

RECOMMENDED PRACTICE IN PRESCHOOL INSTRUCTION: INCREASING CHILD
ATTENTION DURING WHOLE GROUP

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In a teacher-directed activity, such as whole group, children can learn new skills by following the teacher's directions and/or model the teacher's behaviors. The National Association for the Education of Young Children Developmentally Appropriate Practices provides several recommended practices for creating a community of learners. When teachers follow these strategies they are providing multiple opportunities to engage children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). When used appropriately, whole group instruction can be very effective when teaching and can be used at various times of the day. Whole group instruction builds a sense of community among the classroom. The purpose of this study is two fold: 1) to establish normative data to determine typical levels of correspondence with recommended practice and typical levels of child task engagement during whole group instruction 2) to modify the whole group activity to determine if child task engagement is impacted. This identifies the levels of task engagement of children during whole group instruction, while concurrently describing the whole group instruction in terms of recommended practice for preschool. The purpose is to determine if the identified criteria for recommended practice in whole group instruction will impact child task engagement during this activity. The settings for the targeted classrooms were three preschool classrooms. Each of the three classrooms was selected based on their performance as compared to the normative data in Phase One. These three classrooms had the highest amount of children exhibiting low levels of task engagement and low number of recommended practice for whole group instruction. Results indicated that when each of the teachers increased their adherence to the recommended practice in whole group instruction, children's task engagement was observed to increase.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

In a developmentally appropriate classroom opportunities exist for children to practice skills in an activity-based format. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that preschool children learn best through observation and active participation with the environment (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Active participation with the environment has also been described in the literature as engagement (McClelland & Morrison, 2002). Leaders in the field state that children learn best through vigorous, significant, and engrossing experiences (Gronlund & Helm, 2000). These experiences should be available in the environment for children to engage in individually, with a peer, or in the form of a teacher-directed activity. All these formats depend on the child's attention to, or task engagement with, the task or activity for learning to occur. When children engage with materials, individuals, or teacher they are able to learn specific skills. In a teacher-directed activity, such as whole group, children can learn new skills by following the teacher's directions and/or model the teacher's behaviors. However, children enter school with a variety of needs, capabilities, and learning backgrounds (Stormont, 2003). NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practices provides several recommended practices for creating a community of learners. When teachers follow these strategies they are providing multiple opportunities to engage children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Statement of Problem

Children need to attend in the preschool class during whole group instruction to learn from materials in the environment, peers, and the teacher. Lack of task engagement can prevent children from being able to take advantage of learning opportunities during whole group instruction that exist in the classroom environment because their teacher does not follow recommended practice for whole group instruction. Therefore, these teachers require intervention to modify their whole group

instruction to be in alignment with recommended practice in order to increase the children's level of task engagement.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research project is grounded in the principles of reinforcement (Skinner, 1987) and the Constructivist Theory (Hall, 1987). Recommended practices of whole group instruction are based on the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and DeVries and Zan's (1994), *Moral Classrooms, Moral Children*.

Principles of Reinforcement. Skinner's research focused on the study of behavior. In his research, he found that consequences remit responses. He focused on *shaping* behavior and developed a behavioral model he called *operant conditioning*. Operant conditioning shapes behavior through reinforcement. His research suggests that punishment is ineffective and leads to short-term behavior change. For example, when a teacher puts a child in time-out for doing something wrong. She is liable to change that child's behavior for the moment, but it may not prevent the child from misbehaving in the future. In contrast, reinforcement proved to achieve lasting behavior changes, reinforcement increases a desired behavior. In other words, if a teacher gives a child, a star sticker every time he chooses to play in a low preference specific interest area, the child's likelihood of playing in that center increases. Skinner described reinforcement as being either positive or negative.

Constructivist Theory. According to the constructivist theory, children take an active role in their own development (Hall, 1987). As children interact with their environment, they gain knowledge (Brewer, 2001). Two theorists who impacted the constructivist theory are Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky (Mooney, 2000).

Piaget explained the process of constructing knowledge. He explained this process using three

terms: accommodation, assimilation, and equilibrium. These three terms are defined as follows:

1. Accommodation – creating a new category for information input
2. Assimilation – organizing new information into existing schemata
3. Equilibrium – information is organized by either accommodation or assimilation.

Children gain information through their experiences with their environment. This information is organized through these three processes (Brewer, 2001).

Vygotsky believed that children gain knowledge through their experiences. Vygotsky also believed that children gain knowledge through their *social context*. Children's *social context* contains their family, people they interact with, and their values. The values of their social context influence how they think and learn (Mooney, 2001). Within Vygotsky's theory is the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the range between what a child is capable of doing independently and what a child is capable of achieving with guidance from an adult (Brewer, 2001). Vygotsky emphasized that the people part of a child's social context should support children within their zone of proximal development, while providing children with meaningful experiences. The guidance which adults give children is referred to as scaffolding. Teachers can provide meaningful experiences to children by providing whole group instruction. During whole group instruction teachers can help children to engage and scaffold them within their zone of proximal development.

DeVries and Zan (1994) speak of the importance of the *sociomoral atmosphere* in classrooms. They write that interactions between children and their caregivers and educators influence their social and moral experiences as well as their development. These authors suggest that group time might be the most important in terms of creating a sociomoral classroom environment. They state that the primary objectives for group time fall under two major umbrellas of development: sociomoral and cognitive. Within the sociomoral domain group time encourages children to develop social and moral reasoning skills. Constructivist teachers therefore use finger plays and other rituals to build a sense of

community and belonging for the children. Through this sense of community and belonging, children learn mutual respect and cooperation as they work together and listen to one another. By providing group time, children experience multiple perspectives, which exposes them to fairness and justice. Children develop several cognitive skills as they engage in group time: reasoning, intelligence, and knowledge in several domains. Group times are successful when the teacher carefully plans them using the children's needs, interests, and abilities as a basis. During group time, the teacher serves as a leader. It is crucial that the teacher keeps the long terms goals and objectives in mind and serves as a respectful and responsive leader (DeVries & Zan, 1994).

Summary. The behaviorist theory of reinforcement can be used by the teachers to reinforce child task engagement during whole group instruction. However, teacher reinforcement must be embedded within a DAP framework to ensure that children are actively engaged. When children are actively engaged in well thought out, planned whole group instruction they are better able to give the teacher more attention and maximally benefit from the whole group instruction. Teachers looking for interventions can use the principles of reinforcement and constructivist theory to modify child behavior. The NAEYC recommends allowing children opportunities to engage in their environment. DeVries & Zan provide teachers with a guide to creating a moral classroom based on constructivist theory. Therefore, when necessary teachers can support this recommendation by using behaviorist and constructivist theories to assist children to increase their task engagement and benefit from whole group instruction.

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is two fold: 1) to establish normative data to determine typical levels of correspondence with recommended practice and typical levels of child task engagement during whole group instruction; 2) to modify the whole group activity to determine if child task engagement

is impacted. This study will identify the levels of task engagement of children during whole group instruction, while concurrently describing the whole group instruction in terms of recommended practice for preschool. The purpose is to determine if the identified criteria for recommended practice in whole group instruction will impact child task engagement during this activity.

Hypothesis

By identifying recommended practice in whole group instruction and modifying this activity in preschool classrooms, child task engagement will increase.

Limitations

1. This method depends heavily on assessment measures.
2. The experiment draws inferences on various interventions and independent variables.
3. This method requires continuous assessment, baseline assessment, stability of performance; many crucial decisions about the design can be made only as the data are collected.
4. The range of outcome questions that can be addressed is somewhat more restricted than in-between-group research.
5. The results may not be generalizable to persons other than those included in the design.

Assumptions

1. Recommended practices for whole group instruction taken from the literature are appropriate for preschool-aged children.
2. Repeated observations of the children's task engagement behaviors are representative of each child's ability to display task engagement to the teacher during whole group instruction.
3. The only change during the study is the intervention between the teacher and the

teacher's practices during whole group instruction.

4. Attention to, or task engagement with, the teacher is important to learning.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature will introduce major themes, which relate to the present study. The review of literature contains a synthesis of literature on the importance of attention or task engagement in preschool-aged children, children's interactions, and teacher-directed whole group instruction.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends the consideration of age, individual growth, and cultural factors when designing developmentally appropriate programs. Practitioners should have knowledge of children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development to guide their planning and preparations of the environment and planned activities. Practitioners should consider each child's growth patterns, personality, learning styles, family makeup, and culture when planning instruction. The NAEYC also provides guidelines regarding the recommended practices in order to provide children with quality education (Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997). By considering these areas of early childhood education teachers will provide children with experiences that require their attention or task engagement in order to learn. When children engage in tasks, opportunities exist for learning across social, cognitive, language, and emotional domains. Teachers provide learning experiences directly during whole group instruction.

The Importance of Task Engagement

Task engagement, or attention, is very important for young children because it contributes greatly to children's learning; when children display task engagement they are able to learn from materials, peers and adults. Approximately 10-15% of preschool children exhibit mild to moderate behavior problems, most of which involve difficulties with self-regulation (Elias & Berk, 2002). Self-regulation is control by oneself (Self-regulation, n.d.). When children lack self-control, their ability to focus on external prompts in the environment can be compromised. When multiple indicators of task engagement or attention problems are observed, the diagnosis of attention deficit disorder is often

made. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV, American Psychiatric Publishing, 2000) characterizes attention deficit disorder/attention deficit hyperactivity disorder as the presence of 5 or more of the following criteria:

Often fails to give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities.

Often has difficulty sustaining attention in tasks or play activities.

Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.

Often does not follow through on instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (not due to oppositional behavior or failure to understand instructions).

Often has difficulty organizing tasks and activities.

Often avoids, dislikes, or is reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort (such as schoolwork or homework).

Often loses things necessary for tasks or activities (e.g., toys, school assignments, pencils, books, or tools)

Is often easily distracted by extraneous stimuli.

Is often forgetful in daily activities.

Often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat.

Often leaves seat in classroom or in other situations in which remaining seated is expected.

Often runs about or climbs excessively in situations in which it is inappropriate (in adolescents or adults, may be limited to subjective feelings of restlessness).

Often has difficulty playing or engaging in leisure activities quietly. Is often “on the go” or often acts as if “driven by a motor”.

Often talks excessively.

Often blurts out answers before questions have been completed.

Often has difficulty waiting turn.

Often interrupts or intrudes on others (e.g., butts into conversations or games).

Children may exhibit some of the following indicators in the classroom. Children may also exhibit some of these behaviors during whole group instruction. However, teachers should be aware of these indicators and guide children to engage during these times based on recommended practices.

Children's Interactions

Recent research (McClelland & Morrison, 2003) suggests the importance of teaching *learning-related* social skills. These skills are behaviors such as listening and following directions, participating appropriately in groups, staying on task, and organizing materials. The authors suggest that these skills are necessary for school success and school adjustment and are most important for success in kindergarten. These skills may also set the stage for later social behavior and academic performance by providing the foundation for positive classroom behaviors. The authors further state that children who are interested and involved in classroom activities are able to focus and pay attention and perform better academically (McClelland & Morrison, 2003). Children need opportunities to integrate, consolidate, and appreciate underlying conceptual meaning in social situations to optimize their development (Morath, 2003).

With Materials. When seeking to change challenging behavior, it is recommended to examine the current environment within which behavior is occurring. By examining the environment, practitioners can identify behaviors that occur prior to and during the challenging behavior (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2000).

Piaget believed that children's intellectual growth is based partly on physical development and that it is affected by children's interactions with the environment. Children build their own understanding of the world by the things they do (Mooney, 2000).

One study by Lopez and Menez focused on children's attention in a preschool setting of twenty children. Attention was defined as becoming and remaining engaged in a task and more specifically, "...child was engaged in an individual academic activity required by the teacher, such as writing or drawing." This study suggests that children's ability to attend is related to a child's success in school. They looked at children's level of sustained attention throughout preschool. They used an observational procedure. Lopez and Menez found that preschoolers sustained attention increased throughout preschool. They labeled this increase a possible developmental trend. It is the dominant and directing mode of learning during preschool of children's thought (Elkind, 2002).

Children display attention when they play with the materials in their environment. Play allows children to express ideas, emotions, and feelings. Play provides children opportunities for relaxation and recreation. Play enables children to practice for the next stage of development and to engage in a wide range of problem solving activities and contributes to intellectual growth. It facilitates learning across the three domains of development. Play also contributes to the development of learning dispositions such as intrinsic motivation, engagement, perseverance, positive social interactions, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Piaget also stressed play as an important avenue for learning. Play allows them to make sense of the objects and activities that surround them.

With Peers. Social understanding takes place in the first years of school (Porath, 2003). Play interactions between young children with and without disabilities influences their development (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000).

Murphy, Laurie-Rose, Brinkman, and McNamara (2007) examined typically developing children's sustained attention and its relationship with social competence. They studied forty preschool children during free play. Murphy, Laurie-Rose, Brinkman, and McNamara (2007) found higher levels of social competence on children who displayed attention.

Research by (Elias & Berk, 2002) examined Vygotsky's assumption that sociodramatic play in early childhood contributes to the development of self-regulation. The authors studied 53, 3 and 4 year olds enrolled in 2-day care programs. Vygotsky argued that children achieve their greatest "self-control" in play. Make-believe play is a unique; broadly influential zone of proximal development in which children advance themselves, acquiring many culturally valued competencies and increasing control over thinking and behavior. Elias and Berk (2002) used a vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler preschool and primary scale of intelligence to find that socio-dramatic play supports Vygotsky's statement that make believe plays a significant role in children's self-regulation development (Elias & Berk, 2002).

Interactions with others are necessary for a child's construction of self-concept. Children's relationships help shape a child's self-understanding by providing him/her with information about how significant others view himself/herself, information that the child then adopts into their self-description (Colwell, 2003).

With Adults. Research suggest that children who are more emotionally secure with their teachers are also more competent both in their relationships with peers and in general (Howes, Phillipson, & Peisher-Feinberg, 2000). Emotionally secure preschoolers may "check in" with the teacher or seek instrumental assistance when they need help. In contrast, dependent preschoolers frequently seek attention and contact with the teacher, often waiting for help without trying to solve problems on their own (Howes, 1994).

Other research (Wood & Attfield, 2005) suggest that an adult's interactions should support and respond to children's needs and potential, support children's skills as players and learners, enrich the content of their play, support their own ideas and provide additional ideas and stimuli, enable children to elaborate and develop their own themes, be responsive to the level of play development, and remain sensitive to the ideas that children are trying to express (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

Research by Kontos (1999) examined several questions relating to teachers' talk, roles, and activity settings are related. The participants were 20 Head Start teachers and 20 assistants in Head Start programs with 15-18 four year olds. This study found that three-quarters of teachers' verbalizations fell into four categories. The majority of teachers spend their time in 2 settings: constructive play and manipulatives. Teachers were found to adjust their roles depending on their role and activity. Facilitators were more engaged in the play enhancer/playmate role. Play managers were more often engaged in stage manager role. The amounts that teachers talk to children are an indicator to how stimulating an environment is for children. Higher quality play results when teachers match their play styles to children's play choices (Kontos, 1999).

Research by Colwell (2003) examined connections between teacher-child interactions and children's perceptions of elf and peers. The author studied forty-seven predominately white, middle-class preschoolers at their preschool. Empirical evidence suggests that the quality of teacher-child relationships predict children's late adjustment to school. Children's spend time interacting with teachers, as well as children's cooperative behavior, emotional expressions, and aggression towards teachers were observed and interview was done to assess their self-perceptions and perceptions of peers. The results showed that positive teacher-child interaction might promote more positive attitudes about the classroom generally and translate the positive attitudes toward peers. Research suggests that gender plays a role in teacher-child interactions (Colwell, 2003).

Children's interactions with the materials, peers, and adults in their classroom environment influence their development. These interactions play a positive role in their development when planned for appropriately and thoughtfully by the teacher. Positive classroom interactions help children to perform better academically and develop the ability to focus and display attention. Therefore teachers must plan whole group instruction thoughtfully and consider the materials and the experiences that will be provided for the children.

Teacher Directed Whole Group Instruction

NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 1987) suggests that teachers create a caring community of learners for optimal learning experiences to exist. Teachers can build a sense of community by guiding children through group experiences. This can be accomplished by the actions teachers take to make each child feel valued by engaging in conversation with them, acknowledging their responses and ideas, and showing affection. Teachers must also value the development that exists when children work and play collaboratively, such as generating a group list of questions following a story or when organizing a study starter. Whole group instruction is one type of opportunity where teachers can foster a sense of community. During whole group instruction teachers must plan various hands-on learning experiences with materials and people that children find meaning in and can relate to their life. By providing these meaningful experiences, children are more easily engaged and more likely to find interest in learning, and teachers can incorporate goals and assess learning standards. During whole group instruction teachers must help children to engage in conversations about the events and work-taking place within their environment. Teacher's can do this by encouraging children to express their ideas and share about their work as well as providing insightful feedback relevant to the children's ideas. In order to maximize group instruction, teachers must observe and assess children's work and use these assessments in planning other whole group meetings. Teachers encourage children to reflect and revisit their experiences during whole group instruction. Teachers plan extension activities that provide a hands-on component that flows from their whole group discussions. As teacher model and coach children during whole group instruction they are providing children with the opportunity to construct knowledge socially and also develop/practice social skills (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

According to leaders, in the field of early childhood education, suggest that children learn through play (e.g., Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002). However, sometimes when children play, their

play may not lead to meaningful learning experiences; therefore, teachers must provide direct teaching occasionally to teach specific concepts or standards. Teachers use direct teaching to provide children with a model of how to use certain materials and/or to teach children certain rules for the environment, especially when new materials are provided for them. There are several concepts that require direct teaching to learn, for example the alphabet. Also teachers must use direct teaching to assist children in reaching the next level in their knowledge repertoire (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).

Teachers can provide direct teaching in a variety of ways: whole group, small group, and individual. When used appropriately, whole group instruction can be very effective when teaching and can be used at various times of the day. Whole group instruction builds a sense of community among the classroom. The Creative Curriculum recommends allowing children to listen to stories, take part in music and movement experiences, or to learn about new materials and adaptation to the environment. When successful, children experience the benefits of being part of a group, are motivated to play with new materials, and learn concepts, which they are incapable of discovering on their own (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).

The High Scope Educational Research Foundation refers to whole-group instruction as *circle time* (i.e., every time you meet in a group it should be in a circle). According to High Scope, during circle time children are given the opportunity to be a part of a group by demonstrating their ideas, learning to be leaders and also learning to be followers. Teachers are able to introduce *key experiences* that build on other experiences and assess children's ability to participate in social settings (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).

The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) refers to whole group instruction as large group meetings. The ECERS evaluates early childhood environments in order to improve their quality. The rating scale suggests that in an early childhood classrooms there must be a scheduled large group meeting, daily. However, there are specific criteria, which the ECERS suggests in order to

be successful. The ECERS suggest that the meetings be relatively short. The ECERS suggest that the children must display an interest in working together and that the topic of the meetings should relate to the current theme or topic of interest. The ECERS define whole group, as all the children involved must be required to do the same thing. The ECERS provide one benefit for children from whole group instruction. This benefit is that children experience cooperating with one another and learn to control their own needs. Children only benefit from whole group instruction if the time period is short and based on the individual needs of children. The teacher serves as an observer while leading whole group instruction. The teacher must observe how children respond and whether they begin to display lack of interest. The ECERS suggests that teachers participate in *educational interaction*. This means the teacher must have conversations with the children including questions, providing information, and/or introducing new materials. While the teacher engages in conversation, he might also read, play, or guide children through a topic (Cryer, Harms, & Riley, 2003).

According to Vygotsky, interactive situations allow children to stretch and grow mentally; growing and learning does not necessarily happen naturally. Children not only learn by doing but also by talking, working with friends, and persisting at task until they “get it”. Learning and development are similar but not identical. The combination of instructing the child and honoring the child’s individual development optimizes learning (Mooney, 2000).

In early childhood classroom developing a strong sense of community is important for children’s development. Children gain a sense of belonging by interacting in whole group instruction. Teachers can provide meaningful experiences that foster social development as well as provide children with opportunities to gain knowledge. Teachers can follow guidelines from the Creative Curriculum, High Scope, and the ECERS to implement appropriate whole group instruction.

Summary

Preschool children gain knowledge when they display attention. Children need to display attention in order to learn. Children gain knowledge from their interactions with their environment, peers, and adults. Adults provide opportunities for children to engage with materials, their peers, and their teacher by providing whole group instruction. Whole group must follow recommended practice in order to foster children's development during this time. Teachers provide appropriate whole group instruction when following recommended practice guidelines from the Creative Curriculum, High Scope, and ECERS.

CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This study included two distinct phases of data collection. Phase One consisted of normative data on recommended practice for whole group instruction and child task engagement during whole group instruction; the purpose being to establish baseline levels of the characteristics of whole group instruction in preschool in comparison with recommended practices identified in the literature. Phase Two identified classrooms from the normative data where low-levels of child task engagement were observed. These three classrooms were targeted for intervention using the recommended practices identified in the literature as the catalyst for change. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained (Appendix A) and informed consent was given by all participants (Appendix B).

Phase One: Normative Data

Setting and Participants. The setting for the normative data was forty preschool classrooms in the south. All preschool classrooms were full-day programs that met five-days per week. Each classroom was evaluated yearly by the state department using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R, Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2007) and was organized into the following interest areas: art, blocks, computers, dramatic play, library, manipulatives, music, science, and writing. Each classroom had a scheduled time for whole-group instruction.

The participants were the lead teachers and the children enrolled in the preschool classrooms. Normative data was used to describe characteristics of the preschool whole group instruction; specifically child task engagement (see below), adherence to recommended practice in whole group instruction (see below), and duration of the whole-group instruction (see Table 1).

Table 1. Percentage of Child Task Engagement, Percentage of Adherence with Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction, and Duration in Minutes of Whole Group Instruction.

Classroom	% Child Task Engagement	% Adherence with Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction	Duration in minutes
1	90	93	26
2	88	53	8
3	75	60	12
4	85	67	17
5	67	73	14
6	80	53	34
7	83	60	34
8	87	53	33
9	100	73	18
10	79	67	54
11	63	46	20
12	88	60	17
13	100	66	37
14	95	40	20
15	85	80	34
16	100	100	20
17	90	66	12
18	85	86	20
19	79	40	10
20	95	93	26
21	97	80	12
22	98	93	17
23	74	53	25
24	82	73	20
25	90	87	13
26	100	87	26
27	70	67	16
28	90	67	13
29	89	87	18
30	76	53	26
31	81	73	21
32	89	73	19
33	58	27	18
34	80	67	30
35	65	47	31
36	88	67	21
37	87	60	18
38	75	53	37
39	91	60	20
40	87	73	24

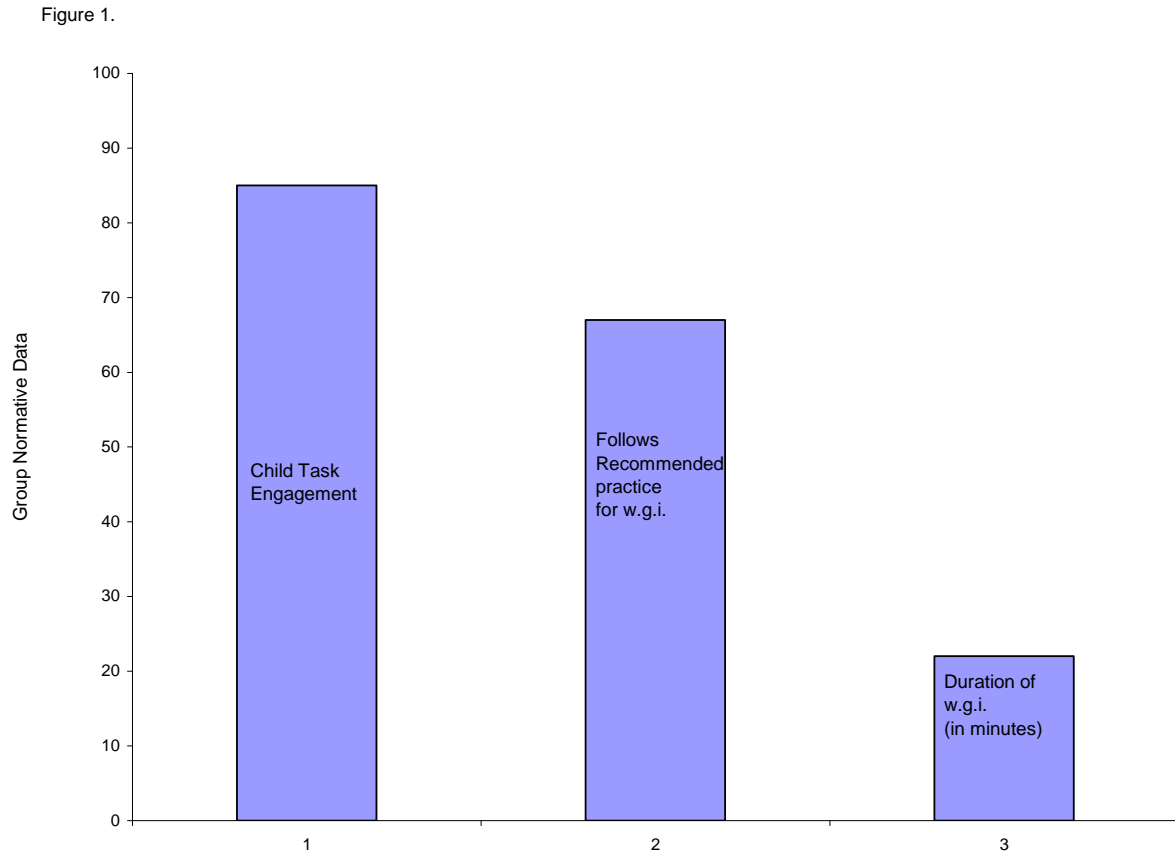


Figure 1. Group Normative Data of Child Task Engagement, Recommended Practice, and Duration of Whole Group Instruction

Normative data revealed that the duration of whole group instruction for the observed classrooms averaged 22 minutes (see Figure 1).

Child Task Engagement Behavior Definitions. The definition of task engagement varied based on teacher direction and included the following: sitting in assigned area/remaining seated or leaning back on arms and hands (yet still attending to the area of focus); hands on lap or in close proximity (not touching others or fidgety); responding to teacher when a choral response is required or when called upon; looking at teacher (or peer) or object during instruction; interacting with a prop that is part of instruction; and/or walking or moving back to designated seat after participating/sharing in front of the whole group.

Observation Procedure for Child Task Engagement . Momentary time sample was used to measure child task engagement. The observers included master's level M.S. teacher, a graduate student in Early Childhood Education, an undergraduate student, and the primary researcher. Observers were trained through written notes and practice observation sessions until eighty percent reliability was reached.

The data were recorded using a Momentary Time Sampling Child Task Engagement Data Sheet (See Appendix C). Momentary time sample is a method of assessment that records the presence or absence of a behavior at the end of a specified time interval (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). Momentary time sample is simple to use and does not interfere with other activities occurring and can be used to observe individuals or groups (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 1987). In this study, child task engagement behavior was recorded for each child at the end of a 1-minute interval. A child was counted as displaying *task engagement* if at the end of the interval he met the above-mentioned definitions. The observers tallied the number of children meeting the definition of task engagement at the end of each 1-minute interval. Percentages were generated to communicate how many children were participating on a minute-by-minute basis, which were then averaged to generate a percentage of child task engagement for the entire whole group activity. On average, normative data revealed that children exhibit task engagement during whole group instruction in preschool 85% of the observation sessions (see Figure 1).

Whole Group Instruction Recommended Practices Checklist. Based on a review of the literature, a checklist was developed to assess the number of recommended practices criteria teachers implement during whole group instruction in preschool. Recommendations included the following: Time frame is a flexible period of time (5-20 minutes depending on the age, interests, and abilities of the group) (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Teacher uses materials & models using materials (such as books, puppets, manipulatives) appropriately for children (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); All children

have materials to use (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Teachers asks open-ended questions (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Teachers acknowledge child communication (not saying “be quiet” or equivalent). Children talk to each other relating to group topic (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Skills related to multiple objectives are addressed during this activity. [Observers asked teachers for a lesson plan] (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Accommodations are made for children who choose not to participate in large-group activities (allow children to look @ books or choose another quiet activity) [ask teacher if not observed] (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979); Engages children in interactive experiences (songs, finger-plays, discussion, sharing) during group. Children have back and forth dialogue with teacher as a group (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979); Teacher demonstrates affection & caring by smiling, verbal praise, or pat on shoulder (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Teacher starts with children who are ready and acknowledges children who are doing the right thing (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002); Teacher relates circle time to things children have been doing (remember when we...) (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979); There is enough space for everyone to move & sit down together (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979); One adult leads, the other supervises children to participate (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).

Observation Procedure for Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction. Observers studied the recommended practice in whole group instruction checklist prior to entering the classroom. After scoring the measure of child task engagement for the duration of whole group instruction, the observer completed the checklist. The data were recorded on the Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction Checklist (see Appendix D). The results of the normative data on the whole group instruction recommended practices checklist indicated that the observed teachers used 67% of the items on the checklist (see Figure 1).

Interobserver Agreement for Normative Data. Interobserver agreement is the assessment of data consistency from different observers (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). Literature suggests that

reliability assessments be performed throughout each phase of the study on at least 20% of forty observation periods with interobserver agreement of 80% or greater (Kazdin, 1982; Cooper, Heron & Howard, et. al, 2007). Reliability was collected on 33% (13 of the 40 observations) of all observation sessions during the normative data collection. Reliability was calculated using the formula of dividing the smaller number by the larger number (Kazdin, 1982). Reliability for child task engagement was 98% (range, 93-100); reliability for recommended practice in whole group instruction was 95% (range, 75-100).

Phase Two: Targeted Classrooms

Setting and Participants. The settings for the targeted classrooms were three preschool classrooms. Each of the three classrooms were selected based on their performance as compared to the normative data in Phase One. These three classrooms had the highest amount of children exhibiting low levels of task engagement and low number of recommended practice for whole group instruction. Classroom One served 24 children. The classroom staff included a lead teacher and an aid. The Classroom Two served 17 children. The classroom staff included a lead teacher and an aid. The Classroom Three served 18 children. The classroom staff included a lead teacher, an aid, a special education teacher, and a student teacher. Each classroom was evaluated yearly by the state department using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised (ECERS-R, Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2007) and was organized into the following interest areas: art, blocks, computers, dramatic play, library, manipulatives, music, science, and writing. Each classroom had a scheduled time for whole-group instruction.

The participants were the lead teachers and the children enrolled in each of the preschool classrooms. Baseline data was used to describe characteristics of the preschool whole group instruction; specifically child task engagement (see below), adherence to recommended practice in

whole group instruction (see below), and duration of the whole-group instruction.

Behavior Definitions and Observation System

The behavior definitions and observation system were identical to those described in Phase One. The data was recorded on a Momentary Time Sampling Task Engagement Record sheet and a Recommended Practice Checklist (See Appendices C & D).

Experimental Conditions

Baseline. Each classroom was observed during the regularly-scheduled whole group instruction time. No instructions were given to any of the observed teachers. Observers sat in an unobtrusive location where they did not distract children from participating in the whole group activity. Each of the targeted classrooms had been previously identified as having low-levels of child task engagement during *Phase One: Normative data*; the purpose of collecting baseline data was to identify an intervention to increase child task engagement. Each classroom was observed until a stable pattern of child task engagement was observed. Length of baseline observations varied across the three teachers (between 5 and 7 observations).

Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction Intervention. Baseline data was used to create a matrix for each teacher to identify which recommended practices she was observed using during the baseline observation session. Each teacher was given the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention, which described the recommendations on criteria that should be addressed prior to whole group instruction, and criteria that should be met during whole group instruction (see Appendix E). Criteria that the teacher was either not observed engaging in or minimally observed engaged in were asterisked, and the researcher spent more time reviewing these criteria with each teacher.

Experimental Design

Single-subject methodology was used to record both the child task engagement behaviors of children in each of the targeted classrooms and the teacher's use of the recommended practices in whole group instruction. Single-subject research designs can be used to examine the behaviors of children before and during intervention. In single-subject designs, individuals are compared to themselves instead of to other groups (Alberto & Troutman, 2006). Single-subject designs rely on clinical significance rather than statistical significance. The results of a study are said to have clinical significance if the intervention results in enhanced functioning, which is defined as an observable and measurable improvement in functioning for participants (Alberto & Troutman, 2006). In this study, average child task engagement prior to and following the recommended practices in whole group instruction intervention was implemented.

Interobserver Agreement for Targeted Classrooms. Interobserver agreement is the assessment of data consistency from different observers (Kazdin, 1982). Literature suggests that reliability assessments be performed for both baseline and the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention phases of the study on at least 20% of 33 observation sessions with interobserver agreement of 80% or greater (Kazdin, 1982; Cooper, Heron & Howard, et. al, 2007). Reliability was collected on 24% (8 of the 33 observations) of all observation sessions. Reliability was calculated using the formula of dividing the smaller number by the larger number (Kazdin, 1982). Reliability for child task engagement was 97% (range, 91-100); reliability for recommended practice in whole group instruction was 99% (range, 92-100).

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

This study examined the effect of implementing a recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention to examine its impact on child task engagement. Specifically, the study examined the percentage of adherence with recommended practice in whole group instruction for preschool-aged children and concurrently the percentage of children displaying task engagement prior to and during the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention. Results indicated that when each of the teachers increased their adherence to the recommended practice in whole group instruction, children's task engagement was observed to increase. Results are presented for each teacher across both baseline and recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention (see Figure 2). During baseline for Classroom One, child task engagement averaged 71%, and recommended practice in whole group instruction averaged 49% of observed sessions. When the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented, child task engagement increased to 93% (a 22% increase); and recommended practice in whole group instruction increased to 85% (a 36% increase). During baseline, the average duration of whole group instruction was 17 minutes; when the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented the duration of the whole group activity decreased to an average of 14 minutes.

During baseline for Classroom Two, child task engagement averaged 70%, and recommended practice in whole group instruction averaged 68%. When the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented, child task engagement increased to 94% (a 24% increase); and recommended practice in whole group instruction increased to 98% (a 30% increase). During baseline, the average duration of whole group instruction was 21 minutes; when the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented the duration of the whole group activity decreased to an average of 17 minutes.

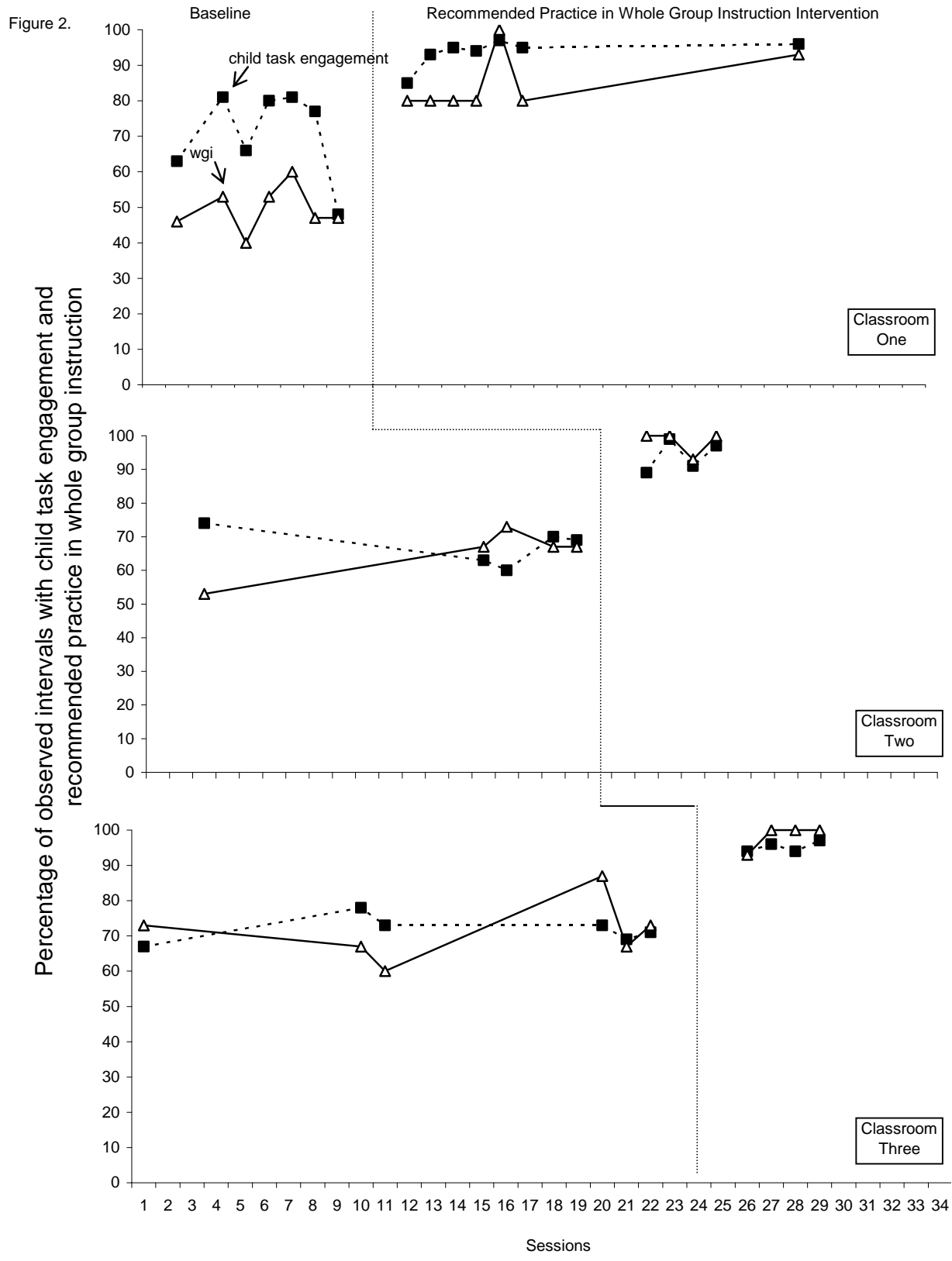


Figure 2. Results of Baseline and Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction Intervention

During baseline for Classroom Three, child task engagement averaged 73%, and recommended practice in whole group instruction increased to 68%. When the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented, child task engagement increased to 95% (a 22% increase); and recommended practice increased to 98% (a 30% increase). During baseline, the average duration of whole group instruction was 26 minutes; when the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was implemented the duration of the whole group activity decreased to an average of 22 minutes.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

Whole group instruction is an integral part of most early childhood preschool programs. During whole group instruction teachers provide learning opportunities which require child task engagement in order for children to benefit. Some children have difficulty with task engagement in general, but particularly in teacher-led activities. Teachers can shape child task engagement by providing reinforcement for task engagement. When teachers provide materials that the child finds reinforcing, the opportunity for increased task engagement increases. When teachers verbally praise children, the children are reinforced for task engagement behavior. Results of the present study indicate that the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention, which was derived through an extensive review of the literature, was effective in increasing child task engagement for all 3 classrooms relative to baseline.

In Classroom One, the teacher was observed implementing a low percentage of adherence to the recommended practice in whole group instruction during the baseline observation sessions. This can be attributed to 4 of the 15 criteria identified through the use of the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention. The 4 criteria are as follows: 1) lack of materials provided for children during whole group instruction, 2) lack of relating the topic to previous topics, 3) insufficient space for children, and 4) lack of stated rules and expectations, supported with pictures. During the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention, the teacher in Classroom One met the 4 criteria with 100% accuracy. This increase was correspondent to an increase in child task engagement; that is, the more recommended practices used by the teacher corresponded to an increase in child task engagement during whole group. Although she did not meet all 15 of the recommended criteria during the intervention (she averaged 85%), the changes she made were sufficient to increase child task engagement by 22%.

In Classroom Two, the teacher was observed implementing a low percentage of adherence to the recommended practice in whole group instruction during the baseline observation sessions. This can be attributed to 3 of the 15 criteria identified through the use of the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention. The 3 criteria are as follows: 1) lack of materials provided for children during whole group instruction, 2) making accommodations for children who do not wish to participate in whole group instruction, and 3) lack of stated rules and expectations, supported with pictures. Although the teacher in Classroom Two did not meet 100% of the criteria, she averaged 98% during the intervention.

In Classroom Three, the teacher was observed implementing a low percentage of adherence to recommended practice in whole group instruction during the baseline observation sessions. This can be attributed to 3 of the 15 criteria identified through the use of the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention. The 3 criteria are as follows: 1) time frame is a flexible period of time (5-20 minutes depending on the age, interests, and abilities of the group), 2) making accommodations for children who do not wish to participate in whole group instruction, and 3) lack of stated rules and expectations, supported with pictures. Although the teacher in Classroom Three did not meet 100% of the criteria, she averaged 98% during the intervention.

Increases in child task engagement corresponded to increases in adherence to recommended practice in whole group instruction for all three classrooms relative to baseline. Child task engagement was 92% or above when 80% or more of the recommended practices in whole group instruction were implemented. This demonstrates that the fifteen criteria of recommended practice are valid in early childhood practice. However, it is noteworthy that the normative data did not show a direct correspondence between percentage of adherence with recommended practices in whole group instruction and child task engagement; meaning that some classrooms were observed to have high levels of child task engagement (over 80%) but low levels of adherence to the recommended practices

in whole group instruction checklist (less than 80%) (see Table 1). This would seem to indicate that all criteria on the recommended practices in whole group instruction checklist were not equally weighted (some criteria were obviously more important than others). Additionally, 40% (16 of the 40 classrooms) of the observed classrooms were over the recommended flexible time period (duration of over 20 minutes); however, 69% (11 of the 16 classrooms) of these classrooms had over 80% child task engagement during their whole group instruction.

Limitations

Although the results indicate that the recommended practice in whole group instruction intervention was effective in increasing child task engagement, because of the limited sample size, results cannot be generalized to persons other than those included in the study. In Classroom One there was the possibility of experimenter expectation; that is the children may not have been naïve to the purpose of the study. Upon leaving one of the child told the researcher, ‘thank you for helping us pay attention’.

Clinical Implications

Although all 3 of the classrooms targeted for intervention demonstrated low-levels of adherence with the recommended practices in whole group instruction checklist during baseline, once the intervention was introduced, each teacher exhibited stability in her adherence with these recommended criteria. This suggests that once teachers became aware of recommended practice in whole group instruction, they were able to make changes to their instructional methods consistently, which produced a change in child task engagement during this activity. This is significant because the intervention was relatively simplistic; the researcher merely shared the checklist with each of the teachers.

Future Research

Further research should focus on obtaining social validation to determine if the criteria used in the recommended practices in whole group instruction are exhaustive and representative of recommended instructional practice for preschool-aged children. Statistical analyses of the criteria are needed to determine which criteria are more heavily weighted and likely to produce the greatest impact on child task engagement. Also, future research should look at the effects of ending whole group instruction earlier to determine if a shorter duration increases levels of task engagement. When looking at the criteria of time, it is evident that time is not equally weighted with the other criteria. Nor are the rest of the criteria equally weighted. For example, one whole group observation lasted for 45 minutes and the teacher maintained a 79% level of task engagement. This example suggests reason for future research on the weight of the criteria in the whole group instruction recommended practice checklist.

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APPENDIX A: LSU INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPLICATION

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research projects using living humans as subjects, or samples or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.



Institutional Review Board
 Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 Baton Rouge, LA 70803
 P: 225.578.8692
 F: 225.578.6792
 irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

- > Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at [http://appl003.lsu.edu/osp/osp.nsf/\\$Content/Humans+Subject+Committee?OpenDocument](http://appl003.lsu.edu/osp/osp.nsf/$Content/Humans+Subject+Committee?OpenDocument)
- > A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
 - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of parts B thru E.
 - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1 & 2)
 - (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
 - If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
 - (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
 - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB.
 - Training link: (<http://cme.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learning/humanparticipant-protections.asp>.)

1) Principal Investigator: Mauree Elizabeth Harris Rank: M.S. Student

Dept.: Human Ecology Ph: 985-237-0459 E-mail: mharr21@mac.com

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank and e-mail for each if student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space
Dr. Cynthia DiCarlo, Human Ecology, Ph.D Professor, CDiCarlo@agcenter.lsu.edu

3) Project Title: Recommended Practice in Preschool Instruction: Increasing Child Attention During Whole Group

4) LSU Proposal?(yes or no) No If Yes, LSU Proposal Number _____
 Also, if YES, either This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant OR More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology Students) Preschool Students & Teachers
 •Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Mauree Harris ** Date 11-14-07 (no per signatures)
 "I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changed I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office."

Effective August 1, 2007, all Exemptions will expire three years from date of approval, unless a continuation report, found on our website, is filed prior to expiration date

Study Exempted By: Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
 Institutional Review Board
 Louisiana State University
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
 Exemption Expires: 11-14-10

IRB# 2045 LSU Proposal# _____
 Complete Application
 Human Subjects Training

Screening Committee Action: Exempted Not Exempted _____ Category/Paragraph _____
 Reviewer Michael Keener Signature Michael Keener Date 11-15-07

APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

1. Include the following statement:

'The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews>

Chairman, LSU Institutional Review Board> (225)578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researchers' obligation to provide me with a copy of this consent form signed by me. '

Parent Signature

Date

2. Illiterate subjects: When ANY subjects are likely to be illiterate, the "reader statement" and signature line below are included.

'The study subject has indicated to me that he/she is unable to read. I certify that I have read this consent form to the subject and explained that by completing the signature line above, the subject has agreed to participate.'

Signature of Reader

Date

3. Child Assent:

A researcher will read the following statement:

"Someone will watch you in the classroom to see how you play and talk with your friends and you teachers. Is it okay if we watch how you play and talk to your friends and teacher in the classroom?"

Subject Signature: _____

Date:

Students may write their name, mark an X, or give verbal assent.

Student gives verbal assent Study Exempted By;

Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman Student does not give verbal assent Institutional Review Board
Louisiana State University 2038-1 David Boyd Hall

'225.578-8692 I www.lsu.edu/irb Exemption Expires: 11-14-2011

APPENDIX C: MOMENTARY TIME SAMPLING CHILD TASK ENGAGEMENT DATA SHEET

Date: _____

Observer: _____

School: _____

Teacher: _____

Children Present: _____

Children w/ Identified Disability: _____

Time Started: _____

Time Ended: _____

Whole Group Instruction Lasted more than 60 Minutes? ___Yes ___No

*The definition of task engagement varies based on teacher direction and includes the following when appropriate:

- ❖ **Sitting in assigned area/remaining seated or leans back on arms & hands (yet still attending to the area of focus)**
- ❖ **Hands on lap or in close proximity (not touching others or fidgety)**
- ❖ **Responding to teacher when a choral response is required or when called upon**
- ❖ **Looking at teacher (or peer) or object during instruction**
- ❖ **Interacting with a prop that is part of instruction**
- ❖ **Walking or moving back to designated seat after participating/sharing in front of the whole group.**

**# of Children Displaying Task
engagement**

Minute of Whole Group Instruction

1	
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APPENDIX D: RECOMMENDED PRACTICE IN WHOLE GROUP INSTRUCTION CHECKLIST

Recommended Practice in Whole Group Instruction Checklist

- Time frame is a flexible period of time (5-20 minutes depending on the age, interests, and abilities of the group) (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Teacher uses & models using materials (such as _____, _____,) appropriately for children (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- All children have materials to use (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Teachers ask open-ended questions (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Teachers acknowledge child communication (not saying “be quiet” or equivalent). Children talk to each other relate to group topic (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Skills related to multiple objectives are addressed during this activity (ask for lesson plan) (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Accommodations are made for children who choose not to participate in large-group activities (allow children to look @ books or choose another quiet activity) [ask teacher if not observed] (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).
- Engages children in interactive experiences (songs, finger-plays, discussion, sharing) during group. Children have back and forth dialogue with teacher as a group (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).
- Teacher demonstrates affection & caring by smiling, verbal praise, or pat on shoulder (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Start with children who are ready. Acknowledge children who are doing the right thing (Dodge, Colker, & Heroman, 2002).
- Relate circle time to things children have been doing (remember when we...) (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).

- There is enough space for everyone to move & sit down together (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).
- Each child knows limits and expectations for circle time (teacher states expectations) (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).
- Rules prior to whole group activity and/or has rules posted with pictures (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).
- One adult leads, the other supervises children to participate (Hohmann, Banet, & Weikart, 1979).

*The above criteria are suggested practices from:

Dodge, D.T., Colker, L.J., & Heroman, C. (2002). *The creative curriculum for preschool (4th ed.)*

Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc.

Hohmann, M., Banet, B., & Weikart, D.P. (1979). *Young children in action*. Ypsilanti, MI: The

High/Scope Press.

APPENDIX E: RECOMMENDED PRACTICE IN WHOLE GROUP INSTRUCTION INTERVENTION

Intervention:

Prior to wgi:

- Post the rules for wgi in the wg area. (which include accommodations for children who choose not to participate in large-group activities (allow children to look @ books or choose another quiet activity))
- Teacher either has carpet squares for each child or their name is affixed to the rug.
- Teacher targets GLEs from more than one domain during wgi (ask for documentation)
- Teacher has materials prepared and at wg area prior to calling children
- review with para: One adult leads, one supervises others to participate (not working on other things away from the group).

During wgi:

- Begin wg by reviewing the rules
- Teacher relates new info to previous info ('remember when...')
- Teacher begins with children who are there
- Teacher smiles at children who are attending
- Teacher has props that are modeled and given to children
- Teacher asks open-ended questions and acknowledges responses, back & forth dialogue with children.
- Time frame does not exceed 20 minutes

VITA

Mauree Elizabeth Harris is a native of Lafayette, Louisiana. She graduated from Saint Thomas More Catholic High School in 2001. She received her Bachelor of Science in human ecology with a concentration in family, child, and consumer sciences: nursery school/kindergarten teaching from Louisiana State University in 2005. She taught pre-kindergarten in Mandeville, Louisiana, at Cedarwood School in 2005-2006. She received her Master of Science in family, child, and consumer sciences: early childhood education.

As a graduate student, Mauree worked on the Baton Rouge Family & Teens Research Project. Mauree also worked in the Louisiana State University Child Development Laboratory Preschool where she taught three and four year children. She also presented at the National Association for the Education of Young Children conference twice and at state and local conferences. She also conducted trainings for child care providers and continues to do so today.