others turned to the side, still pressing on the tables. This created a very informal seating arrangement.

Below is a photograph of the seating arrangement in Charlotte's classroom.



Figure 14: Pre-R seating arrangement

Although Charlotte accepted the role of facilitator, she was more of a hostess than a facilitator of the session. She eagerly greeted the other participants, showing them areas of interest in her classroom and ushering them to seats, however once the session officially started, she became more reserved. This allowed for many silences, particularly in the first part of the session.

4.2.4.2. Focus Groups Discussion

After greeting the participants, Charlotte reminded everyone of the topic for discussion that had been decided on in the previous session, the extension of role play in the classroom. However, due to the large break between the third and fourth session, the participants had lost their enthusiasm for this subject and were keen to look at a new topic. Madeline was the only participant to share her extension of role play, building on the role-play library which she had described in the previous session. Madeline showed a clear understanding of extending language and literacy in her children's play, by not only adding extension activities and labels, but also allowing and encouraging the children to evolve their games and play within that area.

Madeline: I put a keyboard in the library and some glasses and paper and pens. And they started playing library and giving each other fines and then they started playing teacher-teacher, so they really enjoyed it. I can always add something new each week.

As a whole staff team at Yellowridge School, the teachers had been working on self-registration ideas in their classrooms, so Charlotte suggested that we look at self-registration as a topic within our focus group during this session. She went on to give ideas, based on activities that she had already put in place or had done in the past.

Charlotte: For the younger ones, it could be a picture or a photograph and then have a picture with their name. So even from that age at one year, they will begin to recognise.

We briefly discussed the starting point of emergent literacy and Alice commented on how literacy tends to start with children. She commented on how their names are very important to them. The participants agreed, and general discussion ensued on

how children first learnt letters that are in their names. This linked back to a comment made in the previous discussion about Rachel, who used an upper-case letter from her surname in her writing.

This opened the discussion regarding games and activities using the learners' names, showing the participants knowledge regarding the use of children's names as a basis for early literacy skills, not only in recognising letters, but also in recognising letter and word shapes in finding correct names and matching names to pictures. These skills of visual discrimination and perception are foundational to formal reading and writing (Department of Education, 2011).

Alice: Maybe stickers (with their names) that they must find the right one and wear it.

Madeline: Or laminated names that they must place next to their picture. Or in columns.

Hermione went on to share an anecdote of what she had observed in class the previous day, showing her knowledge of name and letter recognition.

Hermione: Yesterday, ...while I was packing up Kerry showed me where her bag hangs and she said that's her and showed the name next to her and said that's Kyle. So she could recognize.

To further promote ideas around name and letter recognition, I posed a steering question to encourage the participants to think specifically about the age groups that they teach. This created a sense of excitement with participants keen to share ideas, add to each other's ideas and even talking over each other at times.

Charlotte: I think names for my age, that they can take it off and put in on by themselves.

Hermione: Mine too. Pictures would make it more interesting. Cause I noticed a lot of my kids will go straight to their names to hang up their bags.

Sophie: I think about maybe taking a photo of my kids and put it by their name.

Alice: Or maybe by their communication books. Cause you should be able to ask the children to "bring me your book for your bag". They should be able to recognize it then.

Madeline: What if it's like a photo on their bag. Then it's a matching thing.

Matilda: What I want to do is put pictures next to the name and put it on the chairs and the tables, so when I say "Go sit on your chair" then they must look at the pictures to find their chair. This will be by their bags as well.

Madeline: So they are matching things up. So, if they have a ladybug on their table they know they also have one on their chair.

Madeline: I think I would have names and surnames, where they would have to sort through them in a box. I would probably have that the first two terms cause by now they all know their surnames.

As the discussion progressed, so did the participants' understanding of why the activity could be useful in a preschool classroom, not only in developing children's literacy knowledge, but also in providing an organised environment. Inadvertently, they integrated mathematical skills of matching and sorting, which I had not yet considered in my own thinking. The ideas had also become less hypothetical and more realistic. It was agreed that we would meet one more time, however before we met we would each put together a self-registration or name recognition activity and observe it being used in our classrooms.

4.2.4.3. Field notes

Session four was the shortest session out of the five focus group sessions. It is entirely possible that the long break between session three and session four, caused some of the participants to lose some interest in the focus group as, in the early part of the discussion, there were often silences where the participants seemed to be waiting for Madeline or myself to speak. We were also missing two participants due to staff leave. However, as we continued with our discussion and became more involved with ideas, so the enthusiasm increased. Although it was a short meeting, the knowledge and opinions that came from the participants was rich and served to motivate one another. By the time we concluded our session, the participants were excited and full of ideas for the next focus group meeting. In our excitement, we did not choose a facilitator for the last focus group.

Table 10: Participation groups: Session 4

| Group | Participants |
|-------|-----------------------|
| A | Madeline Tammy |
| B | Charlotte Hermione |
| C | Alice |
| D | Sophie Matilda |

The table above illustrates the groups as divided by each participant's contribution.

4.2.5. Session 5: Wednesday 27 July 2016- Staffroom

Our final focus group session took place in the staffroom. The staffroom is a space where staff come to relax during their tea and lunch breaks. It is a space for staff members to meet, socialize, as well as monthly staff meetings. The room has three comfortable couches placed in a 'u' shape, as well as having extra seating available should it be needed. It is attached to the kitchen and so the participants had access to tea and coffee for our meeting.

4.2.5.1. Space and facilitation

The informal arrangement of seating in the staffroom, created a relaxed, almost playful atmosphere. Prior to the start of the meeting the participants were play-fighting for the more comfortable couches and not really being concerned next to whom they sat. As the couches were arranged in a u-shape, there was no specific seat which could be seen as the leader's chair. This seemed to allow our final focus group session to have more of a feeling of equality, one of the goals of an effective community of practice as set out by Lave and Wenger (1991a). We had not chosen a facilitator in our previous meeting, so I facilitated our final meeting. However, I didn't speak as much as in the first focus group, as the discussion that ensued reflected the relaxed seating arrangement, with the participants all joining in and making comments as they felt fit. This was in contrast to some of the previous discussions, where they waited for someone to call on them.

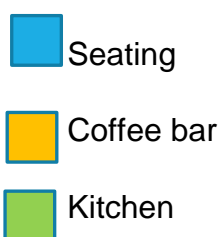
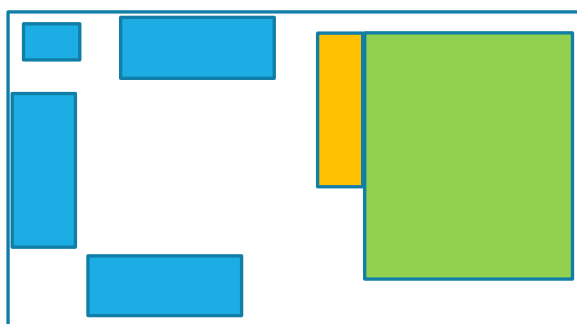


Figure 15: The staffroom layout

4.2.5.2. Focus Group Discussion

Session five started immediately. There was very little small talk, but rather an eagerness to share what had occurred in their classrooms in the previous week. I started the session with the reminder of the topic that we had chosen for the week, self-registration and name recognition. Nancy, who had missed the previous week responded with her thoughts on the topic.

Nancy: So, it's basically the kids recognising their names and the little ones associating their names with images and obviously the older ones start recognising their names with images. I know that much.

Before we could continue with our thoughts on name recognition, however, Sophie began by sharing an emergent literacy activity that she had observed during outside play. Although it was not directly linked to the topic we had chosen, it did reflect on Sophie's understanding that mark-making is an integral part of emergent literacy, and on how the use of different media can encourage children in their more formal writing later on. Sophie was clearly excited that she had observed it and even took photographs to share with the group.

Sophie: Ok, I'll maar start. My kids were in the sandpit and Jason did draw something in the sand. He said it's elephants. Then the other ones did draw some aeroplanes outside.



Figure 16 & 17: Jason's mark-makings of elephants in the sand

After commenting on the mark-making skills involved in the sand activity, Sophie continued, remarking how Jason is often involved in learning activities that are more commonly seen with older children. A discussion began, with Matilda, Hermione and Nancy sharing ideas with Sophie on how she could further extend Jason's learning.

Charlotte refocused the group by sharing her example of a self-registration activity.

Charlotte: I put names on my door, as well as on a big poster for my attendance register and every morning when they come in they must take their name off the door and put it next to the name on the poster. And most of them can do it. They were excited. They just wanted to go play with it.



Figure 18: Charlotte's self-registration poster.

Her example was followed by others, keen to share their ideas.

Dorothy: Our helpers for the day, they look who is there and not there. If they are not there they put an x by their name. But the other kids do their own names by themselves.

Matilda: I finished the pictures and everything and before I put it up, I let them choose their own pictures. I've got them on the tables, by their bags and by my reading board. So I held them up and ask "Whose is this?" and they will say.

Hermione: Mine is going well. What I did is when I started it I showed them all their names and pictures. Then I went back and asked them which was theirs. And then I put it up. Sometimes during play I see them sit and discuss it.

Below are photographs of how Hermione used her self-registration activity. The learners need to find their names and pictures and move it into the next column when they arrive at school.



Figure 19 & 20: Hermione's self-registration poster

At this point I asked whether or not the learners were trying to read each other's names as well.

Matilda: Yes they are interfering. And now I see with the yoghurts... I put them out and they are going "that is mine, that is mine, that is mine."

Nancy: Do you have their names on it?

Matilda: Ja I write their names on the yoghurt.

Tammy: So they are already recognizing their names?

Dorothy: A lot of ours know their surnames already.

Alice then commented on the fact that by Grade one, according to the CAPS curriculum, children are required to know their names, parents' names, address and contact number (Department of Education, 2011). Madeline responds to this by sharing her Grade R self-registration poster, which shows her awareness of formal schooling expectations.

Madeline: Mine is name, age, surname and birthday. And they must find it on a big chart.

Nancy: Are they starting to do each other's?

Madeline: They do! There are some that are starting to do each other's. They help with their names and surnames. I try to get them to know their birthdays too.

I concluded the session by thanking the participants and asking how they would prefer to do the structured interviews. The participants seemed nervous, afraid that they would be 'tested'. After discussing various options, it was agreed that I would give them the questions prior to the interviews, in order for them to consider their answers.

4.2.5.3. Field notes

Session five was a true reflection of what a community of practice could be. The participants had taken from the ideas shared in the previous meeting and had put them into practice in their own contexts. As the participants shared their activities, it was clear that they had understood the reason behind the activities. They were eager to not only share what they had made, but how the learners had made use of it. Matilda was very excited to share and made a significant change in her participation, moving from group D to group A, as seen in the following table. Conversely, Alice was quieter in this meeting. This emphasizes Wenger's (1998) theory that it is appropriate for participants to be on the periphery due to their knowledge and experience, and in this as both Alice and Nancy do not have

classrooms, they did not have as much to share on name recognition as the other participants. This is seen in the following table.

Table 11: Participation groups: Session 5

| Group | Participants |
|-------|---|
| A | Matilda Madeline Tammy |
| B | Madeline Sophie |
| C | Nancy Dorothy Charlotte Hermione |
| D | Alice |

The table above illustrates the groups as divided by each participant's contribution.

4.3. Interviews: Wednesday 10 August 2016- Library

The interviews took place in a library, a quiet space, surrounded by children's literature. It seemed a fitting space to conclude this research of emergent language and literacy.

As discussed in session five of our focus groups, I had given the participants each a copy of my interview questions. As I spoke to them individually, it was noted that each of the participants had written down comments and were prepared to answer my questions. Below I will share the participants' answers to my questions.

4.3.1. What was your initial understanding of emergent literacy?

Dorothy: For me emergent literacy had more to do with the different languages the kids speak and we had to teach them the difference between Afrikaans or English.

Madeline: Emergent literacy are skills that a child learns which will eventually lead to reading and writing. For example, mark-making, telling a story from a picture, pretending to read a book, scribbling and learning new words.

Sophie: My understanding was that all the children make some use of emergent literacy everyday outside, as well as inside activities, by drawing in the sand, play house-house in the classroom.

Charlotte: My understanding was to see how kids make use of emergent literacy in their day to day play activities inside and out of the class.

Hermione: My understanding of emergent literacy was when a child starts being able to recognise letters and words.

Alice: That you need to TEACH them how to read and write.

Matilda: My understanding was that the children make more use of emergent literacy in their day to day activities.

Nancy: That it is the beginning of a child's spoken and written language.

All of the participants had some understanding of emergent literacy, however their understandings varied from participant to participant. Dorothy mentioned different languages and although it would still fall into language development, it is not specific to emergent literacy. In the first session, however, Dorothy, after discussing the meaning with her group, stated that emergent literacy is “*the start of exploring themselves and by drawing.*” This showed the progression of her understanding already in the first session.

Nancy, however had a sound understanding of emergent literacy, coming into the focus groups. Her explanation in the first session was one of the comments that provided a basis for discussions that followed. “*It is the introduction of sounds, doing activities that form the foundation.*”

Both Alice and Hermione thought that emergent literacy was specific to more formal early reading and writing, linking it to recognition of letters and letter-sounds. In the following question, Madeline too, acknowledges that she thought emergent literacy only starts when children learn to read and write.

4.3.2. Has your understanding shifted in any way? how?

Dorothy: Yes! Kids learn through different ways. They explore and create. Exploring their body with writing.

Madeline: Yes, as emergent literacy does not only begin as the child learns letters to read or how to write. It starts when the child is much younger. Babies and toddlers who babble, imitate what they see, start scribbling. They are developing emergent literacy.

Sophie: Yes, I've learnt a lot from this literacy classes and things that I didn't know. I am glad that I've joined in now I can help my kids more in different ways with different activities.

Charlotte: Yes, I learnt more out of this. More ideas, more activities.

Hermione: Yes, I learnt that it's not just about word and letter recognition, but about linking pictures to the real things.

Alice: Yes, that children can relate to literacy even if they can't read or write yet.

Matilda: Yes, I also learned a lot more from this to help my kids more with new activities.

Nancy: My understanding of emergent literacy has grown in that I now know it incorporates so much more than just written and spoken language, it includes mathematical, visual, auditory, artistic and creative literacy.

The participants all felt that their understanding had shifted in some way. Some of the participants seemed to have a shift regarding the underlying foundation of what emergent language and literacy is, while others seemed to have more of a shift regarding the practical usage of emergent literacy activities in their relevant age groups.

4.3.3. How has the process contributed to your understanding of emergent literacy?

Dorothy: It does not matter what size or age the kids are. All of them can learn. Smaller kids learn with texture and style and the bigger ones can create and explore.

Madeline: Yes. Very much. I became more aware of trying out new fun ways to develop different emergent literacy activities, such as shop-shop, putting words around the class, class register, library-library and different fantasy games. It was

interesting to hear the other teachers' ideas and how the different age groups would go about the same task.

Sophie: Is to teach and show the kids what is the real meaning of emergent literacy.

Charlotte: It taught me how kids can explore in so many different ways.

Hermione: It helped me to think of different ways to help the children with their letter and shape recognition, like forming letters out of playdough or make shapes out of playdough or drawing in the sand.

Alice: By observing the kids play, you realise that children learn literacy skills through playing even if they can't read or write yet.

Matilda: It is helping me to teach my kids so much more every day and in different ways.

Nancy: It was fascinating to learn how everyday activities in school and at home contribute to the child's emergent literacy and how to extend activities to promote emergent literacies.

Most of the participants stated that they had gained more knowledge around activities which encourage emergent language and literacy, as well as extending such activities. The participants seemed very positive in answering this question, motivated to try out ideas that we had shared in the focus group sessions.

4.3.4. Where was your preferred meeting space?

Dorothy: In the atelier (art room). I was familiar with the class and felt more confident to speak.

Madeline: The atelier. It was relaxed.

Sophie: In the Grade R class

Charlotte: In your office.

Hermione: In the Grade R class. It had a cosy atmosphere and I felt more comfortable and open in sharing ideas.

Alice: Your office

Matilda: Teacher Madeline's classroom (Grade R class)

Nancy: the art room or Grade R class. They were more creative and had a relaxed atmosphere.

The use of space became central to this research. The movement to different spaces for each session and where they felt most comfortable, was linked to each participants' level of involvement within each session. In some cases, the answer that the participant gave in response to this question did not match their level of involvement according to Table 12 and Table 4 (As seen in 4.5) Madeline, for example, was most involved in her own classroom, the Grade R class. However, when asked she preferred the art room. She also stated that it was more relaxed. This could be speaking directly to her own nerves at leading the session that took place in the Grade R class and that, although she was most involved, she felt more pressure and so was not as relaxed as in the art room, where Nancy was facilitating. Nancy and Dorothy also preferred the art room. Hermione, Sophie and Nancy also commented on the Grade R class, stating that they were "creative" and "cosy".

Charlotte and Alice, however, preferred my office as a more formal space. They seemed to enjoy the 'classroom' style of questions and answers. Charlotte and Alice were both most involved in the session that took place in my office. As seen in Table 12 and Table 4 (As seen in 4.5).

4.3.5. Do you have any other comments?

Dorothy: None. Thank you for having me here.

Madeline: Coming together in meetings with the other teachers helped motivate me to try new things.

Sophie: Only that I enjoyed the emergent literacy classes.

Charlotte: For me, it was a great privilege to be part of this group. Thank you.

Hermione: It was good thank you.

Alice: Children learn literacy skills from birth by observing their parents.

Matilda: Not now. Thank you for ideas and talking.

Nancy: Thank you for allowing me to be part of the focus group. It was informative and inspiring.

The participants seemed to enjoy the focus groups. Nancy and Madeline both stated that they felt motivated and inspired. All of the participants offered thanks for being invited to join the focus group, stating that it had been helpful to them in their teaching contexts. Sophie referred to the experience as emergent literacy classes, as if she had come to be taught by an expert.

4.4. Observations

Since the conclusion of the focus groups and interviews, I have been able to make many observations, regarding the participants' use of their emergent language and literacy knowledge. Many of the observations were brought to my attention by the participants themselves, as they wanted to share something new that they were trying in their classroom or wanted my opinion on an activity. Madeline has since set up many role play corners, as well as adding a writing area, complete with writing apparatus and thematic key cards.



Figure 21: Madeline's writing table in use.

Dorothy has since become a teacher in the three to four age group. Her classroom has been set out with emergent literacy in mind. She has labelled all her areas, set out a cosy little reading area and has labelled all the learner's items with their names and pictures to encourage name recognition. I also observed her sharing her ideas with staff members who had not been participants in our focus groups.

Matilda has also since moved into the art room as an art teacher. Even though she is no longer in a full curriculum teaching position, she has still made use of emergent

literacy in her art room. She has labelled her resources and even kept a shelf with books available for learners who have finished their activities.

Sophie, as a teacher of the toddler class, has also since shared new ideas and experiences with me. She has extended the ideas shared to the outside play area, encouraging the young learners to participate in activities that promote literacy. She has also included the other toddler classes, sharing the ideas with those teachers.

Below are some of the photographs that Sophie has since shared with me.



Figure 22 & 23: Toddlers using different apparatus and mediums to mark-make



Figure 24 & 25: Children using different apparatus to make marks during outside free-play time.

4.5. Reflection on participation

The following table, tracks the number of times each participant spoke in each session, in descending order for the first session. It can be noted that as some

participants gain confidence or interest in the focus group, the number of times they speak increases. (Table 12)

| Participant | Session 1 | Session 2 | Session 3 | Session 4 | Session 5 |
|--------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Nancy | 12 | 16 | 3 | Absent | 4 |
| Madeline | 9 | 14 | 17 | 7 | 5 |
| Alice | 6 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Sophie | 6 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Charlotte | 5 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 |
| Dorothy | 4 | 2 | 1 | Absent | 4 |
| Hermione | 2 | 7 | 2 | 6 | 4 |
| Matilda | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 7 |

The table (table 4) featuring the outline for each focus group has been included again in order to draw comparison between the number of times each participant spoke and the content and length of each session.

| Session | Facilitator | Location | Time | Length of focus group | Focus as chosen by participants |
|----------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------|------------------------------|--|
| 1 | Me (Tammy) | Principal's office | 10 am | 30 min 19 sec | Introduction to Emergent Literacy |
| 2 | Nancy | Art Room | 10:30 am | 31 min 17 sec | Book corners |
| 3 | Madeline | Grade R classroom | 10 am | 27 min 4 sec | Role Play areas |
| 4 | Charlotte | Pre-R classroom | 10 am | 19 min 3 sec | Role Play area/ Self-Registration |
| 5 | Tammy | Staff room | 10:00 am | 20 min 44 sec | Self- Registration |

Nancy spoke the most in session two, where not only was she the facilitator, but the topic was the book corner. This sparked a huge interest in her as the school librarian. She also enjoyed participating in session one. Nancy enjoyed learning and so the question and answer format of this session encouraged her to be involved.

Madeline spoke more than the others across all the sessions. Although she started tentatively and unsure of her contributions in session one, she soon became confident in sharing her opinions and stories, feeding off of the comments of others. She spoke the most in three where she was leading with a topic of role play corners, a key area in a Grade R classroom.

Alice spoke the most in session one. She is confident in answering questions and enjoyed playing a supportive role in the sessions, encouraging others to speak or assisting them in their understanding. As an administrator, Alice did not have a classroom of her own and so she found it difficult to contribute concrete observations. She did however, share from experience and anything she had observed when walking through the school.

Sophie also enjoyed answering questions and discussing pictures in the first session, however she really became more confident in the last session, where she offered up her own ideas and opinions without prompting.

Charlotte enjoyed the more formal setting of the first session. This was confirmed in her interview. She felt comfortable answering questions, rather than offering up her own opinions and thoughts in front of the group. Although she was the facilitator in session four, she still preferred to listen rather than speak, offering up predominantly greeting and pleasantries. In session five she became more confident as she was knowledgeable about the topic of self-registration and had used this emergent literacy technique in her class for an extended period of time. She did not make one specifically for our focus group.

As an assistant, Dorothy was initially concerned that she would not have much to offer the group, as discussed with me on agreeing to be a participant. However, once she realized that she was in a safe, judgement-free area, she slowly gained confidence to share her stories and ideas.

Hermione was very quiet at first, simply listening and making notes. She seemed nervous to answer any questions in the first session, perhaps afraid that her answers would be seen as incorrect. However, from session two she started enjoying herself, sharing stories about her class and ideas that she would like to try in the respective areas.

Matilda remained quiet throughout the focus group sessions until the final session. As she is shy by nature, she did not seem to enjoy speaking in front of the group, especially in sharing her opinion. Through my general observations, however, I noticed that Matilda would try out many of the ideas generated in the sessions, in her classroom. On many an occasion, I would see her making something for the various learning areas that we had discussed. The final session was different in that Matilda had worked exceptionally hard on her self-registration ideas over the week, wanting them to be ready for our next focus group. She was clearly proud of her work and therefore felt confident to share with the group. This encompassed one of the goals of a community of practice.

4.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented and analysed the data that was generated from this study, looking at the key ideas of space and facilitation, focus groups, discussions, field notes, interviews and follow up observations. By having regular focus groups, this study gained rich data. We were able to walk a journey together, starting with our basic understanding and then extending that understanding each week. The group developed from being individual participants, making individual statements to a group that fed off the thoughts and opinions of each other, feeling the liberty to share their ideas, achievements and what they deemed to be failures in the classroom. This feeling of tolerance and support within the group, builds upon the premise set by Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) that an effective community of practice is built on trust and freedom of speech, where each participant feels confident to share and engage in the discussions without judgement.

In Chapter 5, the findings in relation to the research questions will be discussed, as well as the limitations and recommendations of this study.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I presented an in-depth description of the data collected in a five-session focus group with eight participants, as well as analysis thereof in accordance to the methodology outlined in chapter three. In doing so a rich picture of focus group engagement over a number of meetings emerged. Through my commentary and analysis, I have tried to provide a thick description of understandings of emergent literacy from the observations and thinking of the participants.

The purpose of this study was to examine the understandings of emergent literacy shared by participants in a community of practice. A focus group is by definition a research method for interaction and data generation whereas a community of practice is a working group where participants have different roles and expertise but come together regularly to share and to ensure that the work of the group is done. Developing a sense of community takes time and necessitated our meeting and sharing on a regular basis. My understandings of the learnings that emerged in this community were presented in light of the literature which had been discussed in chapter 2. In order to present my findings as valid and trustworthy, I used a number of methods and tried to integrate the field notes and focus group transcripts to present a holistic understanding of the group interactions.

In this chapter, I aim to reflect on how the data can be used to answer the initial questions posed in chapter one, as well as suggest implications for future research. I also discuss the various limitations that I may have faced in the course of my research.

5.2. FINDINGS

I will discuss my findings in terms of the research questions that formed the foundation of this study, starting with my sub-questions and building up to my primary research question.

5.2.1. Research sub-question1:

How can a Community of Practice be developed around observations of emergent literacy practices?

After the introduction of emergent literacy in the initial focus group session, the participants developed their understanding each session by sharing their experiences, thoughts and ideas. A close community seemed to have formed around the topic, even sharing ideas between focus group sessions. Each week their knowledge on the topic grew as they built upon the previous week's discussion by adding to their observations, with more participants speaking more often. As the weeks progressed, so too did their confidence in sharing their thoughts and ideas with the group, eventually bringing concrete examples of emergent literacy to the group for discussion. This reflected their growing understanding of the topic. The focus on early literacy gave the group a common goal and interest: our on-going work as educators moved the interactions from an interest group, revolving around general good ECD practice, to a more focused, community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Developing a community requires regular interactions in which all roles and contributions are recognised, valued and sometimes interrogated but all have opportunities to share and learn.

5.2.2. Research sub-question 2:

What are the educators at Yellowridge School's understanding of emergent literacy?

The understandings of the participants are varied according to their initial answers in the first focus group, as well as in their interviews. I saw in the first group that ideas were characterised by uncertainty 'we're not sure' 'we think' indicating it was a somewhat nebulous concept. Exploration of the pictures in the first focus group indicated an awareness of the concept of emergent literacy in practice. In subsequent focus group discussions participants shared comments and examples provided more tangible evidence of their understanding and what this concept meant in children's play. Through the sharings over subsequent focus groups the examples of emergent literacy that had been observed in the children's play became richer and more detailed. The participants seemed more alert to the possibilities of emergent literacy and attuned to their learners' use of this.

5.2.3. Research sub-question 3:

How can changing spaces support focus group participation?

Each week the focus group session took place in a different space. Some of the environments were more formal, whereas other environments were more relaxed and laid back. Some of the environments could be seen as discussion points in themselves, such as the Grade R and Pre-R classes. Each week, the way in which the participants responded within the spaces were different. As seen in chapter four, two of the participants felt more comfortable in a formal setting, one where they felt like they were part of a meeting or a training session. Six of the participants, however, preferred a more relaxed space to hold the focus group. According to Wenger (1998) learning requires social participation and engagement, which “depends on opportunities to contribute actively” (Wenger, 1998, p.227). One where they felt they could speak freely and were seen as equal in the discussion. Rutherford (2015) agrees, stating that effective participatory learning environments require a more congenial setting, one where participants have sufficient space to be comfortable and feel a closer connection with one another. Rutherford (2015) asserts that “these are key social and psychological considerations to understand in order for an effective design and arrangement of learning spaces that encourage and enhance the learning experience” (Rutherford, 2015, p.5). In most cases there was a direct correlation between the space where they felt the most comfortable and their involvement, as seen in table 12 and table 4.

I also became aware of how space was also linked to power and position. I had initially underestimated the contribution of my role but came to see how my presence could constrain the group. Moving into different spaces with different facilitators was a means to diffuse my position and mobilise other spaces in a more generative way.

5.2.4. Research sub-question 4:

What are the possibilities for emergent literacy practices?

The participants of the focus group discovered endless opportunities for emergent literacy activities in their journey. Activities that are not traditionally seen as being literacy activities were given new objectives and twists which allowed for the learner to develop an early language or literacy skills. Every week, the participants grew in their excitement of activities, until it reached the point of them making and carrying out the activities, rather than simply discussing them. As seen through my follow up observations over the last year, the participants have only grown more in their

enthusiasm for emergent literacy, sharing encouragement with other teachers and remaining motivated in their teaching.

5.2.5. Primary Research Question:

How can the development of an ECD community of practice facilitate the understanding of emergent literacy in children's play?

This study showed that creating a community of practice, not only served as a valid training technique, but also as an on-going support group for those participating in it.

In this study, the eight participants who took part, all had varied experience and qualifications prior to this study. Some had a more academic background while others were only entering the profession, either as a new teacher or as an assistant. This varied experience aligned with Lave and Wenger's (1991a) belief that participants in a community of practice have a symbiotic relationship between the 'old timers' and 'newcomers', where the 'newcomers' take part in peripheral learning, and the 'oldtimers' share their expertise. In the discussion of the data in chapter four, it was clear who the 'oldtimers' and 'newcomers' were according to their comments on their initial understanding of emergent literacy, as well as their participation in the focus group sessions.

A community of practice provided a space for all to participate in discussions around emergent literacy. In these discussions all contributions were welcomed and valued and this atmosphere of trust meant that deeper richer learnings of emergent literacy developed. These then spilled over into classrooms and staff rooms so that the awareness of emergent literacy spread more outside the original community of practice.

5.3. LIMITATIONS

As the study continued, so I became aware of certain limitations which may have affected or constrained the outcome of my research.

Firstly, I became aware of the fact that my position as the principal at the school could be problematic. This did not originally cause me concern. Although their leader, I have been working alongside most of the participants for years. I know them all well and have good relationships with all of them. I did not take into consideration,

however, that as I am part of the management team of the school, they might be wary of giving me their honest opinions and answers in case I viewed their answers as wrong, and judged them as educators. This took place specifically in session one. I made every effort, however to close that gap, reassuring them along the way that there is no judgement and that I am simply part of the group, travelling the journey with them. I found that the participants often waited for me to speak or lead. I countered this issue by encouraging different participants to facilitate the focus group sessions. These facilitators were chosen by each other and as the sessions continued, so they grew in confidence to share ideas and ask questions. A community of practice develops over time and so our roles and working relationships in the community also developed over time. Successive focus groups in varied spaces also contributed to developing the community of practice and to mitigating my role as principal.

The second limitation which I encountered was the rather practical reality of school life. Many of the sessions had to be moved or rescheduled due to an instance that could not be helped, whether it was a shortage of staff due to illness, reports and assessments, photo day or dress up day. We would meet briefly in the staff room to discuss the best day and time and would do our utmost to ensure our meeting took place. The school holidays caused a rather large break to take place between the third and fourth session. This in turn, influenced the participants' motivation and enthusiasm for the group, as seen in session four where the participants had lost some interest in the previously chosen topic. However, changing to a topic of the participants' interest, reignited their enthusiasm and session five that followed was even more fruitful, showing more participation and greater insights.

5.4. IMPLICATIONS

The results of my study indicate that a community of practice within a preschool offers certain benefits as learning forum, as it allowed participants to learn from each other and internalise the information and ideas that they shared. The ideas that the participants shared within this focus group, went on to motivate and encourage them to become more aware and enthusiastic educators, which was in turn impressed upon the other educators at the school. The interest in emergent literacy then rippled out to other staff members who had not joined the focus group. So to some extent the community of practice was expanded with more legitimate peripheral participation

happening outside the research. Having an ongoing community of practice not only increased the knowledge base of the participants, but also their enthusiasm for their roles as educators to young children. This need not only be about one specific topic, such as emergent literacy, but might cover a wide range of early years' aspects.

With regards to the topic of emergent literacy, encouraging educators to cross areas of curriculum would be extremely beneficial to the learners. Young children are holistic learners and see the world around them as a whole (Bruce, 2011). Educators need to practice seeing their activities as such. Allowing for time to look at activities under a microscope and dissect them into not only one learning area, but many, will motivate the educators in holistic teaching and provided the learners with activities that cover a broad spectrum of curriculum objectives.

5.5. CONCLUSION

Throughout this study, I have not only been answering my research questions, but I have been on my own journey exploring my leadership skills and training techniques at the school. As a teacher in a Grade R class, as well as being the school principal, I found that there was a gap in my belief system regarding training and raising up strong educators. I strongly believe in intrinsic learning and motivation, believing that once a child has internalised knowledge, they will not only remember it, but be able to make use of that knowledge in a practical way. I found, however, that when it came to staff members, my training became more one sided, me talking and the staff listening – or pretending to. When I originally started this research, I had no knowledge of communities of practice. However, as I read more of Lave and Wenger's work (1991 a & b), I began to see the positive applications that it may have, both in my immediate research and in my relationships with staff in my school for years to come. I have found that not only have the participants who participated in the focus groups internalised the information gleaned from the sessions, but they have been intrinsically motivated to continue making use of that knowledge in a practical way. This can be seen in their weekly planning for their classes, as well as their continuous rearranging of their classrooms to update and create new learning spaces. Lastly, and possibly most importantly, the participants of this focus group have grown in confidence in their teaching abilities, their knowledge and place within the school. In these sessions, they were given a space where their voices could be heard and their ideas explored and

were not judged for it. They found their own answers through guidance and facilitation by others who had previous experience and in turn shared with those who may not know. This community of practice gave the learners a community of educators, passionate about them.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Ethics Approval



13 June 2016
Dr E Scheckle / Ms T Martin
Education Faculty
NMMU

Dear Ms Martin

Developing a community of practice to support emergent literacy in preschool children's play

Your above-entitled application for ethics approval was approved by the Faculty Research, Technology and Innovation Committee of Education (ERTIC) at the meeting held on 7 June 2016.

We take pleasure in informing you that the application was approved by the Committee.
The ethics clearance reference number is **H16-EDU-ITE-011**.

We wish you well with the project. Please inform your co-investigators of the outcome, and convey our best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Hay", is shown.

Ms J Hay
Secretary: ERTIC

Appendix B: Information Sheet

Information sheet for early years' educators at Tiny Learners preschool at Yellowridge Preparatory School who I am inviting to participate in my research study entitled '*Developing a community of practice to support emergent literacy in preschool children's play.*'

I am currently doing my masters degree through Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and would like to invite you to join a focus group where emergent literacy would be the focal point. You do not have to decide immediately whether or not you would like to participate, but rather reflect upon it, discuss it with your colleagues or ask me any questions you may have.

Children often make use of emergent literacy in their day-to-day play activities. I would like to start a focus group where we can share our personal understanding of emergent literacy experiences in our classes and discuss how we can create more opportunities in our class environments.

This research will involve your participation in a group discussion that will take about one hour twice a week over an eight week period. There will also be a one to one interview with me at the end of the eight week period. The focus group will be recorded using a voice recorder for me to transcribe our conversations at a later time.

You are being invited to take part in this research because I feel that your experience as an early years' educator can contribute much to the focus group on emergent literacy.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. The choice that you make will have no bearing on your job or any work-related reports. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier without prejudice or consequence. All participants in the focus group will remain anonymous in the collection of data and letters will be allocated in the place of your names. The knowledge we get from this research will be shared with you and the school.

If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me on my cell number: 0849929684 or my email: tammy@littlexplorers.co.za

Appendix C: Informed Consent form

I have been invited to participate in a focus group where we will discuss and share our emergent literacy practices within the preschool context. We will be meeting on a bi-weekly basis for approximately one hour per session. I understand that this is voluntary and I am under no obligation to take part of the group. I also understand that I may leave the focus group at any time without prejudice or consequence.

I have read the foregoing information sheet, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant_____

Date_____

(day/month/year)

I agree to being recorded in the focus group using a voice recorder. I understand that I will remain anonymous throughout the research process.

Print name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant_____

Date_____

(day/month/year)

Appendix D: Institutional permission

Dear Mr Woods

10 March 2016

Consent to carry out research at Tiny Learners/ Yellowridge Preparatory School

I am currently completing my Masters studies at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and I would like your consent to conduct research at your school, specifically in the early childhood department.

The purpose of my research is to create a participatory forum where educators with shared practice and interest in the holistic development of children can discuss emergent literacy practices in preschool settings and encourage each other to extend children's emergent literacy, using the children's own interests and ideas as a starting point. I feel that this would not only provide relevant data for my research study, but be beneficial to your preschool department as part of your staff members' in-service training and development.

The proposed title of my research thesis is '*Developing a community of practice to support emergent literacy in preschool children's play.*'

I would like to meet with the teachers and assistants in the preschool department and invite them to join the focus group. This would be on a voluntary basis and they will have the freedom to participate or not. This focus group would meet twice a week over eight weeks in the second term this year. Each session would be approximately an hour long, but this would also be dependent on what and how much the participants have to share.

All participants would remain anonymous and letters would be used in place of their names in any data collected, as well as in my final thesis. The data would also remain confidential and a copy will be given to the school.

Please feel free to contact me regarding any aspect of the research study.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind Regards

Tamarynd Martin

Appendix E:

Questions for the structured interview.

What was your initial understanding of emergent literacy?

Has your understanding shifted in any way? If so, how?

How has the process contributed to your understanding of emergent literacy?

Where was your preferred meeting space? Why?

Do you have any other comments regarding our focus groups?

Appendix F: Example of transcripts: Session 1

Focus Group 1: My Office

Wednesday 25 May 2016

Persons Present: Myself, Charlotte, Matilda, Dorothy, Hermione, Nancy, Madeline, Sophie, Alice (all names are pseudonyms)

Tammy: Thank you so much for doing this I really appreciate it. What I'd like to do is start today and maybe we can do another one on Friday.

Is this time ok for all of you?

This group is not a study or a test it is purely for us to discuss what we know about what we can do what we see it is not for me to be in charge and say this is what we are going to do today. I would like to choose someone to lead and I would just be one of the teachers joining it. So in this group I don't want you to see me as your boss or anything like that, I am just a teacher and we are just going to discuss.

To start off today what I want to do I have got some photo's that I am going to pass around. I want you to look at what in the picture the children are learning. Anything that jumps to mind?

Hermione: I would say it's like umm its fine motor development.

Tammy: Any other thoughts?

Charlotte: It's literacy – they are making the letter m and manipulating playdough.

Tammy: Ja so I wanted to ask everybody what do you think Emergent Literacy is? If you want to chat with each other and discuss what you think Emergent Literacy is. If you don't know then that's fine too. We can feedback in a minute.

Nancy: I remember what this was from Varsity. I think it's the background of literacy the introduction of sounds.

Dorothy: Exploring literacy

Nancy: Doing activities that form the foundation using their whole bodies – whole body learning

Madeline: I am not sure if this is right (laugh)

Tammy: There's no right or wrong. We'll just discuss and go from there.

Madeline: We think its the start of where children start developing literacy skills and concepts by teaching practical ideas that they can become involved with each activity.

Dorothy: They start to explore themselves and by drawing.

Hermione: How to create something that is cheap or free for learning or something like that.

Charlotte: Where kids see something and think what they can do with that and then they try to make something with that.

Tammy: So using knowledge they already have to use something?

Charlotte: Ja

Nancy: In my mind it is forming the foundation of literacy whether it's language, reading or writing. And I think by using your different learning areas its using their whole bodies to learn something where writing an "n" again and again is not going to really teach them, but teaching them with their whole bodies in a fun environment will.

Tammy: Alice you mentioned something about learning styles?

Alice: Yes with texture a lot of children when you write something on the board they do see it, but when you give it to them they are learning in a different way. I myself if someone tells me this is how you do it, I wonder if I am going to remember it, but if they come to me and show me this is how to do it I remember it better.

Tammy: It's very interesting that I am seeing the different age groups coming out. A very basic definition of Emergent Literacy is everything that comes before actual reading and writing in school. So is there anything you can think of off hand that you have seen in the class or playground that has stood out as an emergent activity that you think "oh my word" that child is learning literacy or language through this?

Charlotte: I saw Zeke last week He took some sand and put it on the table and drew pictures in the sand and Lyle took grass and pretended it was his tail.

Tammy: Aah that's great that's exactly what we're looking at. It's not something that we can teach, it's like you said it's the children using knowledge they're already got. Think of all the corners in your classroom, umm is there anything that you've seen that the children have done in a corner?

Madeline: Mine like puppet shows and singing with the puppets.

Tammy: In your puppet shows – Anyone else seen any children play with puppets or teddies? – what do you think they learn through that?

Madeline: Language

Charlotte: Drama

Alice: Communication skills, cause they communicate with the whole audience, their friends.

Tammy: Maybe even some basic conversation if two or more of them are doing it "Hello" How are you?

Dorothy: I saw Maddy and her cousin they were talking in Chinese the other day and some of the other kids were following them trying to listen.

Tammy: Out of interest do Lily and Maddy always talk in Chinese to each other.

Dorothy: Only in the mornings when they arrive.

Tammy: Does the little one in your class speak at all ? Even in Chinese?

Matilda: No but she is starting. Everything is “no”

Madeline: Phoebe comes home and is trying to speak Afrikaans and then I hear her all of a sudden say “Ag nee” then points to a pic of a baby and says baba-tjie.

Nancy: I think it’s better for them to hear all the languages. The little ones repeat what they hear.

Tammy: I agree. Its modelling they pick up what they hear. How many children play teacher – teacher and you realize oh my gosh I sound just like that.

Hermione: I must say Shelley sounds just like me especially when one of the other children does what they shouldn’t. She is such a little teacher.

Tammy: And in your bookcorners? Do they just look at the stories?

Hermione: My kids like looking at books. On Monday they took some books to read and then Shelley says don’t tear the books cause Adam loves to do

that and then she went to Adam and told him: “You take a book and hold it like this” and showed him how to hold it the right way round.

Nancy: She could be my little librarian.

Alice: They don't know what's written there but they love to read the story with their friends.

Nancy: They love to. There is always one who sits on a chair and pretends to be teacher and reads the story.

Alice: It's also what they can remember. If it's a story you've read then they take pieces.

Madeline: Some of them even know the stories off by heart like Caun – If I miss out anything he will tell me I can never shorten a story. (laughs)

Tammy: That is their learning, the basis of reading. It all forms part of their pre-reading and pre-writing. They need to know that words mean something. They not just squiggles on a page. It's not whether they can read it or not, but when you read it they go “ooh that means something to me”

I've got some more pictures in my folder I'm going to pass it around. If you could choose one you like and tell me why you like it? What stands out? Particularly in Literacy. Remember Literacy is your pre-reading, pre-writing and language.

What can the kids take from these activities?

Nancy: Jolly phonics table. I like that its interactive and has the words of the objects so they have to think of what the sound is of the object and then match it so the correct letter. It's very interactive learning and fun.

Tammy: It looks like a fun table.

Alice: Ooh yes the children would love to pick up all those things and feel them.

Tammy: In this one it is specifically Jolly phonics so Pre – R up, but with the younger ones. If you are doing a theme, say wild animals, you could do something similar. With labels for the animals. They won't read it, but they will understand that that squiggle over there mean that.

Matilda: I like this activity. All the different stuff and the sounds that they make when you shake it. They open and close.

Tammy: Yes it really looks like she is investigating in this one.

Nancy: Do you think she is “reading” the labels? I mean trying to (pretending). I think she is seeing all the words and reading.

Charlotte: Yes she is playing shop – shop so is even reading numbers and counting.

Tammy: She is clearly a little shopkeeper. So if I play this through my head, somebody must be doing the shopping. What would that person gain from this activity?

Madeline: Well similar things. The packets are there with the shop name on. Groceries have labels.

Tammy: But now I'm going to throw a quick question in there. How do the children know that this is Nesquik?

Nancy: Well they recognize the logo. The bunny.

Tammy: So they know what it looks like. I have never met a 2 year old that does not know what Mac Donalds look like. They all know it's a giant M. They can't read but they know what that says. By having those type of things in your shop you are promoting Literacy. You know those Chinese groceries from the Chinese shop are not actually the best – those are just groceries. But if you put a tin of tuna in your shop they will know its tuna because they recognize it – well if their parents have it. And if you have packets for them to shop what child doesn't know what a PnP packet looks like. Ok who is next?

Dorothy: I like this one

Tammy: Ok what do you like about this one?

Dorothy: It's the noodles on the playdough.

Sophie: I'd say it shows children numbers and how to measure them – from low and up and also hand development putting the noodles on the straw and also she is putting like less and many.

Nancy: Yes measurement. That's a very nice Maths activity. There is even balancing with the straws, so weighing.

Tammy: This is what I love about Early years you can learn so many things through fun activities. If you look at the fine motor activity she has to really concentrate to put the noodle on the straw. The noodle is not going to go on easily, so what is she using? She is using a form of pencil grip. It might not be perfect, but she is learning how to manipulate a small thing. She is having to hold it carefully.

Nancy: I love this activity.

Tammy: It is the lids that are being posted into the wetwipe box.

Sophie: That is a nice one.

Hermione: I thought it was good for the helping of the kids to recognize the letters and also learning the colours and sorting them into the right colour box. Lots of sorting ideas.

Madeline: Yes you could even take a peg or something to sort them.

Tammy: This one has so many levels. For the younger ones its posting its what they do and is great fine-motor. For the older ones they could find the letters of their name and post those. If you are doing numbers they could post how old they are. You really could go wild with this.

So what I want us to decide between now and Friday – I would like us to think about what we would like to observe. One thing that we will look for alright so whether it be on the playground or in the book corner or during playdough it's not that you will necessary set it up. If you want to great , but it is just something that we will look for. So what area would you like? It's basically choosing an area and looking to see if anything happens in there that is linked to literacy.

Nancy: What about book corners? Is that still relevant in the younger classes?

Tammy: Yes that is relevant you all have book corners, the language would just be substantially less. They might just use one word – like “look” or “moo”

Sophie: Yes most of my children can point to an animal and tell me what it is. Like last term we looked at what animals eat and where they live.

Nancy: So they may be able to put some words together, like lion catch buck, haha I don't know, Lion roar.

Tammy: So shall we start with a nice easy one and say the book corner. So between now and Friday look for something that is happening in the book corner. All I want is for you to bring a story.

Madeline: Like "Nathan was playing with a book and pretended it was a car? So anything that happened?

Tammy: Are you all good with that? So on Friday we are just going to tell stories about what we see. (Discussion of best times for everyone)

Nancy: So we can do 10 am. Then on Friday we will choose the next day.