Integrating and implementing literacy in a toddler classroom

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Integrating and implementing literacy in a toddler classroom

Abstract
This Project examined the topic of literacy in a toddler classroom. Research on toddler language, reading, writing, and parent involvement with literacy was discussed. The Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale and Iowa Early Learning Standards were used to rate a toddler classroom in regard to literacy activities. Guidelines were presented for establishing quality literacy activities for toddler children. Conclusions were drawn from the literature and the classroom project for the future of literacy development for toddlers.
This project by: Emily Knutson
Titled: Integrating and Implementing Literacy into a Toddler Classroom

Has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

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Date Approved

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

As a teacher of toddlers, I try to create a classroom that provides the best learning environment for my children. Literacy is an area that is sometimes overlooked by educators and caregivers who work with toddlers, either in center daycare settings, or in home daycare settings. Some parents are unaware of the extensive benefits of reading to very young children. I plan to create a model toddler classroom that provides a literacy rich environment for young children. I want college students who major in early childhood education and other toddler teachers to use my classroom as a model literacy program. In developing this quality program, it is important to remember the developmental expectations of toddlers. Makin and Whitehead (2004) reminded us of toddlers' developmental expectations when they wrote:

The period from 18 months to 3 years is one of rapid development - physically, cognitively and emotionally. By the age of 2 years, children's brains weigh 75 per cent of what they will weigh as adults. This physical growth reflects changes in the structure and functions of the brain, which have important implications for children's early literacy learning. (p. 29)

The children in my classroom range in age from 18-30 months. I want to use this valuable time of brain development effectively, especially in terms of literacy development.

I plan to use the Iowa Early Learning Standards (IELS) (2006) created by the Iowa Department of Education and the Iowa Department of Human Services, as well as the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) (2006) by Harms, Cryer, and Clifford to
assess my classroom in terms of literacy implementation. I will also look at the appropriate literature to see what practices are beneficial to literacy development for toddlers.

*Project Description*

This project will take place in the Totters Classroom at the University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center (UNI CDC). As I indicated, I will review the IELS to see if my classroom meets all of the qualifications for communication, language, and literacy. This is area four in the 2006 Iowa Early Learning Standards book. Area four includes benchmarks for language understanding and use, early literacy, and early writing. I will also look at the Listening and Talking section of the ITERS book to see if the Totters Room meets all of the criteria that the ITERS identifies as important in quality literacy implementation. A critical component of creating a literacy rich classroom is parent involvement. I plan to implement a schedule where parents can come to read to their children in the classroom, as well as have a backpack that parents can take home, providing books and information about reading to use when talking with toddler children about books and other literacy materials.

*Rationale*

Many people who work with toddlers do not spend enough time implementing literacy activities. Even though young children cannot talk, or talk well, it does not mean that they cannot understand or learn from talking, reading, or writing. According to Rosenkoetter and Knapp-Philo (2006), “Receptive language skills are often more advanced than expressive language capabilities (i.e., speaking or producing language)” (p. 36). According to an observational study by Honig and Shin (2001), reading to young children in group care was seldom done. If teachers did read to toddlers, it only lasted about one minute. To improve this situation, I designed this
project to identify the type and quality of literacy learning experiences for helping toddlers in my classroom. I believe that children in my classroom will benefit from this project; I also believe that it will help me become more intentional as a facilitator of literacy skills for toddlers, for I will specifically focus on toddler reading, language, and writing development.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this project is to create a model toddler classroom using *literacy integration*. The UNI CDC serves as a laboratory for early childhood education majors. Students come here to observe children and teachers, as well as develop and implement lessons for young children. Teachers from other child care centers and schools also visit the UNI CDC to learn new ideas for their own classrooms. It is important for my classroom to be the best that it can be to provide a good example for other teachers and students.

Parent involvement is a critical component of high quality early childhood education programs. According to Dodici, Draper, and Peterson (2003), “It appears that the quality of parent-child interaction, even at very early ages, is related to early literacy skills” (p. 132). Many parents believe that it is the job of the teacher or childcare provider to provide literacy rich experiences for their children. This is true; however, it is equally important for parents to support development of a good foundation for children's literacy development. The results of a study by Dodici, Draper, and Peterson (2003) stated that, “Parent-infant/toddler interaction are related to the early literacy skills of receptive vocabulary, symbolic representation and phonemic analysis” (p. 132).
Importance

I believe that the implementation of literacy experiences in toddler classrooms is lacking because many toddler teachers do not understand how to provide literacy rich opportunities for the children with whom they work. Sometimes people who work with toddlers try to use literacy activities that are developmentally inappropriate and are meant for older children. I have seen evidence of these misconceptions when early childhood education majors come into my classroom to do lessons with toddlers. They frequently expect toddlers to sit in a large group and listen to books, and then ask the children specific questions related to what they read. Many times books are too long, and the field experience students get frustrated when children are distracted or walk away. Perhaps these students have not been exposed to developmentally appropriate literacy activities for toddlers because there are not many classrooms that provide appropriate examples. In this regard, Hall (1987) stated:

Children create their literacy where: literacy is a meaningful event for them; where they see people participating in literacy for real purposes and with enjoyment, where people are prepared to discuss their literacy activities, where there are opportunities for children to participate in literacy; where child-initiated literacy behaviour is welcomed by adults; and where children’s literate efforts are treated seriously. (p. 73)

It is my goal to create a classroom in which literacy activities are age appropriate and meaningful for children. I want other teachers and students to learn from my example and to improve literacy in their own classrooms, childcare centers, or homes.
Terminology

For the purposes of clarity and understanding in this project, the following terms will be defined accordingly:

*Developmentally Appropriate Activities/Practices*: Experiences that provide for each child’s social, emotional, intellectual and physical development that are age and individually appropriate. Cultural appropriateness is also a factor.

*Emerging Literacy*: Young children’s reading and writing development (Teale & Sulzby, 1986).

*Intentionality*: Done deliberately or on purpose (Stein, 1982).

*Literacy Integration*: Making literacy part of the everyday activities and routines with toddler children.

*Phonotactic Cues*: Early in development, infants become sensitive to the probability that certain sounds will occur both in general and in specific positions of syllables and words (Pence & Justice, 2008).

*Semantic Development*: An individual’s learning and storage of the meaning of words (Pence & Justice, 2008).

*Vocabulary Spurt*: An increase in the rate of word learning (Ganger & Brent, 2004).
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

I selected this research topic because I read about the lack of literacy activities for toddlers in center childcare and at-home childcare settings. I was also astonished to visit other childcare centers where books were not available to the children or even read to children on a daily basis. I decided that I would like to create a classroom that provides the best environment for literacy enhancement.

Procedures

Within this chapter I describe the procedures that create a model classroom. My first step was to identify best practices and assess my classroom to determine if it is a place where quality literacy activities are available. I decided to follow the ITERS and the Iowa Early Learning Standards guidelines for literacy in a toddler classroom. These two tools were used to assess my classroom because they are widely used and respected.

I believe that educating children involves collaboration between a teacher or childcare provider and parents. Many parents might not know if reading to very young children is appropriate, or maybe they never even thought about reading to their child before. I decided that educating parents about what they can do to improve their child’s literacy skills was an important component in improving their literacy skills in all areas of their everyday life. Parents need to be aware of literacy development, and to find out what their children are capable of learning. To make sure that I was taking the correct steps with parents, and to make sure that I was making my classroom a literacy rich environment, I consulted the relevant literature.
Review of Literature

The literature reviewed for this project included the following topics: toddler language, reading with toddlers, writing with toddlers, and parent literacy interactions with toddlers.

Toddler Language Development

"From the time a human voice is heard, the abilities for listening, and later cooing, babbling, and the production of other vocal sounds are developing" (Lawhon & Cobb, 2002, p.114). It is important for caregivers and parents to talk to their children often in order to enhance these skills. Many times parents and teachers get caught up in what they are doing and do not realize that talking to infants and toddlers is an important part of language development. Rosenkoetter and Knapp-Philo (2006) observed the following: "Infants and toddlers learn a considerable amount of language in a short amount of time. For instance, by age 3, most children know at least one thousand words" (p. 36). Some people think that because children do not speak, they do not understand what we are saying. "Infants and toddlers typically understand more language than they can produce themselves" (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2005, p. 36).

Language development occurs when children play. In this regard David et al. (2000) stated the following:

Engaging in play and language interactions may not be the only way children can become adept at using symbols, but it is probably the most meaningful for children. In their play, young children actually demonstrate their ability to manipulate symbols. They will build a boat or a stage with large blocks, treat a visiting adult to tea, speak into a toy telephone, cradle a doll as a baby. Drawing on their experiences their ability to create new ideas and new situations is endless. This ability to symbolise in their play provides a foundation for
I believe that creating meaning is an integral part of language development. According to Pence and Justice (2008), “When children encounter a new word, they must develop an internal representation of the word that includes its phonological form (the specific sounds in it and their order), its grammatical role (e.g. verb, pronoun, noun), and its conceptual meaning” (p. 74).

Toddlers need adults and other children to provide the vocabulary for their literacy experiences. This is how children improve their semantic development. “Semantic development refers to an individual’s learning and storage of the meaning of words” (Pence & Justice, 2008, p. 73).

I will encourage adults to speak to children without interrupting or taking over their play. Roskos and Neuman (1993) conducted a qualitative study that examined adults’ literacy assisting behaviors, roles, and role-taking during spontaneous play. They observed that many teachers were reluctant to intervene in children’s play by speaking to them. Roskos and Neuman (1993) found that day-care teachers facilitated literacy in play by building on what children are doing without imposing formal instruction techniques, for those adults who do not wish to interrupt toddlers’ play by asking questions, they can just observe play. Simply by watching children play, adults can help children get deeper into their play, which enhances literacy development.

Vukelich, Christie, and Enz (2002) found that by watching children in their play, teachers demonstrated their interest in the children’s play, and they considered play a valuable, worthwhile activity. By observing teachers, Vukelich, Christie, and Enz (2002) also identified when more direct forms of teacher involvement in play were appropriate. Through observing, teachers can understand children’s interests and create activities that can expand children’s vocabulary.
Another reason that it is important for adults to speak to toddlers during this stage in their development is because children usually speak their first words between eight and 14 months of age (Ganger & Brent, 2004). Some researchers have stated that children undergo a vocabulary spurt in the second year of life. In a longitudinal study, Ganger and Brent (2004) looked at thirty-five children who were twins, to see if this was true. The children’s words were tracked by asking parents to keep journals of their twins’ language use. Ganger and Brent (2004) compared the rate of new word acquisition versus cumulative vocabulary to get their results. At the end of the study only 20 children could be considered, and of these 20 children, four or five showed evidence of a spurt. This research does not show conclusive evidence that all children undergo a vocabulary spurt, but for toddlers who do experience a spurt, teachers need to provide the best possible language models. One way to build language development, as well as literacy, in toddlers is through reading to them.

**Reading Development**

As I mentioned earlier, I have witnessed childcare centers where children are not given access to books, or even read to on a daily basis. Soundy (1997) wrote that one of the reasons that infant and toddler caregivers do not read to children is because the adults tend to be heavily involved in routine caregiving activities. Honig and Shin (2001) did an observational study where they observed 55 infants in childcare centers. Of the 55 infants observed, 35 were read to and 20 were not read to even though they were awake and available for reading. I do not think that just because a caregiver has to do routine caregiving activities it is a good excuse to not read to children, especially when there are clear benefits to reading to children, no matter what age
good is to have warm and interactive book times where the toddlers are allowed to turn pages and point to pictures.

The types of books in a classroom are also important. Books in a toddler classroom should be durable and made of cardboard (Dwyer & Neuman, 2008). Zeece and Churchhill (2001) stated: “First books should be durable: touchable, bendable, and even lickable! Such books should be made of nontoxic, heavy laminated cardboard, vinyl, or cloth” (p. 102). Print should be visible to children in the environment as well. Vukelich, Christie, and Enz (2002) observed that: “…because environmental print is so meaningful and easy to read, it should be available in all preschool and kindergarten classrooms” (p. 122). Vukelich, Christie, and Enz (2002) also said that environmental print is often the first type of print that young children can recognize and understand.

The books available for toddlers to read should be meaningful to them as well. “Books entertain toddlers because of their relationship to everyday events. Images that reflect a child’s immediate environment and stories that translate daily routines into written words are critically important in introducing children to decontextualized language” (Rosenquest, 2002, p. 242). Otto (2006) encouraged the use of familiar books to allow children the opportunity to revisit the story through looking at pictures and remembering what was read. She also recommended having multiple copies of the same book (p. 142). In a meta-analysis by Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995), they found that book reading is as strong a predictor of reading achievement as is phonemic awareness (p. 17). Sulzby (1985) did a developmental study on children’s emergent reading of favorite storybooks. She found that prior to formal instruction, important development
is going on (p. 479). Reading to toddlers is a must.

Writing Development

Educators know that speaking and reading to toddlers is important. Is writing just as important for a toddler’s literacy development? Research with toddlers in the area is limited. Recently Rowe (2008) conducted an ethnographic study of two-year-olds’ and adults’ interactions at a preschool writing table. The children in this study observed adult writing, initiated their own graphic activities, and co-authored with adults. Eighteen children ranging in age from 23 to 27 months participated in this study. Rowe set up a writing center in the classroom and added more opportunities for children to read with adults at the classroom book center. Rowe surveyed the children’s parents and found that in general parents did not expect or ask their children to write linguistic messages other than their names. At the beginning of the study, all children made marks of some kind when asked to write their names, but none independently initiated writing linguistic messages. By the end of the study, all of the children made marks they read as their names, and 14 of the 18 children had, at least once, assigned other linguistic messages to their marks as they wrote with adults at the writing center. Rowe’s study indicated that writing is beneficial for toddlers. Rowe (2008) added that, “...teachers and I believed that writing activities, like the rest of the curriculum, should encourage children to actively engage with materials and to learn through play” (p. 398).

Writing materials should be available for toddlers to explore. Teachers also play an important role in writing development. Rowe (2008) found that when only children were present, they typically engaged in parallel play with some talking, but mostly the children would just observe each other’s work. When adults were present at table time, talk was more likely to
occur. In this case adults initiated conversations, which helped children talk about their work and compose their texts.

I think it is important for teachers and caregivers to understand that we need to let children manipulate materials in the way that they choose, which might not necessarily be the way the teacher wants them to respond. The Iowa Early Learning Standards (2006) urged that teachers should individualize strategies to encourage the use of tools by all children. The word encourage tells teachers that they should not force children to use materials, but make the experiences fun for the children so that they will want to explore them. Since not all of the children will be interested in the same items at the same times, teachers should try a variety of different strategies and materials to get all of the children involved.

As always, children are more willing to be involved with writing activities if they are meaningful to them. Morrow and Rand (1991) did a study on the effects of manipulating the environment on literacy behaviors. They found the following:

Modifications in the physical design of a classroom can have an important impact on young children’s literacy behaviors. The dramatic play area seems to be a place in which children will engage in literacy activities when it includes literacy materials. (p. 400)

This research makes teachers and caregivers think about their classroom and how it is set up. Writing materials and books can be included in the block center, dramatic play area, or anywhere that children might use them. Morrow and Rand based their findings on 4-6 year-olds; however, I believe that information can be beneficial and useful for toddler teachers as well.

Some of the guidelines that Morrow and Rand (1991) created for stimulating literacy during play
are the following:

1. Reading and writing materials which are incorporated into children's thematic play activities are likely to generate functional and practical emerging literacy behaviors.

2. Materials should be kept in clearly marked and defined containers, so that they are accessible and easily put away.

3. Teachers should suggest uses for materials, model literacy behaviors, and change materials periodically to keep the interest level high.

4. All levels of development should be accepted, and reading or writing attempts should be recognized as legitimate literacy behaviors. (p. 401)

Toddlers might not be able to create books or write lists, however they are able to use pictures in books to create a structure or situation. For example, in my toddler classroom we are doing a *Wild, Wild, West* theme. Several of the books in the room are cowboy themed, and many of the centers are cowboy based. There is also a saddle on a bale of hay that the children can ride. I have noticed that children bring the cowboy books over to the saddle and read while they are sitting on it. They also bring a songbook that I created about cowboys to sing to them while they ride. Toddlers also look at books about certain animals, and then look for the toy version of the animal in the animal container. Perhaps if I put books directly in the centers it would create a better experience for the children.

Writing is a skill that should be practiced by toddlers. Otto (2006) wrote, "It is important to remember that children's early writing is exploratory in nature. They are exploring how writing is made and how it has meaning" (p. 143). Makin and Whitehead (2004) stated that, "Children's early scribbles are the first steps to writing. Respond positively - show interest in
their scribbles, share them with others, display them” (p. 40). If teachers and caregivers are interested and excited about writing, toddlers will be excited about it as well.

**Parent Interactions**

We know from research that teachers and caregivers can impact a child’s literacy skills, but what role do the parents play? Makin and Whitehead (2004) suggested the following tip for parents and teachers to enhance literacy development: “Build positive partnerships between families and educators. This helps optimise the support given to children’s early literacy” (p. 39). Parlakian (2004) observed the following: “For babies and toddlers, all learning happens within a relationship. The social-emotional context of a child’s most important relationships—parents, family members, and infant-family professionals—directly affects young children’s motivation to learn to read and write” (p. 39).

Dodici, Draper, and Peterson (2003) conducted a longitudinal study to see the relationship between parent-child interactions and early literacy skills for 27 families living in low-income households. In this study parent-child interactions in *simulated* daily experiences were videotaped when the children were 14, 24, and 36 months old. They rated the tapes with the Parent-Infant/Toddler Interaction Coding System (PICS) by Dodici and Draper (2001). The PICS scale rated child language, parent language, emotional tone, joint attention, parental guidance, and parental reponsivity. Dodici, Draper and Peterson (2001) found that parent-infant/toddler interactions are related to the early literacy skills of receptive vocabulary, symbolic representation, and phonemic analysis. Their study supported the idea that early parent-child interactions improve later literacy development.

Frosch, Cox, and Goldman (2001) conducted a similar study relating to infant-parent
attachment and toddler behavior during storybook interactions. Their study examined 131 lower-middle to middle-class families. At ages 12 and 15 months, infant-mother and infant-father dyads were videotaped. At 24 months, dyads visited the laboratory and were videotaped during storybook interaction. They discovered that attachment security with mother during infancy was meaningfully related to affective and stimulation qualities of mother-toddler storybook interaction. The research by Frosch, Cox, and Goldman proved that parent interactions, even in the very early years, provide the framework for literacy development later in life. Parents, teachers, and caregivers must work together to give children the tools they need for literacy development.

While doing research I discovered a resource called *Shining Stars Toddlers Get Ready to Read* by the National Institute for Literacy (2006) (see Appendix). This resource tells parents how they can help their toddlers get ready to read. This pamphlet provided questions for parents to ask their children while they read together. There is also a checklist of steps that parents can take to help their children get ready to read. I included this resource in my classroom project.
CHAPTER THREE

The Integrating Literacy into a Toddler Classroom Project

While reviewing the Iowa Early Learning Standards (Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Department of Human Services, 2006) and the ITERS (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006) I realized that my classroom could improve in literacy implementation. My classroom included a writing center and a reading center; however, I felt that both of these areas could be improved to create more meaningful experiences in regards to literacy connections for children in my classroom. My plan was to improve language interactions, reading experiences, writing experiences, and parent involvement with literacy activities for the toddlers that I teach.

Through my observations of other childcare centers I found that literacy activities were lacking in other classrooms as well. I once visited a classroom for children 18-30 months. The books for the children to read were located high on a shelf, out of reach of the children. I entered this classroom with a pen and a notebook to take notes on my observations. Several of the children came over to me and grabbed my pen and wrote on my notebook. I then said, “Wow, your friends must really like to write!” The lead teacher in the room told me that they didn’t let kids write because they just put the writing utensils in their mouths and got all messy. I was surprised by this comment, considering that the children in the room were able to write on my notebook without getting themselves messy or putting the pen in their mouths. After this visit and four others I realized that there is a need for a model classroom in terms of literacy integration for children in toddler classrooms.

Many teachers from other childcare centers visit my classroom to learn ideas about toddler activities to take back to their own classrooms. Students from the University of Northern Iowa
also visit my classroom to observe children and me as we interact. These students are sometimes required to create lessons for the toddlers as well. As future early childhood educators, they are using my classroom as a guide for their future classrooms and interactions with children. It is important for my classroom to be the best possible model for them as they develop their conceptions about emerging literacy development.

For this project I first compared my classroom to the ITERS guidelines and the Iowa Early Learning Standards to language interactions in my classroom. Next, I assessed reading experiences in my classroom following the same scales. I then checked to see how my room rated in terms of writing development according to the ITERS guidelines and Iowa Early Learning Standards. I then focused on how I could improve parents’ involvement with their children in terms of literacy. Finally, I discussed how I will show new students and other visitors how literacy activities are implemented in my classroom.

**Literacy Assessment of My Toddler Classroom**

**Language Interactions**

To evaluate language interactions in my classroom I compared my classroom to the Iowa Early Learning Standards and the ITERS guidelines to determine if improvements needed to be implemented according to these tools. In Area 4.1 Language Understanding and Use in the Communication, Language, and the Literacy section of the Iowa Early Learning Standards the benchmarks for infants and toddlers are the following:

The infant or toddler:

1. responds to the vocalizations and communications of familiar caregivers.
2. uses vocalizations and gestures to gain attention from others.
3. increases both listening and speaking vocabulary.

The toddler also:

4. uses simple sentences to communicate.

5. participates in conversations (Iowa Department of Human Services, 2006, p. 35).

In order to meet these benchmarks caregivers interact in a certain way and say certain things.

According to the Iowa Early Learning Standards:

With infants and toddlers, caregivers:

* describe each child’s activities.

* repeat and expand each child’s vocalizations.

* support attention-getting strategies to gain interaction as needed with each child.

* take turns exchanging vocalizations with each child using his/her home language.

* make eye contact with each child while speaking or listening, whenever possible, and with respect for cultural needs, hearing impairment, or developmental delay.

* individualize strategies to facilitate communication with each child (Iowa Department of Human Services, 2006, p. 36).

When I compared these strategies to my classroom, I found some areas that needed to be improved. To address describing each child’s activities, I did try to interact with each child on a daily basis by asking them questions about what they were doing, as well as describing what I was doing at diaper changes, getting ready to go outside, or at mealtimes. I noticed that I sometimes needed to remind other adults in the classroom to have meaningful interactions with children while performing routine tasks. I demonstrated appropriate interactions at a room meeting with other professionals in my room about how to converse with children. This was done
to ensure that adults in my classroom speak to children at diaper changes, meals times, and while children are playing. By interacting with children while engaged in routine tasks I made sure that I was *taking turns exchanging vocalizations* with each child, which is also a guideline.

Another way that I encouraged language in my classroom was to have questions posted on the wall for field experience students and student staff to ask children while they played with them. I also shared with field experience students that they can describe what the children are doing if they do not know what to say. This descriptive strategy usually helps college students to be more comfortable talking with children, and it also improves teacher-child interactions. By making adults more comfortable in the classroom, they are encouraged to meet the guideline of *making eye contact with each child while speaking or listening to them.*

Having adults at the children's level while they are playing also helps meet the guidelines about *repeating and expanding upon each child's vocalizations* and *supporting attention getting strategies* to gain interaction with each child. If adults are actively engaged in what children are doing, they are able to listen to what children are saying through both their verbalizations and actions, and can build upon the child's vocabulary. According to Snow, Tabors, and Dickinson (2001), "There seems to be a consensus that the environments of young children should be language-rich with lots of words used during interesting conversations, and should be enriched by stories and explanations" (p. 5). I believe in providing questions and having adults in the room available to provide words to the actions of children to create a language rich environment.

My classroom this year does not have any children with severe developmental delays; however, children do learn to speak and communicate at different rates. To meet the guideline
about individualizing strategies to facilitate communication with each child I taught student staff members sign language for popular words in the room. Many of the children in my room use the signs for *more* and *all done*. I have provided information on this topic at a room meeting, and posted pictures of words with their signs to encourage adults in the room to use signs with the children who want to use them, and to encourage children who don’t speak to communicate through signing.

The emphasis that the Iowa Early Learning Standards places on *having meaningful language experiences* with each child helped me to be aware of my experiences with children. I found that I was having meaningful interactions with them during routine tasks, but I needed to make sure that each child was given the same experiences while they were playing. I assigned each student staff member to a child to make sure that each child had someone focused on observing and interacting with him or her. I also made myself aware of my interactions with the children by placing a mark on their daily sheets if I spent time interacting with them while they played. Sometimes it was not possible for me to interact with each child everyday, so I developed a system to start with that child the next day. Otto (2006) wrote about the rapid increase of language when she stated:

> Toddlers begin to use language in two- or three-word utterances for a variety of purposes and are beginning a period of rapid growth in all aspects of language and knowledge. Thus, toddlers need a curriculum that provides opportunities to explore and interact verbally as well as nonverbally within their environment in a range of activities. The learning environment of infant and toddler settings is critical. It is important to consider all aspects of the environment- the physical environment, the cognitive environment, and
The classroom environment also plays a role in language development. To rate my classroom I turned to the ITERS by Harms, Cryer, and Clifford (2006). The ITERS scale rates the environment with a scale that goes from 1, which is considered inadequate to 7, which is considered excellent. For my classroom, I was interested in achieving the excellent rating. Two sections of the ITERS book applied to language development in my classroom. They were the Helping Children Understand Language section and the Helping Children Use Language section.

To receive a 7 rating in the Helping Children Understand Language section the following requirements had to be met:

7.1 Staff use a wide range of simple, exact words in communicating with children (Ex. Name many different objects and actions; use descriptive words).

7.2 Staff take part in verbal play with children (Ex. repeat infant’s sounds; rhyme words in a playful way).

7.3 Staff talk about many different topics with the children (Ex. talk about feelings; express child’s intentions with words in addition to naming objects and actions) (p. 30).

As I compared these requirements to my classroom, I felt that we should receive a 7 rating on this scale. Of course there is always room for improvement. In regard to standard 7.1 I observed that adults in my classroom use the names of objects, actions, and use descriptive words as I described in the previous section. In regard to standard 7.2, I felt that language was used in my classroom in a playful way through songs and finger plays. Children were exposed to rhymes such as, The Name Game and Five Little Monkeys on a daily basis. In regard to standard 7.3 the
adults in the classroom worked hard to give children words to describe how they are feeling during conflict situations. For example when a child was bitten an adult said, “I am sorry that you got bit, that hurts, can you tell your friend to stop because that hurts.” We also encouraged children to use words if they wanted a toy from a friend rather than simply taking it. Adults in the room would model the words, “May I please use that toy when you are finished with it?” By modeling language while interacting with children during routine tasks and their play activities, I believe that my classroom met the excellent criteria for the Helping Children Understand Language section of the ITERS scale.

To receive a 7 rating in the Helping Children Use Language Section of the ITERS book the following requirements had to be met.

7.1 Staff have many turn-taking conversations with children (Ex. repeat what toddler says and then let toddler take another turn talking).

7.2 Staff add more words and ideas to what children say (Ex. When child says “juice” staff respond with “Here is your orange juice. It’s in your cup.”).

7.3 Staff ask children simple questions (Ex. “What’s in this picture?”; wait for toddlers to answer before giving an answer).

7.4 Staff usually maintain a good balance between listening and talking (Ex. give child time to process information and answer; talk more for babies and give toddlers more time to talk themselves) (p. 32).

After observing my classroom I believe that it would receive a seven rating in this section as well. I observed adults in the room meeting standards 7.1 and 7.2 while at breakfast. Adults ask children about their day and expand upon what they are saying. For example, one of the children
said, “I have doughnut.” The teacher said, “Did you have a doughnut at home before you came to school?” The child nodded. The teacher then said, “You must be hungry to eat some cereal at school too.” The child said, “Yes.” This conversation demonstrates the requirements for standard 7.3. I believe that meeting standard 7.4 can be difficult for some adults because it is sometimes difficult to wait for young children to give an answer. I have been conscious of this concept while interacting with toddler students in my room after reviewing these standards. Before completing this project I would have received a 5 on the ITERS scale, however, now that I am more aware of allowing a longer wait time for toddlers I would increase my score to a 6 or 7.

Reading Experiences

To see if my classroom provided quality reading interactions with children I consulted section 4.2 Early Literacy in the Communication, Language, and Literacy section of the Iowa Early Learning Standards (2006). The benchmarks in this category include the following:

The infant or toddler:

1. explores or shows interest in books by picking them up, mouthing them, carrying them, or going through pages.

2. focuses on a book or the reader when hearing stories read.

3. points to or gazes at pictures in books.

4. responds to or engages in rhymes with the caregiver.

The toddler also:

5. points to pictures or names items in books on request.

6. labels or talks about objects, events, or people in books.

7. enjoys and repeats in rhymes (Iowa Department of Human Services, p. 37).
According to the Iowa Early Learning Standards caregivers can take steps to meet these standards. They are:

With infants and toddlers, caregivers:

* talk with each child during routine activities, such as diapering and mealtime.
* read books daily to each child.
* respond to each child’s interest in a book, talking about pictures and actions
* provide a variety of books, including both fiction and non-fiction books, and textures for each child to explore.
* provide opportunities each day for each child to participate in finger-plays, rhymes, and songs, including those in sign language, the home language, or representing the home culture (p. 38).

After reviewing the actions that caregivers can take to facilitate reading development by toddlers I examined my classroom for evidence of the required actions. As I described earlier, I believe that adults in my classroom do a good job of talking with children each day. I also know that each child is read to at least once a day because it is part of our naptime routine. As I observed adults reading in my classroom I found that they also asked children questions about what they were reading. My classroom includes both fiction and non-fiction books, as well as books that have different textures in them. Finger-plays, rhymes, and songs are sung daily as children wait for lunch to be prepared, or while they are looking at books that interest them. I do believe that my classroom was lacking in including songs that incorporated sign language, or songs that represented the home culture. In order to remedy this problem I found a book of songs that included sign language. I included Way Up High in the Apple Tree, which is a rhyme that has
signs that go along with it, into the daily routine. I plan to include more sign language, and songs representing a child’s home culture as situations arise.

I then evaluated my classroom using the ITERS standards in the area of Using Books. Again, I was interested in achieving the excellent level of recognition by receiving a 7 on the scale. According to the ITERS scale the following requirements must be met.

7.1 Book area set up for toddlers to use independently.

7.2 Staff are involved in using books with children periodically throughout the day.

7.3 Books are added or changed to maintain interest (Harms, Cryer, & Colby, 2006, p. 34).

As I looked at my classroom I found that the bookshelf is easily accessible to all children. Pillows and beanbag chairs provide comfortable spots where the children can sit and read. A rocking chair is also available for adults to sit and read with children. Staff was involved using books periodically throughout the day while reading at free play time when children brought them books to read, at naptime, and by initiating reading with children. Extra books are added and changed monthly to help the children maintain interest. I rated my classroom excellent in regard to using books with toddlers. Several centers would receive minimal or inadequate ratings because they do not have books available to children because they might ruin them. In my classroom we have several board books available to each child. Adults model and teach children to be gentle with books, but they do get torn and ripped after time. I still believe that it is necessary for toddlers to have access to books. I am glad that the ITERS scale and the Iowa Early Learning Standards confirm my belief.
Writing Experiences

After my experiences visiting other childcare centers in which staff believed that writing was too messy for toddlers, I became interested in what the Iowa Early Learning Standards and ITERS book had to say. I first consulted area 4.3 Early Writing in the Communication, Language, and Literacy section of the Iowa Early Learning Standards book. The benchmarks in this category are as follows:

The infant or toddler:
1. grasps a variety of objects for eating and play in his/her environment, with and without handles, such as blocks, spoons, markers, etc.

The toddler also:
2. uses a variety of writing tools or other manipulative objects (such as markers, bristle blocks, stringing beads, pegboards, pencils, crayons, paint brush, spoon, etc.).
3. scribbles spontaneously.

To help children meet these benchmarks the Iowa Early Learning Standards provides suggestions for interacting with children. These suggestions include:

With toddlers, caregivers:
* provide each child with daily access to writing tools, such as crayons or markers, and paper on horizontal and vertical surfaces.
* provide opportunities for each child to observe the caregiver’s own writing.
* encourage each child to explore ways to practice scribbling or early drawing (for example, by breaking down the skill, adding prompts, or providing more repetition). (p. 40)
After reading these suggestions I realized that my classroom was lacking in experiences and tools in the early writing category. Children were exposed to writing tools daily on horizontal surfaces; however, they had not been given opportunities in writing on vertical surfaces. To fix this problem I attached a large sheet of paper to a window for the children to write on. This was quite a popular activity for the first couple of days! In my classroom children observe adults writing with them at the writing center, but now I am more conscious of this activity. I intentionally write in front of children, purposefully describing what I am writing, and children were previously encouraged to scribble or draw. This was before I read the Iowa Early Learning Standards, but now I have provided more materials and areas for early drawing to occur.

The ITERS did not have a section specifically for writing; however, it did have a section entitled Fine Motor and Art, which I believe included items commonly found in a writing center, so I compared my room to these two categories. To receive a 7 rating in the Fine Motor category of the ITERS book the following should occur:

7.1 Materials rotated to provide variety.

7.2 Materials of different levels of difficulty accessible (Ex. Some challenging and some easy for all children in group, including those with disabilities) (p. 35).

Again I felt that my classroom needed more variety in terms of the writing center. I provided more materials such as colored pencils, stickers, stamps, more paper, different sizes of markers, and dot paints. I believe that by providing different materials more levels of difficulty will be addressed.

To receive a 7 rating in the Art category of the ITERS book the following guidelines should be met:
7.1 A variety of materials is introduced as children are ready (Ex. crayons and watercolor markers for the youngest children; paints, play dough, added for the older toddlers and twos).

7.2 Access to materials is based on children’s abilities (Ex. made available with close supervision for younger children; very simple materials, such as large crayons or large chalk accessible to 2-year-olds). (p. 38)

Many of the changes that I made to my classroom according to the Fine Motor section of the ITERS book also applied to the Art section. I found that by adding more materials and a greater variety of activities more children chose to visit the writing center, and stayed involved with writing for longer periods of time.

After consulting the ITERS and the Iowa Early Learning Standards I believe that all toddlers should be exposed to writing materials, even if they are messy. Teachers can model how materials are used to prevent excess messes, even though messiness is going to happen when toddlers write, particularly if nonpermanent markers or paints are being used. The experiences that children gain by being exposed to writing materials are too important to miss.

Parent Involvement

The Iowa Early Learning Standards and ITERS do not have sections involving parents with literacy activities with their children. However, after reading literature on the importance of parents reading to their children, I wanted to find a way to improve parent involvement with literacy activities in my classroom. Earlier this semester we had a Reading Week in which we asked parents to come into the room to read to children. We only had one parent come into the room to read. I decided that perhaps the parents of the children in my room needed more
information on the importance of encouraging and fostering literacy activities. I turned to the appropriate literature to decide what to do. In a meta-analysis by Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini (1995) they wrote:

The results of the current meta-analysis support the hypothesis that parent-preschooler book reading is related to outcome measures such as language growth, emergent literacy, and reading achievement. There are hardly any studies with negative effects, indicating that book reading has a positive effect on outcome measures. (p. 15)

I know that parent involvement is critical in a child’s literacy development, but I was curious concerning how I as a teacher could provide parents with knowledge about reading to children, and providing their children with meaningful conversations and writing opportunities. I decided that the best way to get the message across was to provide information and examples at parent-teacher conferences.

My first step was to consult the book *Beginning Literacy with Language* by Dickinson and Tabors (2001). This book discussed a study called the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, which told of the link between home and school. In this book Porche (2001) concluded:

Given the relationship between parent involvement and children’s language and literacy outcomes in this study, the most important aspect of any effort to facilitate parent involvement would seem to be to establish mechanisms for teachers to communicate clearly to parents about the sorts of activities that are most beneficial to children’s learning. (p. 311)
By providing parents information in face-to-face conferences I thought that I would have more of
an opportunity to get the information out than sending a pamphlet home or putting information in
a newsletter or e-mail. I believe that most of the children's parents in my classroom know that
reading to children is beneficial. By reading the chapter titled "Homes and Schools Together" by
Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson in the Beginning Literacy with Language book I realized that
simply having parents read to children is not enough. Tabors, Snow, and Dickinson (2001) wrote:

Our findings, however, show that it is not the frequency of book reading or even the quality
of the talk that accompanies book reading alone that is related to children's language and
literacy abilities in kindergarten. What we have found is a much broader pattern of parent-
child activities and interactions that support children's language and literacy development.
(p. 329)

This information is beneficial for parents. I discussed with parents at parent-teacher conferences
how providing their child with experiences provides them with opportunities to expand their
knowledge base and vocabulary. I also discussed and handed out the pamphlet Shining Stars
Toddlers Get Ready to Read by the National Institute for Literacy (2006). This pamphlet
discussed in simple terms steps that parents can take to help children become good readers. This
pamphlet includes a checklist with the following statements:

* I read with my child every day, even if it's only for a few minutes.

* I encourage my child to bring his favorite books to me so that we can read together.

* I point to pictures and name them out loud, and encourage my child to point to pictures
  while we read.
* I watch to see if my child sometimes makes eye contact with me when I read aloud. That tells me she is paying attention to me and the story.

* I talk with my child throughout the day about things we are doing and things that are happening around us.

* I try to be patient when my child wants to read the same book over and over again.

* I encourage my child to play with books—pick them up, flip them from front to back, and turn the pages.

* Sometimes I listen when my child pretends to read a book—he holds the book, goes from page to page, and says words, even though they’re not the words on the page.

* I give my child paper and crayons so she can scribble, make pictures, and pretend to write (National Institute for Literacy, 2006). (p. 5)

I felt that this checklist encourages parents to work on having conversations with their child, read with their children, and encourages having children write as well.

Another tool that I used is a literacy backpack that includes: books, paper, markers, and crayons. I also included a copy of Shining Stars Toddlers Get Ready to Read by the National Institute for Literacy (2006). I discussed this tool with parents and told them that they can check it out from the classroom for their children to use. Sometimes simply having new materials at home provides excitement about reading and writing. New books and materials also provide opportunities for parents to have new conversations with their children. Children also get excited about taking a backpack home with them. By providing materials and giving parents more information about literacy activities, they become more aware of the importance of their role in their child’s literacy development.
To help visitors who visit my classroom understand the importance of literacy, I will make sure that my books and writing materials are visible, plentiful, and available. I will also discuss with each visitor the importance of speaking to children to enhance their learning and language development. The questions posted on the wall are printed, and I can hand them out to visitors to take back to their classrooms or homes. I will also give them *Shining Stars Toddlers Get Ready to Read* from the National Institute for Literacy (2006) to use as a resource for parents, or to read themselves to become more familiar with reading resources for infants and toddlers. I believe that these resources are also helpful to college students as well. By sharing resources and ideas with other toddler teachers and college students, literacy experiences will be enhanced for more children. Hopefully, visitors that come to my classroom will learn to create literacy rich environments for the children that they work with as well.
CHAPTER 4
Conclusions and Recommendations

The intent of this project was to integrate and implement literacy experiences into a toddler classroom. In order to do this I researched the following four topics to see what was appropriate and beneficial for toddlers: (1) Toddler language, (2) Reading with toddlers, (3) Writing with toddlers, and (4) Parent interactions with toddlers. I then rated my own classroom using the ITERS and the Iowa Early Learning Standards.

I wanted to do this project to improve literacy experiences in my own classroom. Early childhood students from the University of Northern Iowa, and other toddler teachers visit my classroom to learn more about toddlers and gain ideas about curriculum. Literacy is a topic that is often overlooked in toddler classrooms. Through my research I found out what experiences children need to have beneficial literacy experiences. Also, I found that children do need to have meaningful conversations, even if they are unable to speak clearly themselves. They also need to be read to by parents and caregivers. Writing materials must be available for toddler children to use. Literacy development takes place at home and in childcare settings, so teachers and parents must work together to provide children with the best possible literacy experiences.

As I rated my classroom using the ITERS and the Iowa Early Learning Standards I found many areas in which my classroom excelled. I also found areas that needed improvement. I believe that the area that needed the most improvement in my classroom was the writing center. I added vertical writing spaces and more writing materials to my writing center as part of this project. I also took more time to talk with children about what they were writing, as well as what I was writing while at the writing center. Parent involvement with their children’s literacy was also
an area that I thought needed improvement in my classroom. To get parents more involved with literacy I spoke with them about it at parent teacher conferences. I also sent home *Shining Stars Toddlers Get Ready to Read* from the National Institute for Literacy (2006), which gives parents tips on reading and speaking to children. A backpack with book and writing materials was also created for the children to take home with them to help promote reading and writing activities in their homes.

Researchers know that literacy experiences in the early years help children when they reach older grades. I recommend that all people that work with toddlers provide them with rich meaningful literacy experiences. Toddler teachers should provide a variety of books that children can reach by themselves. They should also read to children daily. Toddler teachers should speak to children while doing routine tasks, as well as when reading books and writing with children. Writing materials should be plentiful and available for children to use at all times. If toddler teachers integrate literacy, future literacy experiences will be enhanced.
References


Appendix

Shining Stars Toddlers Get Ready to Read
Shining Stars
TODDLERS
GET READY TO READ

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP THEIR TODDLERS GET READY TO READ
HOW TO USE THIS BOOKLET
You are your child's first and most important teacher. This booklet gives you ideas on how to help your young child get ready to read.

• Read the story Jack's First Book on PAGES 1-3. Watch for ways the parent in the story helps her child get ready to read. You might want to look at the checklist on the back page first for ideas.

• The page from the alphabet book on PAGE 4 suggests some questions and activities you can use to help your children learn more about stories, and how letters look and sound.

• The ideas in this booklet can be used with other books when you read with your child.

• The CHECKLIST on the back page can remind you of ways to make reading time more fun and interesting. You might post it on the refrigerator or use it as a bookmark.
I remember the day Jack came home. I held him tight every step of the way! A baby feels so fragile when you carry him out of the hospital. Jack depended on me for everything. I knew someday that would change. In fact, Jack turns three years old today and he has grown up so much already. But in those early days, I had to figure out a lot on my own.

For example, after the baby wakes up from his nap, and you feed him and change his diaper—what do you do then? They don’t tell you about that in the hospital! I played peek-a-boo with him, said funny words and sounds, and counted his fingers and toes. But was that enough? I asked my sister, who teaches first grade. She said “babies learn by playing,” which meant I was doing the right things to help Jack learn about the world around him and the sounds of language.

When Jack was a few months old, my sister gave him a beautiful alphabet book. “Sandra,” she said, “let’s read with Jack this afternoon.” I thought she was crazy. Jack was more likely to chew on the book than read it! But I sat him on my lap and held the book open. He slapped and grabbed at the pages, ripping some of them. I kept reading even though it felt silly. At first I read the words exactly the way they were written, but when I put more enthusiasm into reading aloud and used special voices, Jack liked it more. I’m a shy person, so it felt strange at first roaring like a lion on the “L” page or crowing like a rooster on the “R” page.
I started getting tired of reading the same books every day and almost gave away the alphabet book. But when Jack was about a year old, I noticed that he liked the book in new ways. When we got to the lion page, he was waiting for me to roar. He roared with me and shrieked with laughter! When I read the “J” page ("Jacob the jumpy Jaguar juggles the jagged jewels") Jack got quiet and looked carefully at the picture. I wondered if he was hearing the “J” sound from his name in all those words.

After dinner one night I gave Jack the alphabet book but he held it upside down. I thought of that before: there are “rules” for how you read a book! A book has a top and a bottom. We turn pages from right to left, and read words from the left side of the page to the right side. I thought kids just knew this, but we have to show them how a book works! We even have to show them the difference between a letter and a word, and between words and pictures!

One afternoon, when Jack was eleven months old, it was very special for me. I was talking to my sister on the phone about the huge shopping center in our little town. I said, “it’s so big,” and Jack said from his crib, “big although it sounded more like “beek!”

Before then, he would say sounds like “ma” when I said “ma,” but this was a real step. I told my sister I’d call her back, went over to Jack and said “big.”

“Beek,” he said again, giggling and smiling like the sun had just come out.

Jack and I had been communicating since he was born, but this felt like the first time we actually talked together. Jack watched my mouth when I said words and looked back and forth between my eyes and my lips. (I never knew I could be so entertaining!)

More and more, he would imitate me, say the same sounds, and laugh when I laughed. My sister said these were the “baby steps” to reading.

The “B” page in Jack’s alphabet book had the word “bananas,” and when we had bananas for breakfast I said “bananas” slowly to him so that he could hear all of the sounds in the word.
My sister says this is called “phonemic awareness,” or knowing the sounds of spoken language, but I just call it “fun with food.”

As Jack got older, he became a real chatterbox. My sister said, “Ask him a lot of questions. Encourage him to answer with more than one word.” Great advice—I asked him questions and encouraged him to answer in whole sentences. Then he started asking me the questions! I tried to be patient, which wasn’t always easy.

On one trip to the grocery store, when Jack was two, it was late and I was tired, and he kept asking questions. He picked up an avocado: “What’s this?” He pointed to a cereal box: “Mom, look!” He pointed to a stack of soda cans. I thought he was going to push them down and I started to get angry, but then I saw the look in his eyes: he was just curious. I decided right then that every question deserved an answer.

I can’t wait for Jack to open his birthday presents. He asked for a bulldozer, red sneakers, and some books. New books! What a relief! Not that I’m complaining. All of those hours of reading, talking, and playing with Jack helped him get used to how words and letters sound, and what words mean. My sister said that the more words he knows, the better reader he will be. The fact that he knows “bulldozer” and “rooster” and lots of other words makes me proud.

For his birthday, I’m giving Jack three books. One is about animals that live in the Amazon jungle. Another is about farm machines. The third is a brand new copy of his first alphabet book. The original is pretty torn up and dirty. We’ll keep that one, for sure, but I want him to have a nice copy to keep forever. Because that’s where it all started.

The End.
There's more to reading together than just saying the words. Try asking your toddler questions like these when you read together.

Point to the pictures
- Do you see the big bird? Point to the big bird.
  (Child points to Nichelle)
- Do you see the owls? Point to them.
  (Child points to them)
- How many are there?
  Three.
- I see two things that the animals are eating. Can you show me?
  (Child points to lollipop, milkshake)

Talk about the pictures
- How many animals are on this page?
  (Count with your child, with both of you using your fingers.)
  Seven (including the three owls)
- Does Max the Monkey have ears?
  Show me where they are.
- What is Max doing?
  Drinking a milkshake.
- What is Linus doing?
  Licking a lollipop.
- What flavor do you think it is?
  Lemon? Banana?
- What kind of animal is Linus?
  A leopard.
- Linus looks like a cat. What sound does a cat make?
  Meow.
- What do cats like to do?
  (Play, take naps in the sun, drink milk)
- Linus has spots. Can you show me his spots?

Some three-year-olds can begin learning letter sounds and names. Try these:
- Let's look at this big letter L. (Point to it and say the L sound.) "Linus" and "lollipop" begin with L. Let's think of other words that start with L?
  (Suggest some) Lunch, love, light, laugh.
- How about "lamp?" Does that begin with the L sound?
  Yes.
- Show me the four big letters and let's say their names. (Trace each letter with your fingers and say it. Do it a few times.)

Linus the leopard
likes large, lemon lollipops.

Max the monkey makes a messy marshmallow milkshake.

Nichelle the nightingale
nests in neat noodles.

Opal the octopus
organizes the owl orchestra.
I try to be patient when my child wants to read the same book over and over again.

I encourage my child to "play" with books—pick them up, flip them from front to back, and turn the pages.

Sometimes I listen when my child "pretends" to read a book—he holds the book, goes from page to page, and says words, even though they're not the words on the page.

I give my child paper and crayons so she can scribble, make pictures, and pretend to write.

This checklist is adapted from A Child Becomes a Reader—Birth Through Preschool. Get a free copy at www.nifl.gov.
Checklist
FOR PARENTS OF TODDLERS

Here are some ways you can help your child “get ready to read” during the ages of 2 and 3.

☐ I read with my child every day, even if it’s only for a few minutes.

☐ I encourage my child to bring his favorite books to me so that we can read together.

☐ I point to pictures and name them out loud, and encourage my child to point to pictures while we read.

☐ I watch to see if my child sometimes makes eye contact with me when I read aloud. That tells me she is paying attention to me and the story.

☐ I talk with my child throughout the day about things we are doing and things that are happening around us.

(over)