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**Children with Disabilities and Delayed Entry to Kindergarten:
To Send or Not to Send**

by

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A Starred Paper

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this paper to my mom, Judy. She is the epitome of strength and has always dedicated herself to her family, her work, and her passions. I believe my passion for early intervention came from her; she has always put children first in everything she does and continues to advocate for education. She motivated me to further my education and obtain my Master's degree in an area that I truly enjoy. I dedicate this to her and hope to influence and encourage my kids the way that she has influenced and encouraged me.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As a young child grows and progresses, one of the most significant milestones in this period is the transition into kindergarten. For some children, parents, and educators, this can be an exciting time as they begin their educational journey. According to the Transition Practices Survey, conducted by the National Center for Early Development and Learning (1996) kindergarten teachers report, approximately half of all students make the transition to kindergarten smoothly, approximately one-third experience minor difficulties, and the remaining 16% experience major difficulties (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). Two approaches that parents and educators commonly use are delaying the child's entry into kindergarten or attending another year of preschool (often termed redshirting) and the child repeating kindergarten instead of transitioning on to first grade (Holloway, 2003).

Early transitions have been a topic of interest and study in the field of early childhood special education for 3 decades. Between 1970 and 2000 the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, funded demonstration and outreach projects focused on the transition of children with disabilities from hospital to home, early intervention to preschool, and preschool to school. In the 1980s, the Office of Special Education Program (OSEP) funded projects to improve the transition to kindergarten with special education students. Two themes arose from these projects: a) transitions should support congruency across programs, and b) transitions should address specific strengths, needs, and characteristics of individual children, families, and programs (Rous et al., 2007).

For parents of children with developmental delays, this transition may be a scary, emotional, and overwhelming time period. As the current Individual Education Plan (IEP) team

prepares a child's transition to the new IEP team there are many items to consider, as this process is complex and requires additional administrative, social, and educational supports. Success depends strongly on the availability of supports at the school level (Janus et al., 2008).

The purpose of this paper was to review the literature related to the transition of students with identified disabilities or special needs from a preschool setting into the kindergarten environment, specifically examining if the policy of redshirting (delaying entry to kindergarten) a student with special needs holds any benefit to the child, parents and teachers.

Definition of Terms

A Child with a Disability. "A child with intellectual disability, hearing impairments, speech or language impairment, visual impairments, emotional/behavioral disability, orthopedic, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities and who by reason thereof, needs special education and related services, child aged 0-6 may include a child experiencing developmental delays in one or more of the five major areas" (Individuals with Disabilities Act [IDEA], 2004)

Redshirting, also referred to as "voluntary retention" refers to the practice of delaying a child's entry into school or attending another year of preschool in order to give him or her the developmental benefits of having been left back, thus entering the next grade at an older age (Frey, 2005, p. 332).

IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is a federal law passed in 1975 that ensures the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities.

Mean Length of Utterance (MLU) is a measure of language development in young children which is based on the average length of utterances in a child's spontaneous speech.

Phonological Awareness is the ability to think about the sounds in words.

Practice refers to a curriculum, behavioral intervention, systems change, or educational approach designed for use by families, educators, or students with the express expectation that implementation will result in measurable, educational, social, behavioral, or physical benefit (Wang & Spillane, 2009).

Retention is requiring a student to remain at his or her current grade level the following school year despite spending a full school year at the given grade (Silberglitt et al., 2006).

School Readiness refers to the state of child competencies at the time of school entry (i.e., kindergarten) that are important for later success (Snow, 2006).

Social Competence encompasses both the ability to complete tasks and manage responsibilities and effective skills for handling social and emotional experiences (Jones et al., 2015).

Social Skills Training is the use of behavioral approaches to teach children age-appropriate social competencies such as communication, problem-solving, decision-making, self-management, and relating to peers (Hebbeler & Spiker, 2016).

Special Needs are disorders that affect the child's behavioral, communication, intellectual or physical abilities (Janus et al., 2008).

Transition is the preparation and support for the changes that occur from preschool settings to kindergarten settings (Stormont et al., 2005), which involves a process of movement

or shift from one environment to another (Rous et al., 2007). The process used to provide continuity between a preschool or home and a kindergarten program, which involves the sharing of student information, classroom activities, and curricular objectives (Nelson, 2004).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

When making the transition to kindergarten, teachers and parents must consider the skills that are necessary for a child to be successful in their transition to kindergarten. Together the parents and educators should look at the child's skills in relation to academic achievement, social/emotional development, communication, functional/adaptive skills, and motor development. As the expectations of kindergarten become ever expanding, the team must address the child's skills upon entry to kindergarten. When a child's birthday takes place in the spring or summer, there is more flexibility with sending them to kindergarten or making the decision to have them attend another year of preschool to better prepare themselves for the demands of kindergarten.

When considering the different areas of development, it is important to note that the skills frequently cross over into each other, rather than a single skill being a true indicator of the child's overall development in that area. An example of this is given in the article, *Relation of preschoolers' visual motor and object manipulation skills with executive function and social behavior* by MacDonald (2016). Preschoolers who performed better on fine and gross motor skill assessments early in the school year were more likely to have better social behavior and "executive function," or ability to pay attention, follow directions and stay on task later in the school year (MacDonald, 2016). Crossover of skills such as these happen frequently; a communication delay may appear to be a cognitive delay as a child is unable to indicate expressively what they know. Functional tasks may appear to be delayed due to a child being unable to perform fine motor tasks independently. Every child is different and has their own set of individualized skills, and for children with delays an Individualized Education Plan is used to

help target those needs in order for a team to best support the child and prepare them for kindergarten.

Dockett and Perry (2003) found eight important areas that affect the transition to kindergarten, with which children should have some familiarity. The first is knowledge which is defined as ideas, facts, or concepts that children know. The second is social adjustment to the school context; for example, knowing how to interact with a large group of children or responding appropriately to the teacher. Third, fine motor skills such as tying shoelaces and holding a pencil appropriately. Fourth, disposition, the attitude a child has toward the school environment. The fifth, another important area for children is rules or the expectations of behavior and action in the classroom. Physical attributes is sixth, also known as characteristics, such as a child's age or general health. Family issues, seventh, are family interactions with the school and changes to family life brought about by children starting school. Finally, eighth is the education environment, defined as what happens while the child is at school. All these issues need to be considered when making a transitional determination for a child, especially when a child has been identified with a disability (Dockett & Perry, 2003). This article went on to further review what children, teachers, and parents indicate is the skill most important to overcome in order to transition to kindergarten. While parents and teachers indicated social adjustment as the most important skill to master by kindergarten, children indicated the importance of rules and disposition as focus areas for school readiness. The transition to kindergarten for a child is perceived differently than that of a parent or educator. Surprisingly to some, the area of "skills and knowledge" was considered less important by children, educators, and parents in the transition to kindergarten.

Academic Achievement

In regard to academic achievement when transitioning to kindergarten, for a child to be able to keep pace with his/her typically developing peers, they must be able to demonstrate a variety of skills. These skills may include the ability to write their name recognizably, count to 10, demonstrate self-regulation skills, appropriately ask/answer questions related to content, and demonstrate an overall interest in learning (Dockett & Perry, 2003). When a child is able to confidently demonstrate these skills, it indicates they would find success in a general education classroom (Dockett & Perry, 2003). For children with cognitive delays, entering kindergarten will require specialized instruction individualized to the child. There are a variety of reasons parents choose to delay their child's entry to kindergarten; the most common being the child's birth date. Parents cited that if their child was born in the latter half of the year, they would be less mature, academically or behaviorally, than their peers (Barnard-Brak, 2008).

Academic redshirting has indicated better academic achievement (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006) shown by data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999 to specifically study academic redshirting by comparing test data of the oldest typically developing kindergarten students (September, October, and November birth dates) with those of the youngest typically developing students (June, July, and August birth dates). Each sample size had roughly 10,000 students identified as oldest and 10,000 identified as youngest; 3,000 from both sample sizes were present for the study. Test data indicated a significant difference in math and science scores between the two groups from kindergarten through fifth grade, with the older students scoring higher in both subjects. Over time, as the groups aged, the gap between them decreased, but it did not completely disappear.

Datar (2006) studied the effects of delaying kindergarten entrance on a sample of children from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class in the fall and spring of 1998-1999. Her findings suggested that delayed entrance to kindergarten is associated with better achievement scores in both reading and math from the fall semester of kindergarten through the spring semester of first grade. Further examination of achievement in later grades is not addressed in this longitudinal study. Datar does address that previous data found test scores at age 7 very strong predictors of one’s future test scores, educational attainment, and labor market outcomes at ages 23 and 33 years. Datar also found that children of lower socioeconomic status, boys, and children with disabilities had comparable growth in achievement test scores as a result of delaying the start of kindergarten. Children from low socioeconomic status families historically have significantly lower participation rates in public or private early childhood programs when compared to families of high SES. This can be due to a family’s financial burdens, a caregiver being unaware of the importance and benefits of early childhood education, or living in a location where the early childhood programming quality is poor due to funding and training access.

In her analyses of children with disabilities, compared to their peers without disabilities, Datar (2006) found moderate increases in test scores. Her comparison found that although math achievement test scores were statistically non-significant, the reading scores revealed a 2.6-point gain in norm-referenced reading assessment among children with disabilities who delayed entrance. Even though the results of this study indicate positive academic results for children with disabilities, it needs to be noted that the study did not distinguish between disabilities. The study also noted that an extra year out of school will not compensate for the effects of a

disability, as a disability is a lifelong experience and redshirting does not function as an intervention or cure for disabilities. A child may be academically redshirted because the parents believe they are behind in one or more areas of study, which may be the result of a disability, but this practice alone does not function as an effective intervention for the disability.

When Datar (2006) examined academic achievement at specific points in time, collected from the fall semester of kindergarten to the 2000 spring semester of first grade, the results suggested initial gains in achievement for children with disabilities who delay kindergarten entrance, but her research did not examine further benefits and it should be noted that it remains to be seen whether these benefits persist in the long run.

Raeffele Mendez et al. (2015) took a deeper examination into comparing research groups who had delayed entry to kindergarten, retained in kindergarten, and typically progressing. The groups consisted of a variety of dynamics including gender, free or reduced lunch status, season of birth, race/ethnicity, prenatal risk factors, etc. The findings indicated students who are retained in kindergarten do not catch up to their peers who typically progressed and those who delayed entry to kindergarten. This group of students who were retained in kindergarten also represented more students of a lower socioeconomic status. This evidence indicates that kindergarten retention does not appear to be the solution, but instead more intensive and individualized instruction may be the solution.

Research consistently shows that a seamless transition to kindergarten has a positive effect on achievement, particularly for children with disabilities and for children from impoverished backgrounds (Nelson, 2004). There has been a common assumption that children will be better able to handle the academic demands of school if they are older when they enter

kindergarten. Due to the academic demands of kindergarten, some legislatures have taken a different approach at the state level by requiring an earlier birth date for a child to be eligible to enter into kindergarten (Diamond et al., 2000).

Social/Emotional Development

A child's social/emotional development must be at a level where the child is functioning in a classroom without dysregulated behaviors interfering with the child's learning (Pierce-Jordan & Lifter, 2005). A child who is ready for kindergarten must feel comfortable working in a group, be able to ask for help, know their personal information (name, age, gender, etc.), follow simple directions given by the teacher, and be able to focus for extended periods of time (Jones et al., 2015). Other indicators a child may be ready for kindergarten is how they approach peer relationships. Is the child taking turns, cooperating with peers, making friends, able to share, joining in play, demonstrating empathy for others? Knowing a child is able to demonstrate these peer interaction skills suggests the kindergarten classroom is an appropriate placement for the child. There are a variety of ways to teach social skills for children including giving the child opportunities to interact with both adults and same-aged peers in public settings, teaching them how to express feelings, role-playing situations that may occur on the playground or in the lunchroom and finding ways to work together to find a solution to potential problems (Education.com, 2019).

Social and emotional developmental delays in children are often another consideration for parents and educators in their decision to delay a child's start to kindergarten. Early childhood transitions such as the transition from preschool to kindergarten are particularly important because attitudes and reputations that may be established at the outset of grade school

may follow children through many years of formal schooling (Ladd & Price, 1987). For a child who may have had less early childhood experiences the transition to kindergarten may come too quickly and the child may have more difficulty socially adjusting to the kindergarten environment (Ladd & Price, 1987). A child's reputation can be either positive or negative and may equally impact how peers and adults perceive the child into future grades. One child may have the reputation of being engaged in learning, participating in activities, and having positive peer interactions. Another child may have difficulty focusing, become disruptive, and refuse to participate in classroom activities, creating a negative reputation by both adults and peers. Although educators and caretakers know a child matures and reputations change, same aged peers may not be as understanding, impacting peer relationships throughout a child's schooling.

Social/emotional development is typically judged by the teacher's perception and the child's classroom peers. Children's efforts to gain peer acceptance may depend, in part, on their behavior. A measure of social/emotional skills may be useful for assessing whether children are at risk for deficits in noncognitive skills later in life and help identify those in need of early intervention. Children's social competence can be assessed by their teacher(s), who observe(s) many instances in which children need to manage relations with peers and adults. The school setting provides the opportunity to observe a child's ability to interact interpersonally, cooperate with his/her peers, complete daily tasks and resolve conflicts which are all skills that are important for successful transitions into kindergarten and to other grade levels (Jones et al., 2015).

Jones et al. (2015) concluded that early social competence at least serves as a marker for important long-term outcomes and is instrumental in influencing other developmental factors

that collectively affect the life course of a child. Evaluating such characteristics could be important in planning interventions and curriculum to improve social competencies. One of the interventions could be the choice to redshirt a child from kindergarten in order to spend an additional year focusing on appropriate and acceptable social interactions between peers and adults. Both Ladd and Price (1987) and Jones et al. (2015) provided the data indicating how effective intervention in preschool can improve childhood noncognitive skills in a lasting way.

Individuals with disabilities, especially those children diagnosed with autism, benefit from improved social skills by being more likely to be accepted in integrated settings, live more independently, and work in a cooperative setting (Wang & Spillane, 2009). Methods used to teach social skills for children with autism include interventions such as social stories, peer-mediated strategies, video modeling, and cognitive behavioral training.

Communication

A child's communication skills are a key component to a child's success in kindergarten (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). A child's ability to understand receptively and communicate expressively spills over into what they are able to express cognitively and socially as well as how they are receptively understanding learning tasks. Communication skills a kindergarten student must be able to demonstrate include the ability to talk, listen, and understand concepts. A child must be able to follow simple directions in the classroom, maintain conversation, initiate conversation, and use a variety of sentence structures in order to expand further on topics (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). As for children with disabilities, communication delays are the most common in early childhood which makes it difficult to truly identify delays in all areas of development.

One of the major developmental tasks in early childhood is learning to communicate in order to interact with others. Communication development for young children includes gaining the skills to understand and to express thoughts, feelings, and information through language or signs. The ability to understand communication begins before birth and continues through life, as a child hears, sees, and interprets information from other people (Gooden & Kearns, 2013).

Average communication skills for children ages 3-4 years include an understanding of 1,500 to 2,000 words, the mean length utterance (MLU) of 4.4 words and includes the use of past tense forms, contractions, some prepositions such as “in front of,” and the use of question words (Goldstein et al., 2013). At this age they are able to follow 3-step commands and explain the function of common objects. Children at the age of 4-5 years have an average receptive language of about 2,500-2,800 words and can tell stories using more complex sentence structure and have an MLU of about 5.7 words (Goldstein et al., 2013). They will use possessive forms and more prepositions, as well as understand many more concepts (Goldstein et al., 2013).

Language expression progresses to words, sentences, and conversations through many methods including gestures, spoken words, sign language, pictorial language systems, and communication boards. It is essential that a child have one of these functional means of expressive language before going to kindergarten (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). This knowledge must be joined with their social competence. Preschool children begin to develop some awareness of language and pre-reading skills by rhyming words or segmenting words into syllables, to hear the distinct sounds (Gooden & Kearns, 2013). Phonological awareness leads to early reading development and the progression of communication, vocabulary development and

listening (Duff & Tomblin 2018). These communication skills are critical in leading toward a child's ability to read, speak fluently and comprehend information (Duff & Tomblin, 2018).

Children entering kindergarten with poor listening, speaking and or phonological processing skills may be diagnosed with a language impairment or developmental language disorder. These delays may lead to a reading disorder, which will impact learning and skills acquisition in all other subject areas (Duff & Tomblin, 2018).

Functional Skills

Another area of development important to the entrance of kindergarten is a child's ability to independently complete functional tasks. Most kindergarten teachers have the expectation of a child entering kindergarten to be able to manage their own bathroom needs, dress/undress, as well as wash hands and independently participate in eating tasks successfully. When a child is able to complete basic functional tasks throughout their day, they are able to participate in classroom routines more effectively (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

Functional skills are those skills a student needs to become independent. An important goal for every student is to gain as much independence and responsibility as possible. These skills are defined as functional as long as the outcome supports the student's independence and can be categorized into three main areas (Webster, 2019): Life Skills, Functional Academic Skills, and Community Based Learning Skills:

- Life Skills
 - The most basic of functional skills are those skills we usually acquire in the first few years of life: eating, dressing, personal care skills like using the toilet, brushing teeth, combing/brushing hair, etc., and communicating important

information such as name, address, personal needs and safety. Students with developmental disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorders, and significant cognitive or multiple disabilities often need to have these skills taught through modeling, breaking them down, and repetition (Webster, 2019).

- **Functional Academic Skills**
 - **Math Skills**—functional math skills include number recognition, skip counting, math operations, counting, using money, measuring, and beginning to tell time. For higher functioning students, math skills will expand to include vocationally oriented skills, such as making change or following a schedule (Webster, 2019).
 - **Language Arts**—Reading begins as recognizing symbols, progressing to reading signs (stop, push), and moves on to reading directions. For many students with disabilities, they may need to have reading texts supported with audio recordings or adults reading. By learning to read a bus schedule, a sign in a bathroom, or directions, a student with disabilities gains independence (Webster, 2019).
- **Community-Based Learning Skills**
 - The skills a student needs to succeed independently in the community often have to be taught in the community. These skills include safety, knowing how to use a phone, community workers, and community buildings. Too often parents, with the desire to protect their disabled children, complete these tasks for their children and unknowingly stand in the way of allowing their children to acquire the skills they need (Webster, 2019).

For some students with disabilities, those skills may be learning to feed themselves. For other students, it may be learning to use a bus and read a bus schedule. Children entering kindergarten without the necessary functional skills may be ostracized by their peers, hindering their abilities to socialize appropriately with other students. A disabled child may also need one-to-one adult assistance with adaptive and functional skills until mastery is reached.

Fine/Gross Motor Skills

Part of efficiency with functional routines requires typical fine and gross motor skills. The expectation entering kindergarten for a typical child is to be able to physically navigate a classroom independently, running and playing on the playground, as well as participate in physical education activities. Fine motor skills expected of kindergarteners include holding pencils, tracing shapes, buttoning/zipping clothing, tying shoes, and using scissors to cut on a line (Webster, 2019). For children entering kindergarten who are currently on an IEP, these skills may not be up to the pace and efficiency of their peers. Supporting children at all levels in the kindergarten setting is key to finding success for all children at whatever level they may be at entering kindergarten.

Motor development refers to both gross motor skills and fine motor skills. For preschoolers who are age eligible for kindergarten, fine motor skill development could include stacking blocks or other items, copying circles on a page or playing with creative toys such as Legos or crayons. Gross motor skill development could include things like playing catch, playing on toys at the park or drawing a line on the sidewalk and having the child jump back and forth over it.

Children with identified disabilities in either gross or fine motor skills need additional time to perform requested motor tasks and may be frustrated due to their own comparison to peers or stress of completing the task, which may lead to behavioral actions or impact self-esteem.

Socioeconomic Status

Another factor not always considered when contemplating redshirting a child is socioeconomic status. Due to the cost of preschool and childcare the decision to redshirt a child may be based on socioeconomic status alone (Mattison et al., 2018). Some families simply cannot afford the cost of childcare and need their young child to be somewhere safe during the day. This ultimately leads to the decision that the child will attend kindergarten as soon as they are eligible regardless of their readiness.

Mattison et al. (2018) examined grade retention and the impact it has on a child's success in school. Retention at the grade level continues to be a commonly used form of "intervention" for children who are not meeting grade-level expectations, even though this practice does not demonstrate a similar success rate as intensive, individualized instruction. Students who are typically considered for grade retention fall under a similar socioeconomic status, gender, and race. Low socioeconomic status represented a large portion of students who are retained (Mattison et al., 2018). Having limited access to resources related to education greatly impacts these students and their progression through the education system.

Stressors for Children

Successful transitions are influenced by the behaviors and skills the child displays during the transition process and how their skills match up with the requirements and expectations of

the kindergarten teacher and program. Research by Dockett and Perry (2003) found that children are most concerned with knowing the rules and being able to make friends. Children view starting school as a major change in their lives and entering kindergarten meant that they were growing up (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

All children entering kindergarten will face changes in their physical environment, social interactions, curriculum expectations, routines, and various other transition challenges. Dockett and Perry (2003) found it is important to allow children to have a voice in the transitional process; ongoing communication with adults is beneficial in assisting a child in understanding the change that will be occurring in his/her lifestyle. These conversations help the child release anxieties and become excited about the new experiences that are about to occur in his/her life (Dockett & Perry, 2003).

Stressors for Parents

Parents want what is best for their children now and in the future, and they have to make the kindergarten-enrollment decision with limited and uncertain information. The concerns that lead parents to contemplate redshirting are most often related to the child's physical, social, and emotional maturity as the parents perceive it (Giallo et al., 2008). In particular, parents seem to wrestle most with the redshirting decision when they have a son whose fifth birthday falls just before the cutoff date for kindergarten eligibility, which is most commonly on or around September 1 (Frey, 2005). If the child starts kindergarten "on time," he will be among the youngest in his grade; if he is redshirted, he will be one of the oldest.

Parents of children with special needs are likely to have a long history of relationships with professionals in early intervention programs, and these parents often expect to be quite

active in supporting their children through the transition to a mainstream setting. When parents feel confident about their child's transition, children demonstrate better social adjustment as they start school (Giallo et al., 2008). In regard to parents of children with special needs, parents feel greater satisfaction with the transition when the school provides support to their child (Giallo et al., 2008). The main component for parents was good communication by school staff in all areas related to their child. Parents see socialization and learning to play with other children as a major benefit of their disabled child attending an inclusive kindergarten setting (Giallo et al., 2008).

Stressors for Educators

Educators rated interpersonal skills such as communication and having a positive approach to learning as the most important skills for children entering kindergarten (Nelson, 2004). Teachers believed stress during the transition process was often due to situations and items outside of their control, such as a limitation of service time, budget reductions, increased class sizes or caseloads, and different expectations from all parties involved with serving a specific child or a group of children with learning disabilities (Rosenkoetter et al., 2007).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC; 2002) position statement on school readiness pointed to a different approach for educators. Rather than attempting to "fix" children so that they meet specific expectations of teachers and curriculum, educators should realize that the nature of children's development and learning dictates two important school responsibilities: (1) schools should respond to a diverse range of abilities within any group of children, and (2) the curriculum in the early grades must provide meaningful

contexts for children's learning rather than focusing primarily on isolated skills acquisition (Diamond et al., 2000).

In April of 2020, the NAEYC updated its position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice stating the following:

Each and every child, birth through age 8, has the right to equitable learning opportunities—in centers, family childcare homes, or schools—that fully support their optimal development and learning across all domains and content areas. Children are born eager to learn; they take delight in exploring their world and making connections. The degree to which early learning programs support children's delight and wonder in learning reflects the quality of that setting. Educators who engage in developmentally appropriate practice foster young children's joyful learning and maximize the opportunities for each and every child to achieve their full potential.

When comparing the two statements from 2002 and 2020, both have a powerful message of optimizing a child's development by responding to a child's learning style that has meaning for them.

Chapter 3: Summary/Conclusions

It is difficult to study the impacts of delaying the start of kindergarten because students who are redshirted differ across a host of dimensions from those who start on time. It is also a difficult topic due to the many variables involved in a young child's life such as the educational richness of their home environment, educational experiences, rate of development and potential or identified disabilities.

Through the examination of a variety of research articles, there is consensus that how the transition process is handled for any child is crucial. Good communication, background information, parent input, and achievement data are just a few of the items to be considered. In the case of a child with a disability other factors such as cognitive ability, communication skills, motor development, social/emotional maturity, and functional skills also need to be examined and communicated.

Although every plan is individualized to the child there tends to be a continual trend that the expectations of kindergarten are a leap from the play-based learning of preschool. When a child who already has developmental delays transitions into an environment with ever-changing expectations the stress impacts educators, parents, and the child (Frey, 2005). Kindergarten is ever-changing by increasing the expectations over the years; moving from a model including nap times, play, and half-day curriculum, to a level of learning to read, math equations, and independent group work. Although there are supports in place for each child to best meet their needs, the difficulty of kindergarten is a stark change from the preschool environment. Transitions at the preschool level adapt and accommodate students, educators, and parents to ease the transition for all. The current nature of kindergarten continues to change and the needs

of young children with disabilities are often being ignored as these changes take place. Kindergarten teachers are being asked to implement standards-based curricula that many believe rush the academic development of even a typically developing child. Many early childhood educators seek to preserve kindergarten's traditional role of providing a buffer to help smooth a young child's transition into grade school, similar to preschool's transition from home. In reality, kindergarten is quickly creating expectations that reflect first and second grades, eliminating learning through play. The rigor of kindergarten curriculum, more direct teaching methods, and the academic expectations are much higher for typically developing students, creating an even larger gap for students with disabilities entering kindergarten (Frey, 2005).

Chapter 4: My Position

Why this Topic is Important to Me as an Educator

As an early childhood special education teacher, I am constantly asked by parents and kindergarten teachers if my students are ready to transition to kindergarten. I find myself continually wondering if kindergarten is ready for the child. In order to make a recommendation that is in the best interest of each child, it is important that I am aware of the research, have a good understanding of the strengths and challenges for each child, and communicate all areas relevant to the child to the parties involved.

Working 4 years in the field, I have come to realize that all teachers, principals, and schools navigate the transition to kindergarten differently. The child's current team can work to establish positive relationships, develop transition to school plans, and communicate the child's needs accurately; however, the child may still have a negative transition into kindergarten. Very often a child goes from a setting filled with learning through play to the rigor and academic expectations that do not accommodate children with developmental delays.

Transition meetings in the spring of the year prior to a kindergarten transition are key communication and data sharing times. As a teacher, my input at these meetings is crucial since I have the most background in working with a child. Allowing parents to share their concerns is also important and relevant to the process. Oftentimes, the special education context is emotional for parents, as well as the potential receiving teacher. Educators also need to consider the legal and academic requirements as it pertains to children with special needs.

In the end, my responsibility is always to recommend and communicate what I believe is in the best interest of the child in regard to his/her placement for the next school year. Parents ultimately make the final decision, but good information, positive communication and trust in the educators and system, will ease parents' crucial decision for their child.

What is the Solution?

After reviewing the research, I feel that the best decision is dependent upon knowing the child well enough in regard to strengths and concerns, understanding the options available within the community and school system, presenting all of the data in a realistic and positive manner, and then making an informed recommendation to the parents. Knowing that each child with disabilities has unique characteristics, the decision needs to be made based on those individual concerns. For some children this will mean that they should move forward with their peers in attending kindergarten, with outlined support in order to make the transition positive and successful. For other children, an additional year in appropriate preschool and/or early childhood special education programming will be the most beneficial.

Basically, there is no "one size fits all" solution. Each recommendation and transition should be made based on the individual child. There is also no evidence that a specific disability category experiences more or less obstacles navigating the transition to kindergarten. Good information and communication between all groups are the most crucial components in making such a decision. The research definitely supported delaying the start to kindergarten over retention, primarily due to the social and emotional harm that a retention can cause a student.

A framework for the entire transition process needs to be established and include:

(1) positive relationships between children, parents, and educators, (2) facilitate each child's development as a capable learner, (3) draw upon funding and resources available, (4) be flexible and responsive, (5) have an environment of trust and respect for all parties involved, and (6) allow for open, honest and respectful communication. If these guidelines are followed, then the decision on whether to redshirt a disabled student from kindergarten will be made in the best interest of the child. Communication between all entities needs to continue to occur whether a transition to kindergarten is or is not decided for the child. Good communication with the child is extremely important, as well as presenting decisions and transition processes in a positive manner to the child.

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Language Development: Communication Strategies in Early Childhood

by

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Dedication

I'd like to dedicate this paper to my sweet family. To my husband, you supported me through all of this, cheered me on, and gave me two beautiful babies along the way. I also dedicate this to Gabriella and Beckett. I hope that my accomplishments inspire you to do your best and excel at everything you do. I am so happy to celebrate this with all three of you.

Chapter 1: Introduction

What We Know About Language Development

There is a strong relationship between language development and language experiences in the preschool classroom. A longitudinal study conducted by Dickinson and Porche (2011) considered factors that contribute to language development at the preschool level, and how students are impacted as they move into elementary age and expected reading abilities at the fourth-grade level. Factors that consistently contributed to predicting literacy level at the fourth-grade level included preschool teachers correcting students' utterances and analytic talk about books (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Preschool classrooms with regular individualized teacher-child conversations would be most conducive to language learning because these cues can be used optimally (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). In both the classroom and at home, teachers and parents who encourage children to elaborate on ideas and encourage language use assists in helping children build vocabulary and language growth. Also found often in preschool classrooms are books filled with pictures and words to enhance language development and vocabulary use.

The study of Dickinson and Porche (2011) included 83 students in both Head Start and private preschool programs. Data were collected through teacher interviews and audiotape recordings. Interviews and recordings took place in preschool classrooms with similar settings, schedules, and environments. To assess language abilities students were given a series of three pictures and asked to tell a story about the pictures. The study's control variables included child mean length of utterance, home support for literacy, family welfare status, maternal education level, child gender, age of assessment, teacher education level, and center type. The study

hypothesized that teachers' language use in classrooms encourages language development detected as early as kindergarten-aged students. The study provided evidence that teachers' talk during preschool free play contributed to children's emerging language and literacy skills in future environments (Dickinson & Porche, 2011).

Stages of Language Development

When discussing early childhood language development there are stages of development that naturally occur as a child learns and grows. Language acquisition is built using a variety of experiences beginning at birth and evolving to preschool learning, into elementary school, and beyond. Beginning at infancy verbal exchanges occur during a variety of routine activities such as eating, changing, bathing, and play. These interactions are opportunities for parents to begin commenting, repeating, and exaggerating an infant's vocalizations (ERIC Development Team, 2000).

The First Year

In the first year of development children use crying as a way to vocalize their wants and needs. Crying transitions into cooing, vowel-like vocalizations, and eventually babbling. As children reach the half-year mark, they begin to use more consonant and vowel sounds as a child begins to imitate and interact with caregivers (ERIC Development Team, 2000).

Second and Third Year

After the first year of life a child begins to use language more purposefully by giving objects and people names as well as using gestural signs, like pointing to objects and people in combination with vocalizations. A child's first words begin to emerge shortly before or after their first birthday. At the beginning of this stage, single words are used to represent needs. A

child's first words differ from adults as they are typically shortened utterances with a consonant-vowel pattern instead of a word with two or more syllables or consonants. An example of this may be "ba" for bottle or "da" for daddy. Shortly after the mastery of this skill, a child begins to create two-word utterances to represent their growing communication skills. A child may take a few months to develop their first 10 words (typically associated with family or objects familiar to a child). Once a child has mastered the first 10 words, typically the next stage of communication is making simple two-word utterances. This form of communication at such a young age is also referred to as "telegraphic speech;" the name was given to this type of communication due to the sentences resembling the abbreviated language of a telegram (ERIC Development Team, 2000).

This transition into language, although ungrammatical, has more purpose than just random strings of words combined. Nonsensical sentences include open ended statements such as "more milk" or "more mommy." Children find a word, also known as a "pivot" word, they use frequently to have wants and needs met (ERIC Development Team, 2000). The context of a child's sentence may play an important role in truly understanding the child. Slowly a child's speech in the second and third years becomes more elaborate and single word utterances turn to more complex sentences with more context.

The Preschool Year

As a child enters his/her preschool years at the age of 3-4, they begin to acquire important skills in language learning. A child's vocabulary has usually grown significantly, and they begin to understand the function of words. In typical language development children also use basic conversational skills with a variety of listeners. At this age most language development occurs during daily events and naturally occurring activities and interactions. These situations may

include eating, playing, dressing, bath time, and bedtime routines, as well as travel, play (indoor and outdoor), and helping around the house. In each opportunity a child learns about language and builds their vocabulary skills to create new ways of using language (ERIC Development Team, 2000).

Language use transitions from a way to have a child's wants and needs met to having conversations and learning to use language to build relationships and interact with both adults and their peers. As a child's language use grows in the preschool years, largely through imitation and practice, they begin to learn the skills of language such as turn taking, establishing joint attention, negotiating, and making credible contributions to conversations. As children begin to enter grade school their language shows more patterns similar to adult language. Children begin to develop language skills that demonstrate syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic elements (ERIC Development Team, 2000). For reference, syntactic language refers to the rules, principles, and processes of speech; more specifically, the order of words in sentences. Semantic language refers to the meaning of words, and pragmatic language is how words are used (ERIC Development Team, 2000).

Factors That May Hinder Language Development

Risk has been broadly defined as exposure to biological and environmental conditions that increase the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). Some biological factors such as premature birth, low birthweight, perinatal complications, or genetic disorders may negatively impact a child's development. There are also environmental factors that may affect a child's development; these include low socioeconomic status, parent/caregiver mental health, or adverse early childhood experiences. Of these adverse

experiences, poverty creates an increased risk for a child to reach developmental milestones, with language delays identified most frequently (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). Very often along with poverty a child may experience increased physical health problems, mental health concerns, inattentive or unpredictable parental care, inconsistent schedule and environment, and deficits in achievement or development (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). Children exposed to these risk factors may be more susceptible to specific language impairments. Stanton-Chapman et al. continued to analyze the level of stress and trauma already occurring in a child's life, speech-language skill development may receive less attention, leading to language delays. Children experiencing these major stress experiences can experience poor achievement in language and vocabulary development. These risk factors may contribute to language delays as students have limited access to education, limited access to early intervention, and/or parents with lack of time to provide enriching experiences to enhance language and vocabulary development.

Several studies have demonstrated that language impairments generally run in families with reported collective rates of between 40% and 70% (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). This statistic means that approximately half of families of children with language impairments have at least one other family member with a language delay of some sort.

An article by Stanton-Chapman et al. (2004) identified 10 social and family risk factors that affect a child's development and may cause language delays. The 10 risk factors include: maternal mental health; maternal anxiety; maternal authoritarian childbearing attitudes; poor mother-child interactions; mother has less than a high school education; head of the household has a semi-skilled or unskilled occupation; minority ethnic status; father absent; several stressful

life events in the previous year; and large family size. Each of these risk factors is individually related to a child's IQ score at 4 years of age and a majority are still related to a child's IQ at 13 years of age. Language development and overall IQ may also be impacted when a child experiences a cumulative risk index, meaning the child experiences two or more of these risk factors. There are 10 social and family risk factors that predict cognitive and language performance in infants as well. These 10 risk factors include: poverty status, maternal education less than high school, household size, unmarried mothers, stressful life events, depressed maternal effect, poor mother-infant interactions, maternal IQ, quality of home environment, and quality of the day-care environment (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). Children who grow up in a low-income environment are at risk for more of the factors than children raised in a middle-income home (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004).

The study titled, "Cumulative Risk and Low-Income Children's Language Development," investigated the relationship between cumulative risks, measured at birth, and the language development of low-income children through the use of an electronic data linkage method. The study was designed to examine two specific goals which included: (1) the prevalence of birth risk factors experienced by children from low-income families, and (2) the cumulative effects of these risk factors on targeted boy's and girl's language development at 3 years of age (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). The children in this study, when compared to the general population, were exposed to a greater number of risk-factors and tended to have lower language scores. The results recommended child-focused therapy such as speech and language therapy and intervention programs. In addition to the results obtained about child-focused speech therapy, the research also determined that intervention programs need to consider strategies to

work with families to help reduce social risk factors. These interventions should include community-based agencies to assist low-income families in improving their life conditions, moving out of poverty, providing education on child development, and building a social network for families that understands their experiences and begins to help them work through their current situation. The study results indicated interventions should begin to focus on the family and provide programs to educate parents on how to raise children with delays or prevent the delays all together. Stanton-Chapman et al. (2004) found families of higher socioeconomic status traditionally have more opportunities to send their child to preschool programs, experience visits to museums and libraries, and use other community learning opportunities. The disparities could create up to a 2-year language development difference, to which children living in a lower socioeconomic area may not have access (Stanton-Chapman et al., 2004). Solutions to decreasing this gap could include parent education classes and free childcare programs targeted in areas of low socioeconomic status.

In reviewing what is known about language development, research questions can be formed to address the acquisition of language in early childhood. Language development can be accentuated when both the educational team and family are involved in the process of teaching and exploring language. With such a significant role in language learning questions arise regarding how to facilitate language as well as what must be known about language in order to appropriately teach and make sense of a child's language learning.

Research Questions

1. What strategies are important to highlight in order to facilitate language development in young children?
2. What do caregivers need to know about language development in order to facilitate language growth?

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Strategies to Enhance Language Development

When we know the biological and social risk factors that affect a child's language development, we can find ways to better support their language needs by implementing speech/language strategies. It is important to review the possible strategies that may be put in place to enhance language development. There are a variety of strategies that can be used in both school and home settings. Some of these strategies for teaching language development can occur through natural play scenarios as well as in structured interactions between the child and an adult.

Play

Children at a young age learn many skills, specifically, language skills through play. Play can be child led or adult led, but typically more learning occurs when a child leads play by acting out real life scenarios and engaging in pretend play. Dennis and Stockall (2015) found through play-based learning children begin to develop social competence in their interactions. Social competence consists of skills associated with self-regulation, self-efficacy, and positive relationships with both adults and a child's same-aged peers (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). Social competence assists children in building and maintaining relationships with adults and peers. Children begin to transition from isolated play into cooperative play resulting from greater social competence. A child begins to interact with their peers in play by working together to accomplish a common goal. Dennis and Stockall (2015) stated the following:

Most often socially competent children can easily learn strategies for interacting comfortably and positively with others during their experiences at home or at school.

Children who struggle socially, for example children with language and/or other developmental delays, may have particular difficulty navigating situations that require anger management, social skills, emotional regulation, and friendship skills. (p. 1)

Although play occurs naturally during peer-to-peer interactions, play can also be facilitated by adults such as parents and teachers to encourage a child's problem solving, social interactions, and exploration. Adults are able to create play scenarios that allow opportunities to enhance social competency skills as well as elicit multiple opportunities to practice these skills. When looking more specifically at students struggling with language delays, they may also have difficulty connecting with teachers and classmates or appropriately expressing themselves using effective communication skills; therefore, lacking social competency. Educators and caregivers can help create an environment rich with language opportunities for children during play while still using a child's play preferences. The predictability of adults in play also helps to encourage a child with language delays to practice language skills in a more predictable environment versus play with only their same-aged peers (Dennis & Stockall, 2015).

As a child becomes more familiar with play skills and begins to use different forms of play through maturation, they transition through different levels of play. These levels of play include awareness, exploration, and problem solving (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). In the stages of play established by Dennis and Stockall, the first stage of play a child becomes more aware of their surroundings, environment, play materials, and peers engaged in play. When a child has a communication delay, these foundational skills may take longer to develop because the child has difficulty attending to play activities. Teachers, parents, and caregivers may need to use direct instruction to assist in developing skills of awareness in play (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). Adults

may use skills such as modeling or instructing within play in order to increase a child's play skills. The second level of play is exploration, which is when a child moves from being aware of their surroundings and begins to interact with the setting, peers, and objects involved in play (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). Often, these skills need some intention in how they are designed and how assistance can be provided to a child in beginning to explore play. In the third level of play children begin to problem-solve within their play (Dennis & Stockall, 2015). When a child problem-solves within play, they demonstrate new skills such as focusing attention, examining, and investigating his/her play environments. These problem-solving skills established in play begin to generalize throughout a child's daily routines and move from play into social interactions and assist in developing language skills (Dennis & Stockall, 2015).

At the preschool level, "play" is a significant aspect to a child's routines. Mills et al. (2014) reported on two studies that examine the effects of play-related variables: length of free play, type of language instructional approach, degree of structure of play and amount of teacher involvement in communication with peers. Both studies found that teacher provided language structure maximizes the peer language and interactions that occur during young children's play, even in students with disabilities. As indicated before, play is an important medium in developing a child's skills related to development, and most importantly, the skills involved in communication and social skills development. Although it occurs during the majority of a preschool day, play must be intentional, appropriate, and significant (Mills et al., 2014). Both Early Childhood Educators and Early Childhood Special Educators have skills to create classrooms that enhance language development across all settings. Play at the preschool level can be enhanced by both child-directed and adult-directed play. According to Mills et al., child-

directed play intensifies language development at a more rapid level than adult-directed play when the play scenarios are organized appropriately. When the play activity is preferred by the child, they tend to use more verbal language and have confidence in their self-directed play activities as opposed to an adult-directed play activity.

In one study by Mills et al. (2014), 38 students with disabilities at the preschool level were evaluated using language assessments to gather a baseline of a child's language abilities. Assessments indicated of the 38 students 82% were diagnosed with language delays, 39% with cognitive delays, 76% had fine motor delays, 63% had gross motor delays, and 71% of students had a social development delay. Tests administered included: McCarthy Scales of Children's Abilities (1972), Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised (1981), Test of Early Language Development--3rd Edition (1981), and Test of Auditory Comprehension of Language-Revised (1985). Language interventions were conducted in six separate preschool settings. Each staff member was assigned a type of language intervention to be used during play. Staff members included a head special education teacher with a master's degree, an assistant teacher with a bachelor's degree, and one of three related service providers (Occupational Therapy, Speech-Language, or Physical Therapy). Three of the classrooms utilized the Enterprise Language curriculum and three other classrooms implemented the Direct Language curriculum.

Enterprise Language (EL) Curriculum is a set of procedures that represent systematic language development and utilize intervention techniques based on Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) guidelines and was developed by Drummond (1989). This style of language instruction occurs throughout the day; there are no designated times specific to language therapy. Language instruction will occur during free play, during child initiation of

interactions, limited use of teacher directions, expansions of child utterances, use of questions to gather further information, self-talk, and modeled language production (Mills et al., 2014).

Direct Language (DL) Curriculum (Waryas

& Stermel-Campbell, 1984) is an approach that includes teacher selected materials and activities, initiating interactions with children, expanding on child utterances, and giving verbal praise. The language instruction is directed during the school day and occurs in very specific activities with purpose. These direct language instruction periods occur during small group and large group instruction outside of play activities.

In reviewing Mills et al. (2014) the effectiveness of both EL and DL curriculum and the impact on language development, it was determined that both strategies are effective in the classroom. There was no difference in the diversity or complexity of language used by young children with disabilities regardless of the instructional approach. The only slight difference in examining the two curricula was that children exposed to DL instruction in the classroom demonstrated a decrease in the rate of utterances. This may be due to the significantly lower amount of teacher language directed toward children in the DL classrooms (Mills et al., 2014).

When looking to improve the social communication skills of at-risk preschool students Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser (2002) examined play context. The design examined three components of intervention: planning of play, use of conversational social interaction, and self-evaluating play interactions. Carig-Unkefer and Kaiser established that young children with communication delays have difficulty engaging with peers during play interactions. In order to engage in such interactions a child must be able to demonstrate skills such as initiating play, responding to interactions, taking turns, sustaining social contact, and demonstrating the ability to negotiate

with others or peers in play (Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002). When children are unable to demonstrate these skills in play due to a disability the gap continues to grow. Without the ability to play with peers they may experience rejection from typically developing peers who have already mastered both preschool play and social communication skills. Thus, the cycle is continued, and a child has limited opportunities to practice these play skills and enhance social communication. In play interactions, children learn to resolve disputes, persuade peers to change play activities, and engage in role-play (Mills et al., 2014). The vast range of language and social skills required for play interactions at this level is considerable, hence, advancing language development is critical to a child's success as they transition into elementary school and beyond.

A study completed by Carig-Unkefer and Kaiser (2002) included six preschoolers between 3 years 5 months and 3 years 11 months. Students selected were at least one standard deviation below the mean on both receptive and expressive language subscales on the *Preschool Language Scale-3* and/or demonstrated borderline or clinical levels of aggression, noncompliance, anxiety, or depressed behaviors. All six participants attended the same federally subsidized childcare center. The method used to assess language development included assessment, baseline, and intervention sessions. Intervention sessions included three components: advanced play organization, play sessions, and review of the session during a 20-minute play period. During advanced play organization the interventionist and child would develop a play plan for a specific play theme during the session, lasting roughly 5 minutes. The actual play session between the child and interventionist lasted roughly 10 minutes. During this component a child would play independently with the toys provided, while the interventionist provided verbal

redirects and reflective statements to maintain play as needed. The third component, review, occurred for the final 5 minutes of the period when the interventionists re-entered the play activity sitting near the child to recap the play session together. The results of the study revealed greater linguistic complexity as well as increased child talk and play for children, as a result of the intervention. Linguistic complexity refers to the diversity and complexity of a child's language by using the total number of words used, the different words used, and the child's mean length of utterance (Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002). Child talk and play are terms used as a measure in this study to establish a child's elaborative language during play activities. This intervention increased the amount of peer-to-peer communication during play. There was also an increase in requests made by students and specific language forms by all six participants. All students demonstrated increased levels of spontaneous peer-directed utterances, although interventionists needed to periodically redirect play approximately 25-30 times per session. The study established a direct link between social competence and communication and play skills. As early interventionists it is critical to assist a child who has communication delays to increase social competence through play interventions (Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002).

Routines

Naturally occurring family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Spagnola and Fiese stated, "A routine can be a sequence of actions or activities regularly followed on a daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly basis" (p. 284). Establishing routines within the school, home, and community setting can create a major impact on a young

child's development. Spagnola and Fiese (2007) took a closer look at how family routines can impact language development by specifically looking at mealtime routines.

The dinner time routine should be rich with language, where children are exposed to a range of narratives, explanations, categorizations, and rules of speech. Often during dinner time families discuss the events of the day, begin to make plans for tomorrow, while still participating in mealtime together. The more family members present at the table means more practice of pragmatic language use for the young child. Spagnola and Fiese's (2007) longitudinal study of young children demonstrated that families who engaged in more narrative or elaborate talk at the table with their 3- and 4-year-old children had created a larger vocabulary and stronger story comprehension skills in their children by the age of 5. By creating a predictable environment for the child, the child is more willing to participate in language activities with their family members and expand their language skills.

Rahn et al. (2019) further examined a practice often used in early childhood called, embedded learning opportunities. Embedded learning opportunities are naturally occurring lessons that take place during a child's daily routine. Rahn et al. explained embedded learning opportunities (ELO) as short teaching events that are set up by the adult when a classroom activity aligns with a child's individual learning objective. The purpose of their study was to better understand how Early Childhood Special Education teachers use embedded learning opportunities to support children with special needs. The study focused on identifying embedded learning opportunities that occurred in the classroom and found ways to direct this learning specifically for students on an IEP. The embedded opportunities allowed the child to practice an

IEP goal as part of an ongoing activity in the classroom and allowed the child to continue to participate in the activity in which they were already engaged.

The results of this study determined that teachers use verbal antecedents to address communication goals within the child's classroom routine. Most often teachers were observed using the following antecedents: directives, verbal prompts, questions, and verbal modeling. Other antecedents observed during the study included: prompting, reinforcement, modeling, and specific environmental arrangement strategies (such as room layout) to promote communication and language use. The use of embedded learning opportunities in the classroom found that addressing communication and social skills goals from the IEP were sometimes harder to accomplish. The study suggested that embedded learning opportunities may not always align with a child's specific IEP language, but embedded learning opportunities are proof that when a child has a predictable classroom routine, a multitude of learning opportunities present themselves naturally and support additional language learning opportunities (Rahn et al., 2019).

Adult Facilitated Interactions

In a study published in the “Journal of Early Intervention,” researchers Stanton-Chapman and Brown (2015) examined child language used during free play in two scenarios: teacher vs. child choice of play and teachers' participation in the play group. Twelve children, all with disabilities, participated and were enrolled in a university lab preschool program. Students were chosen for the study based on the results of language assessments (PPVT and TELD); students with scores that indicated language delays were selected for the study. All students in this study were eligible for special education support in more than one categorical area (communication, cognition, motor, adaptive/functional, and/or social/emotional).

Stanton-Chapman and Brown's (2015) study took place in six different preschool classrooms with children attending 2 hours per day, 5 days a week. Each class had two student participants as part of the study. A preschool day consisted of small and large group work and a 40-50-minute free play period. There were three play activities to choose from in each part of the study: creative station, dress-up in housekeeping, and wooden blocks and vehicles. The students were organized into either a teacher-directed group, where teachers initiated rotations to new play activities, or child-directed groups where they could move from one activity to the next freely without adult direction. In the teacher-directed group children changed play activities every 12 minutes; students who chose to avoid play groups or wandered idly about the classroom were directed by teachers to return to their group. In the child-directed play groups children were able to follow their own play rules by rotating from one activity to the next as desired. In the event that a child in this group wandered around the classroom, the teacher would assist in redirecting them to one of three play activities. Thirty-six minutes of play interactions were collected on each student. The data collection and analysis examined each child's language use throughout play activities. Data were collected on the number of utterances, the length of each utterance, and the variety of words used by each child. The study determined that children with language disabilities tend to use a larger variety of words when conversing with their peers than with adults. Adult support was needed to assist in conversational rules such as turn-taking and engagement in play activities. These data are consistent in indicating children with disabilities are able to demonstrate the ability to initiate, respond, and take turns during play when adult directed. When adult direction is not provided, a child with a language disability may miss numerous opportunities to learn and use language. Although adult directed play assisted in

practicing language within play, it is important to note that an increase in utterances, mean length of utterance (MLU), and variety of words used was higher during child-to-child interactions in the study. After some adult direction was provided, the adult stepped back to allow child directed play to occur. Combining both adult-directed and child-directed play it created the most productive play situations for children with disabilities.

In their study, “Facilitating Commenting and Requesting Skills in 3-Year-Old Children with Disabilities” Stanton-Chapman and Brown (2015) focused on scripted adult interactions and how to facilitate language use in 3-year-old children with disabilities. Social communication skills have been a targeted teaching area for early intervention educators, as delayed communication skills may often directly affect play interactions and social skill development. Social communication skills include joint attention, expressive and receptive verbal language, non-verbal communicative gestures, and affect (Stanton-Chapman & Brown, 2015). According to the authors, it is important for Early Interventionists to know what the child’s exact needs are to help increase the student’s communication and language skills and prevent further delays related to social skills and peer interactions. Table 1 provides demographics and disability labels of the six student participants, as well as scores in three areas of need, language skills, problem behaviors, and social skills. This study also looked more deeply into adult directed play interaction vs. child-to-child play interactions. A second question addressed during play activities was: were children more successful in their social interactions when guided by the adult or when directed by the child?

Research took place in a rural elementary school that served preschoolers in a “resource room” setting; a classroom consisting of fewer students who all receive special education

services. The resource room had two adults, one a Master's degree ECSE teacher and another with an Associate's Degree in Child Development as the assistant teacher. Six students were included in the study, which consisted of collected baseline data and tracked progress as related to each child's ability to comment on behaviors, request for verbal behavior, request for non-verbal behavior, and non-verbal requests.

Table 1

Facilitating, Commenting, and Requesting Skills in 3-Year-Old Children with Disabilities

Participant	Age in Months	Race	Gender	Disability	Language Skills**	Problem Behavior***	Social Skills****
Joshua	41	White	M	DD	61	48	75
Ashley	47	White	F	DD	51	41	82
Montel	40	Black	M	DD	50	52	60
Mia	38	White	F	DD	50	52	84
Shontelle	42	Black	F	L	80	40	89
Blake	36	White	M	DD	89	61	89

(Stanton-Chapman & Brown, 2015)

*Participant names changed for confidentiality purposes. Disability category is indicated by Child's IEP plan for the 2008-2009 school year. DD= Developmental Delay L=Language Delay.

**Language Skills = a child was considered for study participation if his/her total standard score was 85 or below on the PLS-4. (If a score is bolded this means the participant met study criteria in this area.)

***Problem Behavior = a child was considered for study participation if their total score was 60 or above on the total problem behavior scale of the Teacher Report Form of the Child Behavior Checklist. (If a score is bolded this means the participant met study criteria in this area.)

****Poor social skills = a child was considered for study participation if their total social skill subscale score was 85 or below on the SSRS. (If a score is bolded this means the participant met study criteria in this area.)

The four targeted behaviors addressed in baseline data were defined within the study completed by Stanton-Chapman and Brown (2015) as follows:

- *Commenting Behaviors*: Statements made by a peer on another peer's activities or relevant events that occur during the interaction. The intent of the child is to explain or interpret activities or an event that occurred during the peer interaction.
- *Requests for verbal behavior*: Verbal inquiries from one child to another that are distinguishable from declarative statements by having the sentence structure of a question or a definite questioning intonation. It includes information questions that begin with a WH-word, How and yes/no questions.
- *Requests for non-verbal behavior*: Verbal inquiries in which a peer asks another peer to perform a physical act such as orienting or obtaining attention or requesting an object or requesting an action or requesting to stop an action.
- *Non-verbal Request*: The intention of the child is to get the peer to provide assistance, material, or attention or to stop engaging in some behavior without saying anything.

Baseline data were collected 2-3 times a week in 10-minute sessions across 28 different sessions. Interventionists did not use any prompting during trials unless safety was a concern.

The strategy used by researchers to teach play interactions were "Storybooks" (sometimes also known as social stories) about each play experience within the classroom. The Storybooks illustrated a thematic play story related to the area of play (e.g., grocery store, haircut, etc.) as well as models for verbalizing during role play. The storybooks also included specific theme vocabulary (e.g., at the grocery store; register, shopping cart) and emphasized three social communication strategies to fit the different play themes.

Play interactions occurred during five different dramatic play activities; grocery store, doctor, construction, animal doctor, and hair salon/barber. Observations took place during free

play within the classroom and on occasion outside on the playground. Stanton-Chapman and Brown conducted this study with a goal to enhance the child's social play and communication skills. In order to measure success, Stanton-Chapman and Brown (2015) needed to consider the following: (1) talking to a friend; (2) listening and responding to a peer; (3) proximity during play; (4) use of a friend's name during play; and (5) turn-taking skills. In further analyzing each of these play skills, the ability to talk to a friend was observed when a child was able to verbally initiate a conversation to a peer. Listening then responding to a peer assessed the child's ability to verbally respond to peer's verbal initiations with adequate responses. When assessing proximity, this was how the child played within speaking distance near a peer. The use of a friend's name was just that; was the child stating a peer's name to gain his/her attention before making a statement? Finally, the skill of turn-taking examined a child's ability to appropriately make exchanges within play for an appropriate number and length of turns within play conversation.

The overall study determined social communication interventions using the storybook model was highly effective in increasing each child's ability to comment, request verbally, and make non-verbal requests. The importance of this study is that it demonstrated growth of language skills in students with developmental delays. Growth was made by all students who participated in the study; growth was observed when students interacted with both their typically developing peers as well as when interacting with each other. It is important to note in this study that although children did not get to a level considered typical, their improvement in language skills exceeded the baseline data. By using interventions like individualized storybooks, interventionists saw growth in language use by each child in the study. Students in this study

who were non-verbal transitioned to a level of using some verbal language, although small improvements were made. These findings highlight the importance of measuring both verbal and non-verbal social communication skills in young children with disabilities (Stanton-Chapman & Brown, 2015).

Connection Between Home and School

In discussing the importance of early intervention for young children in the educational system, it is also important to highlight the importance of language development in the home. Educators can provide suggestions and research-based information to families and caregivers about ways to help a child develop language that can be generalized across all environments. In a study completed by Stockall and Dennis (2013), suggestions were made for how preschool special education teachers can specifically assist fathers and paternal role models as they work and play to enhance the language and literacy skills of their children. Some suggested strategies included reading activities, dramatic play, and pretend play. Most often a parent's involvement in learning at home can be facilitated by the classroom teacher and special education teacher. When a child has both their teacher and caregivers invested in their learning, most of the time, they too become invested in their own learning (Stockall & Dennis, 2013). At the early childhood level, students learn through play and interactions with peers and adults. Teachers and caregivers have established this positive relationship; it molds a student's excitement for school as well as academic success later on. In recognizing this crucial relationship between school and home Stockall and Dennis (2013) focused on the role of the father in this academic involvement. Historically, research has referred to the involvement of the mother in a child's educational experiences.

Stockall and Dennis (2013) compared the roles of fathers versus mothers in a child's academic growth, a father's role in learning is more frequently demonstrated in the form of play. A father's play behaviors can enhance the social and emotional development of young children (Stockall & Dennis, 2013). Stockall and Dennis addressed the idea that most fathers engage in rough housing, tumble play, pretend, jumping, wrestling, and chasing types of play with the child. By harnessing this active engagement, a father's role can greatly contribute to enhancing emergent literacy skills (Stockall & Dennis, 2013). Emergent Literacy is defined as the developmental process in which children acquire the foundation for reading and writing (Stockall & Dennis, 2013). Skills included within Emergent Literacy are language development, listening comprehension, concepts of print, alphabetic knowledge, phonological awareness, and the environment in which they are developed (Dennis & Stockall, 2013). A father's involvement in learning tends to be active, engaging, and exciting for young children.

Suggestions were provided to fathers as to what type of play experiences would help to encourage literacy learning and language use. Most often free play experiences and pretend play were the most common types of learning that may occur more naturally in father and child interactions. Teachers help give suggestions about successful play interactions such as practicing turn-taking, language use, and child-directed. With a child leading play and a father following the play, both father and child can mutually construct play involving positive interactions that facilitates language learning. Stockall and Dennis (2013) noted during pretend play and dramatic play children begin to construct knowledge about their world by using play language and tools similar to those found in real world scenarios. Play situations that are interesting and enjoyable

for a child will ultimately be those he/she is most eager to engage in with their father (Stockall & Dennis, 2013).

By creating a positive connection between home and school both teachers and families see growth in language development. Children become more interested in learning, long-term academic success is more likely, and early literacy skills emerge more quickly. This type of play is essential, dynamic, and educational for both the child and father.

Child-Directed Interactions

Adult directed interactions with students can influence young children in their language development. Adults are able to manipulate play, learning, and activities in ways that encourage language use, language rules, and understanding of language. Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser (2002) discussed the idea of play context in preschool by discussing language development through child-directed interactions. Although a child may not have the best ideas about language use, he/she may feel more comfortable when leading interactions both child to child, or child to adult.

Although sometimes unpredictable, a child may be more confident using communication skills with a same aged peer. When a child has the skills to plan their play, use conversational social interaction strategies, and self-evaluate their play interactions, the play becomes a more positive interaction and language use occurs more appropriately and frequently (Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser, 2002). Although these skills may need to be taught by an adult, they can be practiced during child-directed interactions at home, school, and in the community. Typically, these child-directed interactions take place during play activities. These interactions help a child to practice social skills, language organization, turn-taking, symbolic play, and problem solving; all of

which, one way or another, relate to language development (Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002). Child-directed interactions can be a positive way to encourage language use in students who have language or communication delays.

Chapter 3: Summary

By highlighting the variety of ways language development occurs, we can better assist caregivers in their role as the teachers in the home. In this paper, I reviewed a variety of articles that further analyze language development at the early childhood level. Many strategies were discussed about how to assist teachers, caregivers, and families on how to increase language development at home, in the community, and at school. There are a variety of ideas about how to elicit language use and language development, but one thing that holds true throughout all ideas about language development is the importance of early intervention. The sooner we begin language exposure the sooner language acquisition occurs, thus, helping a child to communicate with peers and adults. With all the ideas we have about language development the next question is: where do we go from here? In the study titled, *Language Intervention in Early Childhood*, Iacono (1999) stated: “Research into early language intervention models indicates that there is no strong evidence for choosing one approach over another” (p. 412).

In the article, “*The Future of Early Communication and Language Intervention*” Warren (2000) stated,

To realize the vision, we must achieve the following on a broad scale: (a) increase support for responsive interaction styles among all parents, childcare workers, teachers, and early interventionists; (b) expand efforts to identify communication delays and disorders as early as possible; (c) move forward with the development of truly effective communication and language intervention approaches; and (d) transform research findings into day-to-day practices. (p. 33)

With this information educators can begin to evaluate the importance of language exposure as early as possible. It is important to create experiences that are highly responsive starting as young as infancy. These environments can be home, school, and the community. Beginning language exposure in infancy, caregivers and educators can also begin to identify communication and language delays as early as possible.

In discussing the roles that ECSE teachers, parents, caregivers, and ECE teachers play in a child's language development, in all actuality, everyone in a child's environment will play a role in introducing and increasing language use. Each child needs consistency, repetition, and encouragement to increase their language skills.

Chapter 4: Where to Go from Here

According to Kaiser and Roberts (2011), 89% of children served under Part B of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) receive Speech and Language Services and 50% of children served in Part C receive Speech/Language Intervention. My hope in writing this paper is to highlight the need to enhance language development as early as possible for all students. By educating families, teachers, and caregivers about what can be done to assist children in language growth, educators can help to reduce the number of students needing speech and language therapy.

Speech delays can be detected as young as early infancy, intervention can begin as soon as identification. The role of an early childhood special educator (ECSE) is to first provide therapy/intervention for the child. The caregivers and adults present in a child's life also serve an important role in a child's development. The second role of an ECSE teacher is to help the family by providing specific strategies they can use to improve their child's language. ECSE teacher's communication with parents and caregivers is vital to the development of a child's language. This is part of the ECSE teacher's practice that is often overlooked and rarely recognized. For early learning, development falls on the adults in a child's life. The small window of time a teacher spends with the child versus the amount of time a caregiver spends with their child are vastly different. A teacher may only see the child two times a week for 3 hours at a time while a caregiver spends mornings, evenings, and weekends with the child. The caregiver must become the teacher in the home with appropriate guidance from ECSE and EC educators. With this knowledge, I hope to become a better educator and be more informative to the families and caregivers of students on my intervention teams.

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