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MASTER'S THESIS

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A case study of preschool children in an English-speaking kindergarten in Norway.

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Abstract

This research has investigated literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years. The research was performed in the form of a case study in an English-speaking kindergarten in Norway. The study addressed three research questions: firstly, the kind of literacy- promoting activities that took place in the preschool classroom, secondly, the role and value these literacy- promoting activities played in the children's literacy development, and finally, how aware the teachers were about these literacy- promoting activities in pre-school years. The study reviewed and analysed the process and the product of the children's experiences during various activities with their teachers and peers in the classroom.

The data for the research was obtained through qualitative research methods, namely classroom observations and interviews with the two teachers. The data collection techniques used during the observations were audio-recording and written field notes. The study took place in one of the 3-4-year-old preschool classrooms, in which there were 16 children. The observation took place on 13 days during a six-week period. Unstructured observations were chosen to enable the researcher to choose from a wide range of activities and different reactions and behaviours from the young children in the pre-school classroom that were considered relevant for this research.

The findings of the study showed that a number of literacy-promoting activities took place in the target classroom. Examples of these were children manipulating toys, storybook reading, environmental print, worksheet activities, and oral interaction, such as pretend play and mealtime conversations. Storytime was found to especially have a positive impact on the children's literacy development. The children were able to learn new concepts, ideas, and vocabulary during these storytime interactions, which enhanced their knowledge and language skills. The storytime interaction process was shared, informal and natural, and the children found it very stimulating even if a story was being repeated. The study also showed that children's cognitive development was supported in pretend play. This enabled them to think in ways that may also build up reasoning and problem-solving skills. In addition, it was evident from the study that children's language and oral communication was being promoted during the pretend

play activities. Overall, oral interaction played a major role when embedded in the children's activities such as worksheet activities and mealtimes. Another important finding was that the the physical environment helped the children to interact regularly with books, which consequently increased their early literacy awareness and print experiences.

The thesis has contributed to the research on children's emergent literacy. It has explored in detail how literacy-promoting activities were part of the daily routines of the case study pre-school classroom. These activities could, in light of Vygotskian theory, have positive long-lasting effects on the pre-schoolers' later literacy skills and development. As far as the researcher is aware, no research of this kind has previously been carried out in an English-speaking pre-school in Norway.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Topic and aims

This thesis investigates literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years. The research is based on a case study of pre-school children between the ages of 3-4 years old in an English-speaking kindergarten in Norway. Literacy-promoting activities are those which allow children the opportunity to use and develop important language and cognitive skills that are related to early literacy growth and emergent literacy (Dickinson and Beals 1994). The thesis focuses on interactive networks, for example the children in small groups or pairs during free play sessions, story time, adult-child/child-child conversations, and various activities linked to the print environment.

The study aims to review and analyse the process and the product of the children's experiences during various activities with their teachers and peers to find out if and how the children benefited or advanced in relation to literacy development. It also aims to find out if the pre-school activities promoted and supported the children's' emergent literacy and literacy development. The study also aims to understand the value, quality and developmental roles of these pre-school activities and experiences among preschoolers.

The research is based on observations of the children in their natural pre-school environment in addition to conducting one-on-one interviews with the teachers of the target classroom. Throughout the observations, the children's conversations were audio-recorded at intervals, with notes taken to supplement them, and the teachers' interviews were also audio-recorded.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What kind of literacy-promoting activities take place in the pre-school classroom?
2. What is the role and value of these activities on literacy development in the pre-school classroom?
3. How aware are the teachers about the role these interactions and activities play in the development of literacy?

1.2 Research context

As Vygotsky (1978:85) points out, children's literacy and learning begins long before they start school. Any learning a child encounters in school always has a previous history in pre-school years. Barton (1994:131) argues that in a literate culture the preparations for literacy even begin at birth. This stage is known as 'emergent literacy', which continues through the pre-school years. Sulzby (1986:53) believes that the 'theory of emergent literacy must encompass the whole child… the child learns content in a social context and the affective part of learning is just as important as the content', thus asserting that social activities are essential in cognitive and literacy development. Mercer (2004:123) points out that the 'socio-cultural' interpretation of cognitive development shows children's emergent ability as the product and result of the combined thinking of past generations, which was thought to have been made possible for children through observing persons in their environment, oral interaction and collaborative activities. Barton (1994:159) makes his own case about the importance of this early experience of language and literacy, asserting that when children try to figure out themselves what kind of 'social practice' literacy is, it in turn develops their reasoning. In other words, it is this early 'awareness' that is developed later into life to different literacy skills. Barton further points out that the mind is 'socially constructed', drawing our attention to situations where children verbalize their thought processes or simply put, what goes on in their minds.

As Barton (1994: 133) emphasizes, oral interaction and social activity are a major part of literacy development in pre-school years. Barton (1994:133) further suggests that it is necessary not to regard learning as an 'individual' phenomenon because children learn by participating in interactions or activities in different contexts. This brings home the importance of oral interaction with peers and adults in relation to the events and situations involved. These literacy activities may include pretend play, story time, adult-child conversations, print knowledge or concepts about environmental print.

Firstly, pretend play, when children assume the role of e.g. adults during play activity, is one way children are able to interact. This kind of play has an important influence on a child's development of literacy-related oral language skills (Dickinson and Beals 1994). Moreover, pretend play is regarded as the most complex form of play because it allows young children to

use their imagination to replace the meaning of an activity and objects around them (Welsch 2008). Vygotsky (1978:102) affirms that play is not just a frequent or common characteristic of childhood, but a huge factor in literacy development. Play therefore creates a 'zone of proximal development' in the child (see section 2.2.2) because when a child is acting a role in play or pretending to be someone else, he/she will act above his average age or more than his normal way of life. Vygotsky (1978:102) claims that 'Play therefore contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development'. According to Zych et al. (2015), children's play is crucial for literacy development and should be promoted and given more attention in pre-school education.

Secondly, story time, i.e. adults reading story books to children, is important for literacy development (Barton, 1994). Barton (1994:148-149) argues that literacy is an essential part of everyday activities and further elaborates on the significance of these activities, which have a huge incidental role in development of literacy. Barton (1994) emphasizes that literacy is embedded in oral interaction during these literacy events. Storytime is clearly among those literacy practices surrounding the developing child's activities and the quality of interaction that takes place is important for the child's literacy development.

Thirdly, through adult-child conversations, children participate in activities and adults instruct them on how to behave through information and explanations (Mercer (2004:123). This research will also view data from oral interactions, such as discussions, questions, encouragements and explanations during different play sessions, activities, and conversations. When talking about these adult-child conversations, Mercer (2004:123) points out that children transform information they acquire from adults through oral interaction into their own new interpretation and understanding, thereby playing an active role by seeking and converting this interaction. Mercer (2004: 124) further notes that:

Young children's direct experience of the world usually takes place in social settings, and is often accompanied by talk about it. That is new experiences are likely to be mediated by language. What is more, conversation is one of the most important kinds of experience that children have. There is no reason to think that the information they

gain through it is any less significant than that obtained by other means (such as by seeing, touching, and so on).

Dickinson and Beals (1994:29) believe that teachers and parents support literacy development in a wide range of settings, some of which involve no print. This study aims to find out how these activities scaffold a child's literacy development. Vygotsky emphasizes this theory of 'scaffolding' and how children can modify or complete a task when assisted (Tharpe and Gallimore 1988). Tharpe and Gallimore (1988: 33) discuss how a child can be assisted and describe this 'assistance of performance' as scaffolding, which they refer to as 'behaviour shaping', where the child's role is directed by persons in the environment. Vygotsky's theory of learning has therefore become the central theoretical framework for studying 'adult–child' or 'child-child' interactions (Kucirkova et al. 2014) and will be the theoretical framework for the present study.

Finally, this study will investigate the influence of environmental print in the pre-school years. The learning context of young children and how the pre-schoolers respond to this physical environment in relation to literacy development will be observed. An expectation is that this physical environment of print or books can promote or affect children's skills, knowledge, and literacy development.

1.3 Methodology

This is a qualitative study. As Dörnyei (2007:125) posits:

> Qualitative research is by definition less systematic and standardized in its data collection approach than quantitative research and that messiness of the rich data that we are aiming for is often merely a reflection of the complex real-life situations that the data concerns.

The data has been gathered through a case study of a pre-school classroom in an English-speaking kindergarten. The researcher used qualitative research methods in the form of unstructured observations of sessions and activities, and interviews with teachers. For interviews, 'a semi-structured interview' (Dörnyei 2007) was conducted with the teachers of the target classroom in order to gather information about their experiences, knowledge, opinions and the role these activities play in the development of children's literacy.

These recorded activity sessions were reviewed closely and analyzed. This involved listening to the flow of interactions during the pre-school activities, transcribing and analyzing them. As highlighted earlier, the aim was to find out at what learning experiences may come about during these activities and how these may contribute to literacy development. The quality of the activity sessions was also taken into consideration, examining their contribution to the advancement of the pre-schoolers' literacy development.

1.4 Background and relevance

The preparation for literacy is largely associated with the child's social interaction and their environment (Barton 2004). Vygotsky (1978:84) asserts that children learn and develop from their very first day of life through acquiring a variety of skills and information in the pre-school years that are directly linked to literacy.

The relevance of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of literacy-promoting activities among pre-school children in the advancement of literacy. English-speaking pre-schools are relatively rare in Norway and, as far as the researcher knows, no one has conducted this kind of research in an English-speaking context in Norway before. One important aim is finding out if and to what extent the pre-school actually engages in literacy-promoting activities, what they are, and how conscious the teachers are about the role of such activities and interactions in the pre-school years. This qualitative research expects to capture in detail the learning that goes on among the children in relation to their emergent literacy. By interpreting the results in the light of Vygotskian theory, one can consider the long-lasting effects and also the extent to which these literacy-promoting activities can contribute to children's later literacy growth.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into six chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 gives an overview of theoretical positions and a literature review that supports the research questions proposed in this study. There is relevant literature that discusses Vygotsky's theory of child

development, emergent literacy, and pre-school literacy-promoting activities. Chapter 3 provides a description of the methods used in the study. In addition, ethical considerations are outlined, as well as the validity and reliability of the research. Chapter 4 subsequently presents the results obtained from the classroom observations and interviews with the teachers, while Chapter 5 discusses the findings in relation to the research questions, theories and literature review presented in earlier chapters. Finally, in Chapter 6, conclusions are drawn on the basis of the findings of the research.

2. Theory and literature review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine pre-school activities and oral interaction in the development of literacy during the pre-school years, and their effectiveness. This chapter has individual sections that review the theoretical positions and perceptions that support the research questions proposed in the study. There is relevant literature that discusses Vygotsky's (1978) theories of child development, emergent literacy and pre-school literacy-promoting activities in which oral interaction is a crucial part. Vygotsky's theories (see section 2.2) offer explanations on social interaction and the zone of proximal development theory, which is a key in literacy development during pre-school years. Vygotsky's social interaction theory is presented, followed by how social interaction contributes to child's learning and development. Moreover, arguments are presented for why this theory of social interaction is necessary to understand young children's interactions with persons in their environment in relation to their cognitive and literacy development. It also looks at the application and contribution of Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' in children's learning and literacy development.

The concept of 'emergent literacy' (i.e. the beginnings of literacy) is broad and replaced that of 'reading readiness' (i.e. a stage in which children needed to be mature enough to start reading (Teale and Sulzby 1986), which had created deficient conclusions on young children's literacy development in general (see section 2.3.1). A critique of the concept of 'reading readiness' is presented and the inaccuracy of the assumptions associated with this paradigm is also discussed (see section 2.3.2). Furthermore, the literature presented in this study discusses previous systematic observations of young children's learning contexts, oral interactions, and literacy-promoting activities. The chapter will also present literature on literacy-promoting activities and experiences which are believed to be important during the early pre-school years.

With regard to young children's literacy development, the chapter will consider the value and role of these pre-school experiences. Finally, why this research is necessary to create more consciousness about the role, types and duration of these activities and experiences in the development of literacy among pre-school children is addressed.

2.2 Vygotsky's theories on child development

2.2.1   Social Interaction

Vygotsky (1978) provides explanations of social interactions between a child and persons in his environment, where the person could be a teacher, parent or more experienced child, and how this interaction can contribute to a child's development. Vygotsky (1978) examines the impact and importance of social interaction in a child's cognitive and mental development, which relates to literacy development relevant in this study. Vygotsky discusses functions that occur during children's interactions and states that:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (*interpsychological)* and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.
>
> (Vygotsky 1978:57)

Vygotsky (1978) believes that social learning occurs or precedes development. Vygotsky (1978: 84) further discusses the distinction of learning that occurs in pre-school with that of school learning, with explanations that children learn a great deal by just interacting and exchanging ideas with persons in their environment. Vygotsky therefore points out that any 'learning' a child experiences in school has an existing history which can be connected to pre-school experiences.

2.2.2   The 'Zone of Proximal Development'

An important concept of Vygotsky's theory on learning is the 'zone of proximal development'. According to Vygotsky (1978:86):

The zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

Vygotsky (1978:87) points out levels of development that particularly cause a higher level of cognitive development when children interact or communicate. This higher level of learning depicts the 'zone of proximal development', whose functions are still in a maturation process until children interact with adults or experienced peers. Children therefore work in the zone of proximal development when they interact with adults or experienced peers in their environment. This study will identify some features of children's experiences in the pre-school classroom which engage children in oral interaction and also focus on these literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school environment and their significance.

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is widely used to study young children's mental and cognitive development as it relates to education. The ZPD concept is regarded as a scaffold or a structure of support for performing an action (Obukhova and Korepanova 2009). In working together with children, adults can build supports that allow children to successfully perform a task or activity and then organise their assistance according to the children's capability. Obukhova and Korepanova (2009:27) state that 'This idea of scaffolding is used in the educational interaction between teacher and pupils as well as interaction among the children themselves in the process of acquiring new knowledge and skills'. When examining the consequence of when children interact with adults within the zone of proximal development, children advance or wind up to a higher level of being capable of achieving on their own things that had not been attainable without adult help.

According to Morrissey and Brown (2009: 106), the zone of proximal development and scaffolding are useful frameworks for studying teachers' or caregivers' influences on preschoolers' development and early literacy development. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) also provides a lens for studying children's emergent literacy as it unfolds within the context of meaningful interaction (Vygotsky, 1978).

2.3 Emergent Literacy

2.3.1   'Reading readiness'

According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), the literature on literacy can be traced back many centuries. The perception up until the 1960s was that literacy development should not begin until a child started formal instruction in school. Teale and Sulzby point out that a change in thinking or perception began to arise as a result of high numbers of children in the US failing initial reading instruction. The pre-school years became of interest and were regarded as a 'period of preparation', which led to the idea of 'reading readiness' (Teale and Sulzby 1986:xiv). Reading readiness was defined as a stage where parents and teachers view a young child as ready to read or write, or probably has gained the basic subskills of reading usually in a formal order and instruction (Teale and Sulzby1986). This idea of reading readiness affected people's thinking and perception about literacy development. One way is that it led to the view that literacy began only when a child masters the various subskills of reading readiness. Secondly, it claimed that literacy begins in a school-like setting, where it is believed that readiness skills are taught formally. Teale and Sulzby (1986: xiv) describe reading readiness as an important concept that was applied in a wrong way and was 'built upon a logical analysis of literacy skills from an adult perspective rather than upon a developmental perspective.' This 'developmental perspective' distinguishes children's thinking as distinctive from that of adults, therefore providing instruction in conformity with children's development as they grow into the adult modes (Teale and Sulzby1986:xiv).

2.3.2   The paradigm shift from 'reading readiness' to 'emergent literacy'

According to Teale and Sulzby (1986), 'Emergent literacy' is a term originally coined by Marie Clay in 1966 to define a new perception for understanding children's early behaviours in reading and writing development. Teale and Sulzby (1986) assert that the process of becoming literate starts right after birth and the first few years of the child's life represent a crucial period when reading and writing development are taking place. Teale and Sulzby (1986) refer to Clay's (1967) research of pre-schooler's language and literacy acquisition, where she regarded these pre-school years as crucial and during which oral language and reading readiness develop. Clay's early research showed that pre-schoolers could engage in significant reading behaviours, such as

visual sensitivity to letter and word forms. These include being able to recognise their names or some familiar words, appropriate directional movements, such as reading from left to right, or holding a text appropriately, self-correction, and being able to match spoken words with written word structure. Clay therefore argued that children should not be restricted from access to reading or printed language forms on the perception that they are not ready or mature enough (Teale and Sulzby 1986: xv).

Clay's (1966) studies of young children revealed insight into early childhood literacy and drew much attention to the fact that literacy development begins long before children start formal schooling. From her studies, Clay showed that 'reading readiness' is a flawed paradigm because young children exhibit significant literacy behaviours during pre-school years which contribute a great deal in later literacy development (Teale and Sulzby 1986).When talking about this paradigm shift, Hall (1994) reviewed and compared the reading readiness paradigm with this new perspective of 'emergent literacy', referring to other contributors, in addition to Clay, such as Goodman (1980) and Smith (1971). Clark (1976) points out that what is usually regarded as children's errors are not the case, but a display of competence and skills in literacy. Clark (1976:32) claims that 'It is possible for even young children to become very fluent readers in spite of an average or below average ability to reproduce or even to remember in their correct orientation, isolated designs sufficiently clearly to identify them from a range of alternatives'. Goodman (1986:5) draws our attention to the fact that young children are in so many ways involved in reading and writing and which tend to be ignored. Goodman (1986:6) further lays emphasis on these early expressions of children's reading and writing and states that when children are reading and writing they are making sense of and through print. Goodman maintains that the beginning of literacy occurs when this awareness about literacy events takes place during pre-school years. This is obvious when children scribble or put marks on paper in the form of information to another, or tend to make sense of environmental print.

Barton (1994) explores the origins of literacy in children's development with a focus on these early years, arguing that the process of literacy begins at birth, especially in a literate culture. Barton (1994:131) points out that literacy is an integral part of oral communication and social interaction and further opposes the view that learning begins when a child starts formal school, concurring with the opinion that preparation of literacy begins at 'infancy'. Furthermore,

according to Rhyner (2009:1), a child's later outcome in school is most likely determined by a 'set of tools' or skills gained in pre-school years. Rhyner further explains that literacy development is a major area that relates to this knowledge and skills acquired during pre-school for later years. Rhyner (2009), following Clay (1966), agrees that children show clear 'literacy-related' reactions even as toddlers when they are not yet able to read and write, which earlier researchers have described as 'emergent literacy'. Rhyner (2009) discusses the concept of a continuum in relation to the notion of emergent literacy as a stage in the beginning of a continuum of literacy development. There is more focus on the recent change in perspective on literacy development since children acquire knowledge and skills first, before reading and writing in later years. Therefore, there is a strong relationship between early emergent literacy and later literacy development (Rhyner 2009:5).

Teale and Sulzby (1986: xiv) discuss the causes of this paradigm shift which has risen in the past decades, and categorize the reading readiness challenges in two broader trends: '(a) cognitive approaches to issues of learning and development and their increasing influence on educationally related research and classroom practice and (b) renewed interest in the first few years of life as a period of critical significance in development'. These trends provided reasons to closely examine the pre-school years and how significantly they contribute to children's literacy development. Children are now regarded as active participants rather than passive (Teale and Sulzby 1986). Teale and Sulzby (1986: xvii) further refer to Goodman (1967), who from his research found that even children who may be earlier depicted as potentially 'at risk' in efficient reading and associated reading skills also understood how to handle books and the characteristics of print and text in their environment.

2.4 The physical environment

Cambourne and Turbill (1987) focus on the effect of the learning context of young children and how the individual child responds to his physical environment and conditions surrounding him in the classroom, especially the environmental print. Cambourne and Turbill (1987:8) call this rich environment a 'process-writing' setting. A process-writing classroom is the context whereby certain print-related conditions and responses are met with regard to young children's learning and development of literacy. Cambourne and Turbill further explain that if rich environmental

conditions are met, then young children are able to satisfy the desires of their learning process. Cambourne and Turbill (1987) examine a range of important child-oriented strategies which gradually develop as a result of environmental conditions in the child's repertoire. According to Cambourne and Turbill (1987), the strategies used in these process-writing classrooms are mostly related to written language and are a form of 'scaffold' for the children to support them at a particular period to promote literacy learning or development. They note that this support can be removed once the children are able to cope on their own.

Cambourne and Turbill (1987:9) identify six broad categories of 'coping strategies' which children use: the use of related activities, the use of environmental print, the use of repetition, assistance from interaction with other children, assistance from and interaction with the teacher, and finally the use of temporary spelling. The use of environmental print includes print displays of different print materials. Environmental print as a strategy is crucial in the pre-school years since young children tend to copy letters from the environment without a plan and purpose, or may give words another meaning or use them in a complex manner.

Dennis et al. (2012) suggest that literacy experiences for pre-schoolers can be intentionally incorporated into many of the regular routines of a pre-school classroom. Dennis et al. (2012) further emphasize the role of literacy embedded in the physical classroom environment. For example, arranging a library corner in the classroom environment creates various opportunities for children to interact with books and stories. Dennis et al. (2012) cite Cunningham (2010), who draws attention to the positioning of the book centre away from areas of active play to avoid distraction and allow an interactive environment for early language and print experiences. In addition to print, art, pictures and books should also be available in all areas of the physical environment and must be visible to the children. A planned sitting arrangement also plays a huge role when talking about the physical environment of the classroom. Sitting at eye-level with fellow peers encourages child-child or even adult-child interaction (Dennis et al. 2012). Wasik et al. (2006) suggest using a learning theme in the display of pictures in the classroom environment and further point out that thematic teaching has been shown to be very effective in promoting vocabulary and language development, which are foundational for literacy development. The more materials available to the children, the more they are likely to produce drawings and stories that would advance into texts or writings. This supportive literacy

environment therefore builds early literacy throughout the children's practices (Dennis et al. 2012; Inan 2009).

2.5 The role of oral interaction in literacy development

Dickinson and Beals (1994) believe that literacy development can be supported in different settings, some of which involve no print. When talking about oral interaction, Dickinson and Beals (1994: 29) draw attention to the fact that 'the link between purely oral activities and literacy is not as intuitively obvious as the link between reading and literacy'. Dickinson and Beals (1994) discuss some conversational settings which can promote literacy skills. These include pretend talk, narratives, and giving explanations in pre-school and at home. There is an emphasis on mealtime conversations since these can provide narratives and explanations of events, actions and emotions with opportunities for children to develop their literacy-related language skills (Dickinson and Beals 1994).

As Dickinson and Beal (1994:29) argue, when children practise or are exposed to print, their literacy skills are promoted or enhanced in various ways. However, one must not ignore the fact that experiences with certain kinds of purely oral forms and interactions also contribute immensely to the development of later literacy skills. Dickinson and Beals (1994) show from their research that oral interaction provides pre-school children with the opportunity to think and connect with ideas, events, and actions, which can promote children's vocabulary. In the same vein, Dickinson and Beals (1994) consider oral interaction during mealtime conversation in the pre-school years as another aspect of the child's linguistic environment and contributing to later literacy development. When talking about oral interaction in promoting literacy development, Dickinson and Beals (1994) conclude that:

> We encourage teachers of young children to see early literacy growth as multifaceted - as requiring growth in oral discourse skills as well as print-related abilities, and as occurring through interactions with peers as well as adults - and to see growth of print and language skills as occurring in the home as well as in pre-schools and schools.

> (Dickinson and Beals 1994:39)

2.5.1 Adult-child conversations

Adult-child conversations are about the oral interaction that goes on between an adult and a child. Greekie et al. (1999) state in their principle of learning that 'it is not interaction itself but the quality of the interaction that contributes to better learning'. According to their research, social interaction, even with professional expert guidance, is not enough in itself, but the quality of the interaction is important when evaluating and investigating the impact of the learning that occurs. Greekie et al. (1999) further refer to Radziszewska and Rogoff's (1988) earlier study on the collaboration of both adult-child and child-child pairs, which concluded that children in the adult-child experiment advanced in learning more than their counterpart group. They further point out the importance of mutual and guided interaction rather than the adult dominating the interaction (Greekie et al. 1999). Mercer (2004:132) records studies of 'talk lessons'- a programme organised for children, where there was a balance of teacher-led activities and different group activities, whose primary aim was to develop children's cognition, analytical, and literacy skills. Mercer further points out that children who participated in the programme had good opportunities for oral interaction and, as a result, could discuss more critically, effectively and explicitly.

When talking about the quality of discussion, Mercer (2004:133) identifies that these interactions can be related to his concept of 'exploratory talk', which he earlier explained thus:

Exploratory talk is that in which partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter challenged, but if so reasons are given and alternatives are offered. Agreement is sought as a basis for joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk.

(Mercer 2000: 98 and Mercer 2004:133)

One very important factor is the value of these oral interactions for children's literacy growth. These conversations contain a crucial kind of 'co-reasoning' with adult participants, following a

pattern and style which help them to share information and ideas from experiences in a reasonable and friendly manner (Mercer 2004). This exploratory talk is also a productive way of using language to think collaboratively, which is needed in classroom learning today. Mercer (2004) therefore encourages more of these exploratory talk interactions in the classroom to enhance literacy development. Mercer (2004) identified frequently used words in exploratory talk using a computer-based analysis, for example *because, if* and *why*, which indicates the critical and exploratory nature of the interaction. Moreover, Mercer (2004) describes young children's cognitive development as dialogue-oriented rather than just as a result of individual growth and development. Furthermore, from the socio-cultural perspective, when adults and children interact effectively, knowledge of past generations can be transferred to young children, thereby supporting the process of literacy development. This valuable dialogue is capable of assisting young children in ways of thinking collectively and building up their learning skills (Mercer 2004). The promotion of these interaction experiences involving language for effective cognitive development would be beneficial.

Dickinson and Smith (2001:142) discuss the fact that teacher-child and child-child interactions as direct communication make it possible to impact the development of a child. Dickinson and Smith (2001) mention the value of children's interactions when trying to find out strong areas of the child in overall classroom experiences. In relation to their theory of literacy development, Dickinson and Smith (2001:143) further state that 'extended discourse' is a crucial part of emergent literacy, suggesting that children build literacy skills by taking part in oral interaction in the classroom, especially conversations that contain 'varied words' and embrace different favourable topics and activities that promote literacy.

2.5.2 Pretend play

According to Dickinson and Tarbors (2001:143), one important way which children are likely to acquire literacy skills through oral interaction is by engaging in pretend play. Pretend play can be defined as play where young children use their imagination to assume and take up roles as something or somebody different from themselves and, in a way, act out real life situations and actions in line with what they have chosen to play (Cecchini 2008). Katz (2001:54) presents studies that investigated pre-schoolers' participation in pretend play in the pre-school years and

which were clearly connected to their emergent literacy skills in later literacy development. Katz (2001) points out the distinctions between the kind of play that involves labelling and representing 'objects and activities', and the talk of pretend play where children represent symbolic transformations of the real world they live in. Katz (2001:54) identified the area of activity which pretend play is related as 'interpersonal engagement', 'language' and 'play' and found that pretend play cut across these three large areas, pointing out different varieties of play. Katz therefore introduced the term 'social pretend play.'

The theoretical viewpoints of Vygotsky's (1978) work found in Katz (2001) conform with Vygotsky's view of pretend play. According to Vygotsky (1978), all pretend play could be classified as social, including its different varieties. For example, it is through social interaction that children are exposed to different elements of culture, ways of life and specific skills when they are pretending during play with other person(s) around them. This is in accordance with Vygotsky's concept of the 'zone of proximal development' (see section 2.2.2). In children's developmental process, as Vygotsky (1978) maintained, children can further use functions and skills that are still in the maturation process and also achieve more than their actual level (Katz 2001:58). Furthermore, Neuman and Roskos (1993), cited in Rhyner (2009:129), suggest that adult participation and mediation during play is very important and can provide an important 'scaffold' in various skills when incorporated, contributing to children's literacy development. According to Rhyner (2009:129), the idea of incorporating 'responsive interaction' during play cannot be overemphasized. Responsive interaction according to Rhyner is the professional and guided interaction which provides structure to the play itself and which can scaffold learning and promote literacy development. This pretend play process can also boost children's ability to read environmental print and also interact with literacy tools when they dramatize and connect writing objectives with play situations (Neuman and Roskos, 1993; Rhyner 2009).

According to Welsch (2008), the foundations of children's later reading are dependent on these early literacy experiences of using their imagination. When talking about the value of the role of this imaginative play, Welsch (2008) draws from Heath's (1982) research that critical comprehension skills can gradually build up when a child plays around stories or engages in pretend play. Welsch (2008) argues that the significance of pretend play is that it vis basically a 'context' for learning, distinguishing pretend play as the most complex form of play because it

allows young children to use their mental representations to replace the meaning of activities and things around them. Pretend play is a world where children have independent control to exhibit their own view of how the real-world functions and where they create their experiences. Vygotsky (1978) identified pretend play activities as the focus of the young children's zone of proximal development, where new knowledge is gained through social interactions with more competent players.

Another factor is that the oral interaction during play promotes the children's verbal skills important for later literacy (Welsch 2008). This is because, in order to sustain and continue the process of the play, the related verbal skills have to be at work, whether in suggesting or taking and playing roles. Furthermore, Welsch (2008:138) points out that the shared meaning produced during this pretend play process is an important factor which encourages social and emotional competence necessary for social interactions needed for later literacy in school. Cognitive development is also a huge factor that has been given so much attention in successful dramatic play because it mentally organizes the many aspects involved in the process of pretending (Welsch 2008:139).

Welsch (2008:139) refers to Roscos (1990) in defining three basic activities of pretend play:

1. Play with objects
2. Playing at being like someone or something
3. Making up people, places, and things.

Pretending encourages children's personal response in that they naturally imagine and make connections spontaneously by playing or repeating actions they may have investigated through environmental and social interactions or storybooks and experiences (Rowe1998; Welsch 2008). Young children can create responses to stories already read to them through pretend play activities, which may provide them with the opportunity to develop a great skill needed for literature comprehension and literacy development. As Welsch (2008:139) argues, when pretending is child-initiated and directed, children may utilize pretend play on their own to delve into the most underlying objective of literacy.

Li et al. (2014:61) describe pretend play as the most 'advanced play forms in childhood', and which shows a strong connection to promoting children's learning and development. According to Li et al. (2014), pretend play makes it possible for children to remove boundaries between imagination and reality.

2.6 Storytime

Storytime is an activity which involves reading and sharing a storybook in an interactive and interesting way between adults or older peers and young children, thereby making connections with the book and the child's life experiences (Barton 1994). According to Dickinson (2001:176), discussing and reading storybooks to children has a great potential to promote language development that is essentially related to literacy. Children integrate images and knowledge found in the storybook with language to fully understand the story. Dickinson (2001) believes that since children are active participants in storytime interactions, they have the opportunity to try out new vocabulary and phrases introduced to them by the adult. This idea of children being active participants is crucial because children tend to learn more when they are actively involved in an interaction or a conversation (Dickinson 2001:177).

Barton (1994) agrees with these views and stresses the significance of engaging pre-schoolers in storytime, which he describes as an important 'literacy event' that can be compared a great deal with the regular school-reading activities crucial to early linguistic and later literacy skills. Barton (1994) further emphasizes that storytime can be shared, can take so many forms, and can also mean many things depending on the age of the child, the situation and the participants involved. When talking about this interactive event and changes that occur, Barton (1994:141) notes that 'reading will vary according to the type of text, according to the way it is used in the interaction, and according to such details as whether a child is hearing the story for the first time. The children's contribution can vary and this too changes over time'. Moreover, Barton (1994:145) draws attention to the fact that the interaction could sometimes be initiated by the child and not necessarily the adult because it is not strictly a story being told by one person to the other, but rather 'a story around a story', which can be narrated or 'constructed' by any of the participants.

When discussing the quality of these regular repeated interactions, Barton (1994:144) refers to the learning opportunities incorporated in the language of the written text, which is usually read aloud in spoken form. This means that young children are exposed to 'rhythms of written language being spoken' and 'extended discourse', thereby also learning skills of how the story is being organized (Barton1994:144). It is also important to note that storytime can increase children's vocabulary and grammatical skills.

Another important factor that Barton (1994:145) emphasises is the spoken language around the written text, which he regards as 'often richer in variety and complexity of linguistic structure' than the regular everyday discussions. Barton (1994:145) refers to this dialogue connecting reading and writing as the 'metalanguage of literacy'. Talking about literacy development, Barton (1994) refers to Snow and Ninio (1986), who argue that children can also learn about the nature of books, and how pictures and story titles communicate as young children become familiar with this material. Furthermore, pre-school children can learn about the functions of literacy and how print can be read into words. In relation to literacy, Barton (1994:147) states that 'These dialogues are the social bases of thinking which the child internalizes. In this way literacy becomes implicated in the creation of ways of thinking'.

Dickinson (2001) discusses the importance of spending a considerable amount of time on storytime due to the fact that this particular literacy event is closely associated with adult-child interaction. Moreover, it especially involves adults reading aloud to children. Dickinson states that: 'Children can learn more from hearing books read once or twice per day than if they are read to only twice per week' (Dickinson 2001:177).

Arizpe and Styles (2004:186) categorize reading picture books to young children as an intellectual and an affective activity. As Arizpe and Styles (2004: 186-187) point out, reading picture books during storytime to children in early childhood is the most important activity that involve interactive reading and also the most sophisticated and primary literature in the pre-school classroom, which create deep intelligent responses in children According to Arizpe and Stlyes (2004:189), conversation when reading story books to children promote the children's learning because it gives children opportunities to operate at a higher cognitive level and provides the opportunity to organise their responses and perception of complex situations. In addition, young children involved in storytime frequently in the pre-school years are most likely

able to exhibit metacognitive skills to come to realize themselves as readers acting a group of formations, such as scientific reasoning, visible thinking and confirming if their own assumptions were right. Arizpe and Styles (2004) further conclude that when children are given the time to engage in storytime interaction, such as for example talking, listening, inferring and thinking during interaction, the results are marked by eminence and distinction.

Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984:9) point out that story readings in pre-schoolers' classrooms are literacy events in which children are usually required to participate and, as such, result in their literary development and to their larger literacy socialization. Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) further explain that story reading is characterized by cooperative interaction and negotiation of the story by both participants and the individual responses of the children most likely influence the story reader's direction during the interaction around the text. Furthermore, the storybook text provides a context through the oral interaction that goes on between the adult and the child involved in the activity. They note that:

> The meaning that the listeners seemed to be making of texts directly shaped the story-reader's role. Through verbal interaction between child listeners and adult reader, the decontextualized language of storybook texts was given a context. The story-reader essentially instructed the listeners in how to use various kinds of world knowledge as frameworks within which particular parts of texts could be read. In this way, she (the story reader) transformed the reading of decontextualized texts from a one-sided to a joint sense-making process.

(Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith 1984:10)

According to Schiefflin and Cochran (1984:10), investigating story-reading interactions in the pre-school classroom describes how to make sense of and use texts in the world generally. Furthermore, the spoken words or interaction around story-reading significantly change the 'internalized' reading structure of the literate adult into an outwardly explanatory and more slower building pattern for young children, which makes storytime a rich literacy event. As a result, story-reading creates a transformation of language patterns or strategies used in making sense of interpersonal communication and a story book text which has been removed from its context.

2.7 Related research

Much research has been carried out regarding literacy development in the pre-school years. The present section is an overview of some related studies concerning literacy-promoting activities which are linked to the present study.

One relevant study within the field of child development is Barton (1994), which was broad research that explores the origins of literacy in the pre-school years. Barton (1994) studied different types of everyday learning, including those that emphasize the role of the environment in the pre-school years. Barton (1994) draws on the work of Vygotsky and asserts that literacy development in the pre-school years involves several different activities or processes of gaining knowledge which are part of the child's acquisition of what Vygotsky (1978) regarded as higher psychological processes. According to Barton (1994), learning does not just happen in a location formally chosen for it, such as the classroom, but it is a system of literacy-promoting activities. Barton (1994:133) further emphasizes that learning takes place mostly in events that are frequently repeated for the pre-school children. Barton (1994) points out that these children's repeated activities are usually attained with support from other participants, linking this through the notion of scaffolding, where the adult or an older child supports the child and knowledge is internalized. Through his ethnographic study, Barton found that literacy is embedded in regular social activities which involve reading to children at bedtime, adult-child interaction, environmental print, and the everyday regular activities of cooking, shopping, keeping records and other family activities (Barton 1994:148). Consequently, Barton (1994) applies Vygotsky's insights and concepts to the development of literacy, connecting the strong social basis of children's early learning to literacy development.

Dickinson and Beals (1994) investigated literacy pre-school activities that do not involve the use of print. Their study explored data from the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, whose goal was to identify the types of language environment and context that support the development of literacy skills. Dickinson and Beals (1994) followed about 40 children of about the age of three and their families, examining the children at intervals during typical activities at home and in school. Children's talk was audio-taped, group times were video-taped, and teachers were also interviewed. The content of the children's interaction was then coded and the duration of the different types of conversation was noted. Pretend play

was of special interest. After a while, different standardized tests were performed to assess a range of language and cognitive skills linked to the children's literacy development. Dickinson and Beals used these standardized tests as literacy outcome measures. The tests involved tasks, for example listening comprehension, in which the researchers read storybooks to the children and asked questions to find out the children's knowledge and inferential ability. Another test was that of receptive vocabulary, which is known to be connected to verbal intelligence and general school success. Finally, they used tasks such as the Comprehensive Assessment Profile or CAP, which assessed children's early skills with print, such as recognizing letters, signs and labels, and writing their names (Dickinson and Beals 1994:34). According to Dickinson and Beals (1994:35), the results from their research on children's interactions during pretend play are 'linked with the development of emerging language-related literacy skills' because, in order to maintain this particular activity, they build advanced words or 'syntactic structures' as they try to express themselves during performance. An observed reason for this was that children who were good pretenders were drawn to other verbal children around them. This gave the children the opportunity to use and increase language skills that were connected to early literacy development (Dickinson and Beals 1994:36).

As for the cognitive development of pre-schoolers, Mercer (2000) conducted research on how children learn to use language for collective thinking and how other people help them to do so. Mercer (2000) examined how the process of interacting contributes to and promotes children's intellectual development. Mercer (2000) began by observing and recording the conversations of children playing together at home, and later analysed them. Then focus was on the socio-cultural aspects which made the interaction with children an important form of human and cognitive development. Mercer (2000:135) drew on inferences from influential psychologists who reconsidered cognitive development as a 'dialogue' and not an individual detection. These 'dialogues' were explained as a kind of guidance that usually occurs incidentally and informally during activities and Mercer therefore suggests 'that the concept of an intermental development zone (IDZ) is useful for explaining how dialogue supports the process of teaching-and-learning' (Mercer 2000:135).

Chandler et al. (2008) carried out research using a project initiative to examine literacy skills within daily activities and routines in the pre-school classroom. Although they observed

that early language and literacy skills were included in the learning of the pre-school, these skills were addressed in an unstructured and unorganized form. As a consequence, Chandler et al. implemented their ELI project (Early Literacy Initiative Project) in the pre-school, which emphasised a universal curriculum and practices for all children, a literacy-rich classroom environment, and early language and literacy strategies that are embedded within daily activities and routines (Chandler et al. 2008:4). The first step was to develop a literacy-rich classroom environment, drawing on studies by Katims and Pierce (1995) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), which supported the idea that such a literacy-rich environment increases children's access to literacy materials that promote early literacy development.

In another study, one carried out by Smidt et al. (2012) in German pre-schools, the researchers observed 96 children in their final pre-school years in 50 pre-schools. In most cases two children per pre-school group were observed. The purpose of the research was to determine the extent of emergent literacy activities taking place in the pre-school classroom. Results showed that emergent literacy activities involving oral interaction played an important role compared to other activities in the children's pre-school experience. The results also indicated the importance of the frequency of the emergent literacy activities. According to Smidt et al., when children arrive at primary school with varying levels of readiness to read, these variations are continually sustained throughout their later school career. These differences are mostly as a result of the children's pre-school experiences (Smidt et al. 2012; Dickinson and Tabors 2001).

An interesting study was conducted by Aram and Besser (2009), mainly to find out which activities, i.e. storytime and alphabet training, were most productive in promoting literacy skills. The researchers also wanted to investigate the age it was appropriate to introduce these activities to the children (3 or 4 years). The results showed that storytime was more productive in promoting vocabulary related to literacy skills, while alphabetic training only promoted a scope of alphabetic skills. However, a combined or balanced approach would promote both language and alphabetic skills, thus boosting literacy development. The results of the study also indicated that three-year-olds benefit even more than their four-year-old counterparts in both storytime and alphabetic training activities.

Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984) were concerned with the ways adults help children build and promote literacy and social development needed to appropriately interpret

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print especially written text in a particular community setting. The point they needed to emphasize from their research was that book or print interest in pre-schoolers does not grow naturally on its own in a culture where literacy is assumed. Rather in the target community, children's early print interest and experiences are as a result of print exposure and socialization. One major way utilized was mostly reading story book to children regularly. Schieffelin and Cochran-Smith (1984:6) conclude: 'Parents believed that printed sources of knowledge were significant to their children's learning in many areas of development-social, cognitive, psychological, and philosophic'.

Arizpe and Styles (2004) began their research after many years of experience with teaching reading picture books to pre-school children. They found out that the story books provoked deep, intelligent and brilliant responses in the young children. In addition, there was an obvious and strong connection between the quality of the children's drawings and the teacher's contributions during storytime interaction observed before and during their research study. Conclusions were made from Arizpe and Styles (2004:198) that engaging in interactive activities with written and challenging visual texts is an important way of enhancing children's intellectual capability in the pre-school years. They record that:

> When children are given the time they need to look at visual texts and talk, listen, draw, reflect and think about them, the results can be outstanding. When opportunities are provided to privilege visual and verbal skills, instead of concentrating on reading and writing, many children can *fly* intellectually, especially those who are inexperienced with written text or learning in an unfamiliar language.

(Arizpe and Styles 2004:198)

Burgess (2011) examined literacy activities using the home literacy environment (HLE) model in his research, where the home literacy environment provided to very young children was assessed. This involved their parents or caregivers completing a checklist and surveys . Young children were also provided with a wide range of literacy experiences and activities. Burgess (2011:445) found out that children who often engage in storytime and book reading will easily enhance their capability in letter/sounds, phonological consciousness, oral language, and gain a strong interest in literacy. Burgess referred to researchers such as Frijters et al. (2000), Senechal et al. (1998), Murray et al. (1996), and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998), who have also found that

shared reading activities are closely linked to oral communication and literacy development. However, Burgess (2011:446) stressed the importance of examining the literacy environment and activities provided to younger children, and emphasized why caregivers should especially engage in book reading to infants. Burgess further noted that:

> Specific HLE opportunities and experiences provided to young children may be important in several ways. They may provide a direct benefit (e.g. learning vocabulary through shared reading) or they may serve as markers for experiences to come (e.g taking a young child to the library may predict subsequent library attendance). Some of the behaviours included were not expected to occur at high frequency (e.g child library usage), but understanding HLE development requires explicit assessment of the opportunities provided at different ages.

Burgess (2011:446)

Burgess (2011:446) utilizes this home literacy environment (HLE) model in his study, which describes the home literacy environment, focusing on the adult-child and child-child interactions. This HLE consists of a wide range of creative resources, and opportunities provided to children as well as by the parental or caregivers' skills, abilities and attitudes, which significantly determine the provision of these opportunities for young children.

Furthermore, when talking about adult-child interactions in the pre-school year, Neumann et al. (2008) conducted research using a case study of a home environment. In this case, a parent scaffolded her child's emergent writing skills by directional or guided conversation and secondly by the child copying environmental print. Neumann et al. (2008:313) reported strategies and examples that may give directions to parents, teachers or caregivers on how to provide engaging opportunities for literacy learning and development in the home environment or pre-school classroom. Neumann et al. (2008) gave explanations about the importance of environmental print, such as product labels, clothing, road signs and symbols, which could aid the adult or caregiver and provide many creative and significant examples to creatively show younger children that print conveys meaning and could be read aloud word by word to provide a context. Moreover, words are constructed with letters that are structurally organized and make sounds. Neumann et al. (2008) refer to Bodrova and Leong (1998), who suggest examples of techniques of how

scaffolding can be applied in a literacy activity, such as materialization and private speech. Neumann et al. (2008: 313) define materialization as the 'use of concrete objects or actions to represent a concept', while private speech refers to children providing their own audible instructions during challenging tasks. Furthermore, according to Neumann et al. (2008:313), Vygotsky's socio-cultural ideas provides a natural view within which we could determine adult-child literacy interactions whereby caregivers can provide adequate 'guided participation' required to scaffold young children within their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Neumann et al. (2008:314) cite Aram and Levin (2008), who found that guided participation and the use of educational print is vital in developing literacy concepts, such as letter shapes, and sounds words, in the pre-school years.

In terms of studies on literacy in pre-schools in Norway, Nurss (1988) compared written language environments in kindergartens in Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) with those in Great Britain and the United States. Nurss' data was gathered through observations in the kindergartens. Nurss found that the Scandinavian kindergartens for 6-year olds emphasized social development, oral language, and creative expression through play. There was little evidence of written language in the kindergartens. While the British kindergartens for five-year-olds also emphasized play, as in the Scandinavian kindergartens, written language was also included through storybooks and the children writing through copying activities and through story dictation. In the Unites States, many of the state-run kindergartens for five-year-olds had shown an increasing tendency to become academic, with the first-grade curriculum being moved down into the kindergarten. However, some kindergartens focused on children acquiring literacy in a natural way, especially through a print-rich environment. Nurss (1988: 45-46) argued that: 'Current research from several cultures suggests that a natural use of written language as part of children's social play environment might be a valuable addition to the kindergarten programs in all of these countries.'

In another study of pre-schools in Norway, Sandvik (2008) studied Norwegian pre-school teachers' beliefs and practices related to early pre-school literacy. The research was based on a questionnaire survey answered by 90 pre-school teachers. The results showed that the pre-school teachers generally held positive beliefs about their role and that of the pre-school in helping children to develop their early literacy. However, in contrast, the results also showed that the pre-

school teachers spent very little time actually practising literacy-related activities. There was thus a strong mismatch between beliefs and practices.

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The present study has examined literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years. The main aim of this research was to find out what literacy-promoting activities took place in the pre-school classroom and to observe how literacy-promoting activities contribute to the pre-school children's literacy development. In order to achieve this purpose, a qualitative approach was used for the data collection process and data analysis. This qualitative research was carried out in an English-speaking pre-school, which is rare in Norway. This chapter aims to describe the methods used in investigating the following research questions:

1. What kinds of literacy-promoting activities take place in the pre-school classroom?
2. What is the role and value of these activities on literacy development in the pre-school classroom?
3. How aware are the teachers about the role these interactions and activities play in the development of literacy?

The study is a case study is based on observations of the pre-school activities and interviews with teachers in the pre-school classroom. This chapter is therefore divided into sections that describe the different aspects of the research, as well as providing an explanation of the overall approach. Furthermore, the methods that were used during data collection (observations and interviews), and the nature of the research as a case study and exploratory research will be addressed. In addition, the school where the research took place and the research participants will be described, which includes a description of the research class and the process of the data collection and analysis. The validity and reliability of the research will also be addressed, as well as ethical considerations in the study. Finally, there will be a section on how the research data will be presented, followed by a summary section of the present chapter.

3.2 Overall research approach

The overall approach of this study was qualitative research. Qualitative research is helpful in analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local context, especially when examining people's views and activities (Flick 2014). In the present case, it meant examining literacy-promoting-activities and emergent literacy among pre-school children. Qualitative research is an approach that allows a researcher to study people in their natural settings, their life experiences and behaviour, by using specific research methods, such as interviews, observations, life histories and biographies, focus group discussions, content analysis, and visual methods. These methods allow the researcher to find out issues from the perspective of the study participants, and understand the meanings and interpretations given to behaviour, events and objects under investigation (Hennick et al. 2011:9). According to Dörnyei (2007:24), qualitative research is associated with data collection procedures that give open-ended and non-numerical data, which usually involves non-statistical data analysis. Qualitative research could therefore be regarded as 'less systematic and standardized in its data collection approach than quantitative research' (Dörnyei 2007:125). Qualitative research sets out to answer questions such as 'why' and 'how' and usually aims to study how people's behaviour is shaped by the social, cultural, economic or physical context in which they live (Hennick et al. 2011:26).

3.3 Case study

A case study is a thorough study of a single subject, group of persons or a phenomenon, based on the idea that the results of one can be representative of many other cases (Borg and Gall 1989:402). Accordingly, the present case study of a pre-school classroom in an English-

speaking kindergarten in Norway involved an investigation of literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years. Borg and Gall (1989) refer to several kinds of case studies, which are historical case studies of organizations, observational case studies, oral histories, situational analysis, and clinical case study. For the purpose of this study, the observational case study was considered the most suitable because it focuses on a pre-school classroom, which is also part of an organisation. Moreover, the focus of the study is the pupils and the teachers, who are regarded as a group of individuals who interact over a period.

According to Dörnyei (2007:152), case study researchers usually combine a variety of data collection methods, such as interviews, observation and document archive. Dörnyei (2007:152-155) believes that the case study is not a specific technique, but rather a method of collecting and organizing data to enhance our understanding of the single case of the social context investigated. Specifically, Dörnyei (2007:155) further argues that case study is an excellent way of gaining in-depth descriptions and insights of a socio-cultural context, much more than any other method can produce. Thus, this current study has utilized qualitative data collection methods (observations and interviews) to gain a detailed understanding and acquire useful information of the topic and context. This variety enhances the credibility of the research, with results from different perspectives.

3.4 Sample

The school where the research was carried out was an English-speaking pre-school in an urban area of Norway. There were four pre-school classes altogether. Two of these classrooms consisted of children of 1-2 years old, while the other two classrooms consisted of 3-4-year-olds. The study took place in one of the 3-4-year-old pre-school classrooms. The target pre-school classroom consisted of sixteen pupils and two teachers. Of these pupils, nine were girls and seven were boys, while the two teachers were both female, with the role of head teacher and assistant teacher respectively. The pupils in the class included children with different minority backgrounds. The school generally had a high proportion of minority background children with different mother tongues residing in Norway, for example countries, such as India, Nigeria, the Americas, Indonesia, Britain and Australia, in addition to Norwegian children.

The researcher got in contact with the main principal of the school to ask if it was possible to conduct research there and received a positive answer. Therefore, the sampling strategy that was used was 'convenience sampling' (Dörnyei 2007:129), which resulted in willing participants, a prerequisite of a rich dataset. On the other hand, as Dörnyei (2007:129) suggests, saturation may not happen at all and credibility may be affected in convenience sampling.

3.5 Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data was collected for this research using observations and interviews. Firstly, the observation method was most suitable for this study involving pre-school children in order to see how they behaved in natural situations. The data collection techniques used during observations were audio-recording and written field notes. The interviews with the teachers was the second method for data collection.

3.5.1   Observations

In qualitative research, Dörnyei (2007:185) argues that observations enable researchers to see naturally and in a direct way what people do without depending only on what they say and claim they do. In other words, observational data can give a researcher a first-hand and objective account of events and behaviours of people. In the case of the present study of pre-school children, observations were valuable, particularly of young participants with emerging verbal skills and in providing a detailed description of the context and setting of the targeted phenomenon (Dörnyei 2007).

Dörnyei (2007:179) points to different ways in which classroom observations can take place, such as 'participant versus non participant' observation and 'structured versus unstructured observation.' The form of observation for the present research was non-participant observation since the researcher was not involved in or only minimally involved in the setting. Following the principle of Dörnyei (2007), another form of observation utilized for this study was unstructured observation because the researcher needed to observe what took place in the pre-school classroom first and then discover the type of literacy-promoting activities that went on in the target classroom. In this way, the researcher was able to decide what was relevant for the study and how these activities could contribute to the children's literacy development. Unstructured observations were chosen to enable the researcher to choose from a wide range of activities and different reactions and behaviours from the young children in the pre-school classroom that were considered relevant for this research. When observing these young children, the researcher also focused on details of how the children received and responded to different activities when they were introduced.

In the present study, the lesson observations took place for 13 days and lasted for a period of six weeks, although not for exactly the same number of hours each day. Forty-eight observation sessions took place lasting for 51 hours. During a typical day, the different types of activities that took place and which were observed were indoor play (pretend play), which lasted for thirty minutes, circle time (adult-child conversations about the day, date, weather, and storytime), which also lasted for thirty minutes, snacks time, which lasted for fifteen minutes, free play/outside play, which lasted for two hours, lunchtime, which lasted for thirty minutes and, finally, project time (i.e. worksheet activities which involved, for example, drawing, painting, tracing and scribbling of alphabet letters, numbers, animals, and shapes), which lasted for a maximum of one and a half hours. These activities had a similar structure on all the days when observation took place.

3.5.2   Interviews

Dörnyei (2007:134) refers to Kvale (1996:5) and states that 'the typical qualitative interview is a one to one professional conversation' which has an aim to obtain descriptions of events and behaviour of or around the interviewee. For this research, interviews were conducted with the two teachers in the classroom. The date and time of the interviews were discussed and agreed upon in advance with the two teachers. According to Dörnyei (2007:135), interviews can be single or multiple sessions and, according to the degree of structure, they can be structured, unstructured and semi-structured. The structured interview follows a strict pre-prepared interview guide which contains a list of questions to be covered very closely with the interviewees, with little or no room for variation and flexibility in the questions, as well as the responses from the respondents. The unstructured interview allows for maximum flexibility and in-depth discussion with respondents with very little interference from the research agenda. The semi-structured interview has a series of pre-prepared but open-ended questions which encourage the interviewees to elaborate on issues in an exploratory way while the interviewer provides direction. The semi-structured interview was chosen for data collection in this study. The semi-structured interview is suitable for researchers who do not want to use ready-made response categories that will limit the depth and breadth of the interviewee's response (Dörnyei 2007:136).

A semi-structured interview uses an interview guide which helps the interviewer to ensure that the relevant subject area is well covered and no important comments are left out. In addition, the interview guide for a semi-structured interview offers the interviewer a list of useful probes, which encourages the interviewee to give more details or clarifications of an original response (Dörnyei 2007:137). The present study therefore used an interview guide as a framework in order to elicit useful responses from the interviewees and at the same time provided direction for relevant areas to be covered (see Appendix 1).

The questions were specially devised to offer useful probes and were also open-ended. The two teachers were asked the same questions but were asked different follow-up questions on the basis of the responses given. The following categories of questions were asked. The first category focused on the background of the teachers, such as their level of education, level of experience and country of origin. For instance, in the background category, the teachers were asked:

-How long have you been teaching in this pre-school?

-How long have you been teaching this class?

-What education do you have?

The above questions about the respondents' personal experiences contributed to the 'ice-breaking period' of the interview (Dörnyei 2007:137).

The second section of questions focused on the lessons, such as the curriculum, structure of teaching, aims and the pre-school activities. In this second category of interview questions, the teachers were asked, for instance, how they structured their teaching, how much freedom they were given to decide on what and how to teach, their teaching aims, and activities that were particularly significant to them. The aim of the questions in this category was to elicit the teachers' views/experiences of the phenomenon under investigation (Dörnyei 2007:138). For the purpose of the present study, this category covered different aspects of the participants' overall view of literacy-promoting activities in the target classroom.

3.6 Data analysis procedures

The stages of data analysis for this qualitative study were transcription and organization of data, systematically analysing the transcripts, grouping categories of comments from the interviews together, identification of the total time duration of individual activities observed, describing the pre-schoolers' spontaneous reactions during and after the literacy-promoting activities, examination of how these activities contributed to their emergent literacy development, followed by discussing the overall data and finally drawing conclusions.

The audio-recordings of the observations were reviewed and transferred to a computer. In total, 2,160.23 minutes of audio-recordings were collected. The first step in the analysis of these recordings was to make an overview with comments about each recording. Each recorded observation session often consisted of several recording clips on the same date. These observations will be presented in the next chapter as a narrative involving different literacy-promoting activities which occurred in the case study classroom. Each observation session was transcribed and saved in a folder on a computer. The researcher listened to each recording, and filled in a table with useful and interesting information that was relevant for the study, such as duration of the recording, children's interactions with their peers or adults, and effects and reactions with adults during storytime or pretend play activities in the pre-school classroom.

Furthermore, for the analysis of the interviews, the researcher listened to the interview sessions with the interview guide that had been used as a framework in order to look for similar or different themes which had occurred in the responses of the interviewees. In the following results chapter, the two interviewee's responses will be presented to show if there were similarities and/or differences between the two teachers. In addition, as part of the analysis procedure, the different entries from the researcher's written notes were also examined. Thus, based on these analyses of the data from the interviews with the two teachers, such as how children learn from interactions, the researcher could gain a view of why and how literacy-promoting activities contributed to the children's literacy development. Since all the responses from the interviewees were kept confidential and for the data to be anonymous, it was necessary to give the participants pseudo-names in this study.

3.7 Validity and reliability

An important aspect of research is its validity and reliability. Cohen et al. (2000:129) replace the conventional views of validity and reliability with 'trustworthiness'. A distinction can be made between internal and external validity. As expressed by Cohen et al. (2000:126), internal validity is concerned with the question of whether the experimental treatments in fact make a

difference in the specific experiment under scrutiny. Additionally, as Dörnyei (2007:52) points out, research has internal validity if the result is a function of the variables that were measured or examined. External validity, on the other hand, focuses on the extent to which these findings can be generalized to a larger population, settings, and contexts (Cohen et al. 2000:126; Dörnyei 2007:52). For this research, the researcher collected data from two different perspectives by using observations and teacher interviews to answer the research questions addressed in the study. Moreover, the lengthy duration of the observations during a period of six weeks increased the validity of the research, providing the researcher with a rich data set and substantial information on different literacy-promoting activities that took place in the classroom over the period of observation. Moreover, the subjects of the study included 18 participants altogether, including two teachers, which may be considered as sufficient in providing adequate information of the case study investigated. Furthermore, the two teachers interviewed had different personal and teaching experiences.

Secondly, when talking about the reliability of research, Dörnyei (2007:57) refers to Silverman's (2005:224) definition as 'the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions'. For the present research, the use of audio-recordings and written notes strengthened the reliability of the research. This is because written notes alone may not provide accurate data, while audio-recording devices are able to provide more reliable data since they can be reviewed and studied carefully, thereby strengthening reliability. Dörnyei (2007:57) stresses reliability as trustworthiness and the extent to which research tools give consistent results when replicated. There is no reason to think that the research tools used here would have provided different results if replicated.

3.8 Ethical issues

When conducting research, it is important to take into consideration ethical issues, such as the participants' consent, privacy, and anonymity. Firstly, as a standard in Norway, prior to the research in the pre-school, the principal of the school demanded a police certificate, which was provided by the researcher. Furthermore, when talking about informed consent, Borg (2010:11) asserts that: 'Obtaining informed consent from participants is also a key aspect of ethical research'. For the present study, the principal of the school introduced the researcher to the pre-school manager, who sent letters to the parents of the pupils, informing them about both the research and the researcher, and they were asked to give their consent prior to the research. The target pre-school classroom teachers were very positive to the research from the outset and also gave their consent. The teachers also informed the pupils in the classroom that someone was going to join them in their classroom from time to time. Before the data collection process began, the adult participants were also informed about the purpose of the research, following the criteria of Borg (2010:11). The researcher met with the pre-school manager and classroom teachers and gave prior notice about the audio-recordings and intended interviews with the target classroom teachers.

Another important aspect was to make sure that the participants' privacy was protected (Borg 2010:11). The researcher informed the principal of the school, the pre-school manager, and the teachers about the anonymity of the research. The research did not reveal any sensitive information about the school, the pupils and the teachers. No one was referred to by their real names in the research, i.e. their anonymity was protected. Finally, after the thesis was completed, the data was deleted permanently.

3.9 Limitations of the study

It is acknowledged that there are limitations in qualitative studies. One limitation of this present study is the position and presence of the researcher in the classroom. The limiting factor to consider is that the teachers and even the children may have behaved differently from what they would do in their regular day-to-day activities.

Another limitation of the study is that when the audio-recorder was used in the pre-school classroom during the children's free play, the children's conversations were sometimes not as clear as they should have been. A better approach could have been for the researcher to use two recording devises to ensure that voices were clearly recorded. In addition, the study would probably have been strengthened if a video-recording device had been used to see the children's manipulation of toys in more detail and the actual dramatic and pretend play that occurred during the children's activities. However, despite the fact that this study was on a small scale, it is still believed that the observational data collected and interviews with the two teachers in the classroom provided enough information and data to answer the research questions addressed in the study.

4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the research on the pre-school literacy-promoting activities which were carried out in the case study pre-school. As stated in the previous chapter, observations and teacher interviews were the methods employed. The supplementary field notes provided context for the audio-recordings during all the observations.

In section 4.2, a description of the data acquired through the non-participant observations is presented. These observations were held in the pre-school classroom with a similar activity schedule every day. The researcher observed the following categories of activities that happened in the classroom. First, she observed the indoor play activities in the morning after the children had arrived, which involved pretend play and exploratory play. Thereafter, she observed the 'circle time' activities when the children were gathered together, which involved adult-child conversations about, for example, the weather, calendar, concept review (alphabet and shapes of the week), which was followed by storytime. Thirdly, she observed the snacks and meal times sessions and, finally, the worksheet activities involving, for example, drawing, tracing and painting of shapes, alphabet letters, and numbers. During the observations, the presence of the researcher did not influence the classroom routines since the teachers had already introduced the researcher as a visitor in the classroom prior to the observation period. The children did not thus spend time figuring out who the researcher was or experience distractions in participating in their activities. As pointed out in Chapter 3, pseudonyms have replaced the real names of the pre-schoolers when presenting the results in this chapter.

In section 4.3, the interviews with the two teachers from the case study will be presented. The interviewed teachers are referred to as Jane and Julia, who are the head teacher and assistant respectively. The interviews were semi-structured and the questions ranged from their background to their different experiences and views on teaching in the pre-school classroom.

4.2 Observations

4.2.1   Observations during indoor play

The indoor play activities were a free play time activity which began as soon as the children arrived in the classroom and which lasted for 30 minutes on a normal day. During the indoor play activities, the children participated in several exploratory play and pretend play activities. Most of the play occurred between the children. However, the researcher was only able to observe one child, a pair or a group of children at a time during each session. Between October 17th, 2016 and December, 4th 2016, the researcher observed 17 sessions of pretend play and exploratory play activities altogether. The researcher has classified situations whereby the children individually manipulated and explored objects or toys in the classroom as exploratory play. There were six sessions of pretend play and 11 sessions of exploratory play activities. Each of these play sessions lasted for about 3-5 minutes. The exploratory play experiences involved both verbal and non-verbal communication. The researcher observed that the children creatively used their imaginary skills during the indoor play. The children participated in these and other similar activities, for example, putting puzzles together, playing with toy animals, small cars, building blocks, and other construction toys available to them in the classroom. They manipulated these objects mostly with their hands in various creative ways.

During these indoor activities, the teachers provided a variety of art resources, such as costumes, props, coloured papers, markers, and crayons, which were set out in boxes and on tables for the children in the classroom. The children seemed to enjoy using these materials made available to them throughout the play sessions. The researcher observed that the children used blocks and building toys in many ways, for example building a complex structure with lego blocks and riding small cars in the classroom. The teachers monitored the children's play, gave suggestions when necessary, and responded accordingly when called upon during play. The following is an example of one specific experience during the observations:

Toy (Horse) Manipulation

> John sees a toy horse among the supply of toys in the classroom, he picks it up,
> inspects and manipulates it in different ways, such as making it 'jump' and
> subsequently drops it to play with other children. Later, Karen picks it up, bites
> the tail and smiles at it.

This exploration lasted for about five minutes. According to Vygotsky (1978), when children create an imaginary situation, take on roles and follow a set of rules determined by those specific roles, they develop the ability for external and internal actions that play important functions in the development of higher mental functions. Vygotsky further discusses that play is crucial in achieving mastery of objects and promoting symbolic ability (Bodrova and Leong 2015). Vygotsky (1978:97) asserts that:

> Play provides a transitional stage in this direction whenever an object (for example a
> stick) becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of horse from real horse. The child
> cannot as yet detach thought from object. The child's weakness is that in order to imagine
> a horse, he needs to define his action by means of using 'the-horse-in-the-stick' as the
> pivot. But all the same, the basic structure determining the child's relation to reality is
> radically changed at this crucial point, because the structure of his perception changes.

This is to say that, according to Vygotsky (1978:97), children's meaning in play becomes the 'central point' while objects are moved from a dominant to a subordinate position.

Another specific example which was observed was when a group of three children seemed to be curious about what happened when objects were being manipulated in different ways and from different angles.

Doll Manipulation

> Sasha picked up a doll and turned it upside down, making it walk with its head.
> This fascinated her and she reported it to a teacher, who described the
> consequence of that action in real life as a 'dangerous way of walking because

one can really get hurt if you walk with your head'. The teacher gave more explanations to the fact that it was abnormal for human beings to walk with their heads.

Adults do not only purposely provide children the opportunity to engage in activities, but they also give detailed explanations and provide information on how to act and conduct oneself in an acceptable way. This does not automatically mean a one-way learning procedure, but rather should allow children take an active role and give them the opportunity of transforming what they are given into their own understanding (Mercer 2004:123).

In another observation session, a group of children focused on the 'book corner', where they picked up storybooks, flipped through them and looked at the pictures. A pair started with this reading activity and attracted more of the children. The following interaction was initiated after Sasha picked up a book, opened it, and seemed to be looking at the pictures.

Sequence 1: Social interaction

Sasha: Which one do you like best?

Kayla: Bananas!

Sasha: I like pineapples! They make me growww! (laughs)

Daniel: I like blueberries! They make me healthy!

Sasha: I like to swim!

Daniel: I like T.V!

Sasha: I like to swim with my sister.

Nathalia: That's a Daddy bear and a baby bear.

Kayla: No I think it's a mummy bear…

When talking about learning approach and the benefit of storybooks or print materials in the classroom environment, Chen and McNamee (2011) note that:

A book provides scaffolding for a child's story, whether or not the child can read the words in the book—pictures in the book prompt the child's elaborations of the storyline, and turning pages suggests a sequence of events. In terms of learning approach, the book provides a focus for the child's attention and helps her to persist in the activity. The book also promotes goal orientation by serving as a concrete reminder of progress toward the activity goal.

(Chen and McNamee 2011:71)

Furthermore, the researcher could see the connection between social interaction and cognitive development from the fact that other children were listening to and learning from Sasha and Daniel talking about the benefit of their favourite fruits in the above dialogue. In addition, Kayla corrected Nathalia and drew her attention to the actual sex of the picture bear. Vygotsky emphasizes these teaching behaviours that go on between the child and persons in her environment in his notion of scaffolding. Vygotsky (1978) stresses that learning awakens in children a variety of internal developmental processes that can operate only when they interact with more competent people in their environment and in cooperation with their peers. Some of the children in the classroom were older and more competent than the others, and therefore provided scaffolding in the above interaction. According to Barton (2004), children's learning is always in a context and therefore scaffolding is provided by this situation.

The children were also involved in more than one kind of activity or play at any time. They seemed to change objects, events and locations. For example, two of the four children, Kayla and Daniel, who were engaged in the book corner reading activity, quickly left for the costume dress play while the remaining two, Sasha and Nathalia, remained for more than five minutes, just looking at the pictures. It seems that one child may be more capable of completing a task than another. It was observed that Sasha influenced and strengthened Nathalia in the book corner and it seemed that Sasha and Nathalia were able to sustain and complete the book reading task compared to the other pair of Kayla and Daniel. Based on Vygotsky (1978), a more knowledgeable peer can strengthen the competency of a lesser knowledgeable peer, thereby promoting a slightly higher level of competence. Overall Sasha was acting as the more competent peer for Nathalia.

In one group activity, a group of three boys tried to use building blocks to construct a road and rode a toy racing car on the 'constructed road'. The researcher observed that this play activity helped a child to repeat an event of the past or predict the future. The following discussion is an extract from the researcher's recording during this observation.

Sequence 2: Pretend play/building blocks

Peter: Can you help me fix this thing?

Teacher: Oh yeah…There you go!... What have you tried to build?

Peter: A long road to travel to China.

Teacher: China? Have you been there before?

Peter: To Hong Kong!

Teacher: Oh!

Daniel: Australia!

Teacher: Oh! Nice.

Peter: I will go there in summer.

Teacher: Awesome! With Daddy and Mummy?

Peter: Yes!

Teacher: Hmmm…but a car could only drive there from a closer location …not from Norway. You could only fly there with an aeroplane from Norway.

Peter was able to think about his last journey or his past holiday events and also communicated his intention to travel with his parents in the summer, even though he imagined travelling to China from Norway in a car. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that a child starts with an imaginary situation that is initially very close to real experiences, as one could see from the above dialogue.

He notes that:

> A reproduction of the real situation takes place…This means that in the original situation rules operate in a condensed and compressed form. There is very little of the imaginary. It is an imaginary situation that has just occurred. Play is more nearly recollection of something that has actually happened than imagination. It is more memory in action than a novel imaginary situation.

<div align="right">Vygotsky (1978:103)</div>

In another observation session, some of the children were involved in dress-up play with supplies of costumes in the classroom. The children were fascinated with this play and, as they dressed up, they interacted with the teacher as follows:

Sequence 3: Pretend play/pirates

Kayla: Look what I'm doing!

Teacher: I see that …

Sasha: You like it?

Teacher: Looks good.

Daniel: Look! I'm a pirate!

The majority of the children were very interested in this dress-up play and quickly selected one costume or the other. Some of the costumes featured some characters that were very special or familiar to the children, for example characters that they had read about in storybooks or seen on television. These costumes included a princess, dragon, pirates and dance costumes. The dress-up play activities allowed for different experimentation with materials and props and to pretend to be the adults represented by the costumes. An interesting observation was when a pair linked their dress-up play to the story they had been told about pirates the previous day during storytime. It happened as follows:

Daniel and John decided they would dress like pirates. They both put on clothing and hats to represent pirates. They seemed to put on the threatening look of a pirate and a refined bodily movement, which the majority of the children enjoyed so much.

Another group activity which the researcher observed during the indoor play activities was when the children used one object to represent another, or situations where the children integrated imaginary objects into their play. An example is as follows in Sequence 4: Anna and Emma told Peter that they would take a train home along with a stroller and a baby. They created an imaginary train with child-sized chairs in the classroom. From this example, one could see that some of the children (Emma and Anna) were pretending to be adults or parents, which is a typical feature of pretend play.

Sequence 4: Pretend play/train

Anna: Good bye, Peter.

Emma: Good bye! We are going home with our baby sister with the train!

Peter: Bye! See you tomorrow!

Anna: (sits in the 'train' and moves the push chair back and forth)

In addition to pretending to be adults, they also speak like adults (i.e. 'We are going home with our baby sister with the train!' and 'See you tomorrow').

Another pair, Mary and Selma, displayed behaviours that reflected a dentist and a mother with a baby doll who was the patient. Mary was the dentist, while Selma had her baby sitting on a push chair. She knocked on the chair and the dentist, Mary, politely asked Selma to come in. Selma picked up her baby and gave her to the dentist, informing her that the baby had come to see the dentist. Mary took the baby doll and tried to open its mouth and at the same time laughed.

It was interesting to observe that the children were able to make wonderful scenarios and at the same time exchanged spoken language. Vygotsky (1978:56) notes the significance of pretend play activities among children in his concept of internalization in cognitive development,

which posits that information from external activity is transformed and becomes internalized through language. Vygotsky (1978) further regards play as a significant part of both language development and a child's understanding of his external environment as a result of the constant speech that occurs either within them or with other people around them. Therefore, pretend play can promote both cognitive and literacy development.

During another observation, the children interacted with their teachers, looking at the environmental worksheet prints on the wall in the classroom. They communicated and shared knowledge and information, especially regarding colours during their interaction. During the indoor play that day, one of the children commented on the worksheet prints on the wall as follows in Sequence 5. This resulted in other children also engaging in dialogue and making contributions.

Sequence 5: Environmental print

Kayla: *(to a teacher and pointing to the wall*) See! That is my own!

Teacher: Which of them Kayla?

Kayla: That one over there.

Teacher: Are you sure Kayla…I don't think that was your work…That's yours over there. Isn't it?

Children: That is mine! That one is mine! That one over there is mine.

Selma: I had a lot of pink on my worksheet!

Peter: I had a lot of purple!

Teacher: Ok, Ok I'm sure that all of you have one …all your names were written at the back of it yesterday. Don't worry.

The use of environmental print in the classroom cannot be overemphasized in terms of literacy stimulation. According to Wolfersberger et al. (2004:112), print-rich environments play a central role in behaviour and literacy development among children in the pre-school classroom. Wolfersberger et al. (2004) in their research record various studies which have focused on

environmental print and on the presence of literacy materials in terms of amount, types, variety and display. Wolfersberger et al. (2004) clearly show that environmental print arrangement and interaction have behavioural consequences for young children during pre-school years.

During the observations, the children also spoke to each other and explained to each other about an idea or something they had knowledge of, an example of which is in Sequence 6:

Sequence 6: Scaffolding through drawing

Sasha: Let me show you Kayla (she picks up a paper and coloured pen and tries to draw something) a princess and ehm ehm….

Kayla: (got a paper and coloured pen and tried to draw too) Look what I draw! A big head with big eyes! (smiles)

Sasha: That's a big head! (laughs) See my own eyes… the princess has one eye…oh no!

Kayla: Oh no!

Sasha: I will make it two eyes…. Yes! You have to make your eyes small and not big, ok Kayla.

Kayla: (leaves the location)

Sasha: Kayyla!

Throughout this experience, Sasha acted the role of 'teacher', while Kayla acted as the learner. Sasha corrected and gave directions on what was necessary to be done on the drawing. She told Kayla politely what she ought to do and kept calling on Kayla, even when Kayla left the location, thus acting as a good instructor. Barton (2004) reminds us that early writing is a social practice, no less so than reading. Barton (2004:157) further asserts that children generally follow 'individual coherent paths of development'. Barton (2004) refers to Ferreiro and Teberosky (1979), who regarded this development as a 'set of stages' where the children often start with drawing and later mature into increased co-ordination for writing.

Before the thirty minutes allocated to this indoor play elapsed in each session, the head teacher announced it was time to tidy up toys and props in the classroom. There was a routine song, usually played with the desktop computer in the classroom, which signalled and encouraged the children to tidy up. After tidying up, the children arranged their chairs and got ready for circle time.

4.2.2   Observations during circle time

The circle time activities came after the indoor play activities on each day. The children and the teachers on all occasions assisted in the re-positioning of the child-sized chairs in the classroom, placing them around the perimeter of a circle for the 'circle time activity'. The circle time activities lasted for approximately thirty minutes. There were several different activities incorporated in circle time, including storytime, which took the most of the time, namely about twenty-five minutes, while other activities, such as calendar, the weather and review of the letter or shape of the week, or a simple warm up activity, lasted for approximately the first five minutes. The total number of storytime sessions observed was nine altogether. In addition, the storybooks available in the classroom were suitable for the children's age and skill level and these were arranged on a child-sized shelf in one corner of the classroom known as the 'book corner'. There were different stories on different days. Examples of storybooks read throughout the observation period were, *Rainy Day, Joey with the Jack, Joey the Kangaroo, Grumpy Bird*, *Wet feet, The red coat* and *The Cat in the Hat*. The storybooks had both text and pictures. The teacher pointed at pictures when reading to the children. The children participated in the interaction and listened to the information given by the teacher, which the researcher observed as an appropriate balance.

During the circle time observations, Julia began the circle time with a rollcall of class attendance. This was followed up with the calendar review and she asked the children what the day's date was. Sequence 7 is one such example from the circle time observations, during which the following conversation occurred:

Sequence 7: Circle time conversation

Teacher: Oh well, let's talk about....Ok, what day is it today? Does anyone know?

Children: I know…I know!

Teacher: If you know, just put your hands up. Which day is it?

Child 1: Friday!

Teacher: Friday! Oh I wish…No it's not….sorry.

Child 2: (Interrupts teacher) I know what it is!

Teacher: Which day?

Child 2: Wednesday.

Teacher: Wednesday!...Well done Mary...It is indeed Wednesday.

What's the Wednesday? Here we go….

Child 3: Wednesday…

Teacher: Wednesday, the middle of the week! Fabulous… Does anyone know what today's date is?

Children: (muttering)

Teacher: Yesterday was 18th and what comes after 18?

Children: 19!

Teacher: Well...someone has to call it.

Child 4: 19!

Teacher: 19! Yes, it's the 19th of October...We are still in October.

Most conversation was shared by the teacher and the children and it was not dominated by the teacher alone. In Sequence 7, the teacher aimed to elicit the day of the week and the date from

the children (i.e. 'What day is it today?' and 'Does anyone know what today's date is?') and was quick to praise the children when they gave correct answers (e.g. 'Well done Mary' and 'Fabulous'). The above conversation took place on Wednesday the 19th October and the weather was a bit cloudy. Thereafter, the teacher discussed with the children what the weather looked like and later told them what they were going to be doing that day after their snack time. There was going to be an outdoor trip to the woods where they would be making flatbread on an open fire, which would be eaten with butter. The teacher went on to tell the children the health benefits of the flatbread and sought their opinion about 'flatbread and butter'.

Furthermore, the children were given the opportunity to interact on each topic of discussion. For example, the letter J was the letter of the first observation week. The teacher reviewed the words that started with the letter J, as in, for example, *juice, jug, jar, jelly,* and *jack in the box*. This was vocabulary training for the children using the letters of the alphabet. The teacher further expanded on the number four (4) and connected or related it to their ages. Two of the children were four-year-olds in the classroom.

As soon as the teacher took up a storybook, all of the children became very attentive and quiet. The following storytime introduction is an example during the circle time observation of storytime:

Sequence 8: Storytime -The rainy day

Teacher: We have got a story to read guys and it's called...(*showing the children the book)*

Child 1: Rainy day!

Teacher: Yes... The rainy day!

Child 2: That is Rebecca

Teacher: Ok, let's have a look at the story.

Child 1: That's an umbrella.

Teacher: Yes...that's an umbrella.

Child 2: That's a raincoat.

Teacher: Yes, yes, yes.

Children: (*muttering and excited*)

Teacher: Shh shh Ok ladybirds…let's have a look at the story.

(The children became quiet and the story about a rainy day began)

One can see from the above dialogue that the children were eliciting information and vocabulary by looking at the pictures in the book and also from the cover page. This was a typical pre-reading strategy before the reading started in ordwer to engage the pupils in the story. From the above interaction, the children interrupted the teacher on some occasions when they found a picture fascinating during storytime. For example, when the teacher was introducing the story in the interaction above, Child 1 and Child 2 quickly interrupted to name what they could recognise from the cover page of the story book (i.e. *umbrella* and *raincoat*). During the storybook reading, there were comments by the children and the teacher followed up with questions, exclamations and comments, for instance:

Sequence 9: Interaction during storytime

Teacher: Who likes splashing in puddles here?

Children: Meeeeeee! Me Me!

Teacher: Yes I know…Yesterday, who was splashing in the puddles?

Child 1: Selma.

Teacher: Selma was! That's true.

The story continued and suddenly…

Child 3: *(Interrupts the teacher)* Oh now its slippery... (*looking at picture in the book*)

Teacher: Yea and its windy…what's going to happen when the wind blows?

Children: (*all quiet*)

Teacher: Have you had that happen to you? Look at this… (*showing them*

pictures in the book

Child 4: Not me!

Teacher: Not you…maybe your daddies and mummies

Child 5: The umbrella is flying away.

Child 6: The tree is falling down into the water!

Teacher: Yes…it's a very wind-blowing day…isn't it?

Child 7: She has to get out of there!

Teacher: Oh yes! You're right.

(The story continues)

In the above example, the teacher linked the story to real life situations by asking the children questions that related to their real-life experiences, for example Selma splashing in puddles yesterday and 'Have you had that happen to you?' In this way, the content became personalised. In addition, the teacher also asked the children questions during the story reading which provided them with the opportunity for cognitive and literacy development by creating more room for thought, interaction and learning for example, 'What's going to happen when the wind blows?' This type of question also encouraged abstract thinking. According to Barton (1994:140), 'Reading to children is an activity which is easily identifiable and obviously related to literacy'. This type of conversation was observed on several different occasions and involved getting attention from the adults, asking a question, providing an answer, and giving feedback, a process which Barton (1994:143) refers to as 'a common building block of spoken interaction'. The adult is able to restructure the whole interaction and even convert the child's cues or sounds into responses, which aids the whole conversation. By so doing, the adult or teacher is creating the child's meaning and also teaching them how to participate in a simple conversation in relation to their literacy development (Barton 1994:143). Barton further elaborates that there are different

forms and ways of reading to children which would vary according to the age of the child in the pre-school.

Another extract during storytime observation was when the story 'Joey and the Kangaroo' was being read to the children by the teacher. The following interaction in Sequence 10 occurred:

Sequence 10: Storytime- Kangaroo

Teacher: Where do Kangaroos come from?

Children: (*all quiet)*

Teacher: Do Kangaroos live in Norway?

Children: Nooooooo

Teacher: Do they live in America?

Child 1: In the desert!

Teacher: Well… they live in the bush…yes that's like the desert … in Australia!

Very very very very far away from here. Half way across the world! Yes.

Children: (*all quiet)*

Teacher: In Australia, in the shadow of the great red rock lived a little kangoroo called Joey. It was too small to jump by itself but Joey did not mind because mummy's pouch was safe and comfy… just right for a baby Kangaroo.

Child 2: Baby Kangaroo!

Teacher: Actually, a baby Kangaroo is called a Joey

Child 3: Mummy Kangaroo!

(story continues)

The teacher started by asking the children if they knew where kangaroos came from, i.e. she tried to use their own background knowledge about the topic. When they could not answer, she tried to help them by asking questions such as 'Do Kangaroos live in Norway?' and 'Do they live in America?'. When a child answered 'In the desert', the teacher elaborated by saying '…they live in the bush…yes that's like the desert … in Australia', thus helping them to develop both their knowledge and vocabulary. These interactions during storytime showed great enthusiasm exhibited by the children and they are also linked to the development of literacy-related skills.

According to Barton (1994:144), children can benefit very much from storytime by learning many things about life, about animals, about adults, about the family, about knowledge and how to acquire it, about human interaction, social practices and particularly about literacy. It is also important to note that storytime provides the opportunity for children to build language and vocabulary especially (Barton 2004). For example, the above interaction gave the children the opportunity to learn and know the name of the Kangaroo and learn about where they live and come from.

The teacher seemed to engage the children in what was being read to them which further promoted their critical and imaginative thinking. According to Maclean (2008:4), when an adult engages pre-school children in what is being read to them, it improves their ability to think in a logical way and also enhance their emotional development. Sequence 11 is one such example from the storytime observation:

Sequence 11: Storytime- Share

Teacher: Today we are going to read a book called Share…everybody listening?

Child 1: Share?

Teacher: Yes, because that is a very important thing we have to do …isn't it?... with our toys! OK.

(The story begins)

Teacher: I love my fluffy teddy, but baby wants him too!

Children: Ohh…

Teacher: Share says mummy. So I do. And now my teddy is soggy and sticky up with food.

Child 2: Oh dear…

(Continues)

Teacher: I love my puzzles, but baby wants it too.

Child 3: Sorry baby…

 Teacher: Shall I share? I ask mummy.

Teacher: (*to the children)* What do you think?

Children: Yes …

Teacher: Mummy comes to with our sister and we want to have her too.

Shall we share our mummy?

Teacher : What do you think ?

Children: Yes.

Child 2: I share my mummy!

Teacher: Yes, because you are a big sister.

Child 3: I am a big brother, I share my mummy with my sister…

Children: (*all talking)*

Teacher: Ok, ok. Good! Some of you are the oldest and some of you are the youngest in your family and you are in the middle (*points) …*I know that…ok

Teacher: Ok ladybirds!

From the above interaction, the children are prompted to think of times when they have also felt the same as the situation the story presents to them, therefore story time can enhance children's

social and emotional learning and competence (Zinsser 2015). In addition, the above dialogue during storytime could help support and model rules and expectations in the classroom, such as sharing of toys, care and tolerance, and so on.

Sequence 12: Storytime 'Wet Feet'

Teacher: We are going to read a book called 'Wet feet'…are we ready?

Children: Yes!

Teacher: Wilf had a rod and a net. Wilf and Dad got to the river.

Child 1: Is that river?

Teacher: Yes, that looks like a big river…let's see what's going to happen.

Children: *(all quiet)*

Teacher: "The river is deep," said Wilf; "We can fish in that bit," said Dad.

Child 1: My Daddy had a big fish from the river before.

Teacher: Really! That's awesome…ok, let's see what's going to happen.

Children: (*all quiet)*

Teacher: "Let's get fishing" said Wilf. "I see fish in this deep bit" said Dad.

Children: Oh!

Child 2: Where is the fish?

Teacher: We'll see…I guess the fish is still inside the river. Let's find out if they got a big fish.

(the story continued as follows)

Teacher: "Let's feed the fish," said Dad; "I can feel the fish" said Wilf. Reel it in then said Dad. It was not a fish. It was a lot of weed!

Children: Oh no!

Child 4: Is that a weed?

Teacher: Yes, that is a weed. Poor Wilf…he got a weed instead.

(Story continued)

Teacher: I can feel a big fish, said Dad

Child 5: Is there a fish inside the water?

Teacher: Hold on… we are about to find out.

(Story continued)

Teacher: It's a big fish… Dad got his feet wet, Wilf got his feet wet.

In the above storytime sequence, the children were talking and listening very attentively, especially to know if Wilf caught a fish in the story. The researcher discovered that storytime gave the children a good opportunity to ask intelligent questions that assess knowledge and comprehension, which is relevant in literacy development, for example when Child 2 asked the teacher where the fish was and Child 5 asked the teacher if there was a fish inside the water.

Another extract during storytime is as follows:

Sequence 13: The red coat

Teacher: Our story book today is titled the red coat (*with emphasis on red*)

Children: We already read it.

Teacher: Already read it?

Children: Yes.

Teacher: Was it Miss Julia?

Children: Yessss!

Teacher: I see…alright…but should we read it again?

Children: Yessss!

Teacher: Ok, good…let's get started.

(Story begins)

Teacher: Chip was a king. "I am a king" Chip said to Mum. "I need a king's coat," he said.

Children: A red coat!!!

Teacher: Well done ladybirds! Whose favourite colour is red here?

Children: Me, Me, Not me, not me! (*all talking at the same time*)

Teacher: Ok ok…it's fine if your favourite colour is not red. My favourite colour is not red either!

Children: (all quiet)

(Story continued)

Teacher: Mum took Chip to a shop. Chip put on a red coat but it's a bit big! Who among you has had this experience before?

Child 1: My coat is not big, …my baby brother's shirt is big.

Teacher: Oh, that means it could probably fit better when he grows bigger.

 Teacher: Ok, let's see what happens.

(Story continued…)

From the above interaction during the story time observation in the classroom, it was obvious that the children could remember stories that had been read to them. They completed sentences about the story on their own showing skills needed in comprehension, which is also linked to literacy development. For example, Child 1 in the above sequence could connect the story to real life experiences in the comment 'My coat is not big, my baby brother's shirt is big'. Storytime in the classroom was a time where teachers in the classroom were usually prepared to accept responses equally, thereby carrying all the children along. Finally, the children learned more about the colour 'red' from reading the story with pictures and texts. After the end of the circle time, the children were told it was time to wash their hands for snacks time.

4.2.3 Snacks time/Mealtime

The conversations that went on around snacks time and mealtimes were also recorded by the researcher. Throughout the observations, the snacks time usually lasted approximately 15 minutes, while the mealtime lasted for about 30 minutes. The total number of snacks times and mealtime conversation sessions recorded were six altogether. The researcher found few examples of explanatory talk or narratives which occurred during mealtime. There were a chain of conversations occurring at the same time during the observations. The teachers assisted the children when called upon during snacks time and reminded the children at intervals about the remaining time for either the snacks time or mealtime. As in other activities in the classroom, the adults were usually present during snacks time or mealtime. As a result, meaningful interaction between the adults and children occurred from time to time on these occasions. Sequence 12 below is an extract from the researcher's recording during a snacks time observation in the classroom.

Sequence 14: Snacks time

Child 1: hmm…yoghurt I like it…yoghurt ..healthy… hmm

Teacher: Yes… yoghurt is healthy.

Child 2: I had yoghurt yesterday.

Child 3: I have blueberries today.

Teacher: Remember all, when we are eating, we sit properly with legs under the table.

Child 4: I have biscuits today.

Teacher: Selma! (to child 4) Eat also some grapes and apple okay, It's good for you.

Child 5: Biscuits are not good for you?

Teacher: Well, you can eat biscuits sometimes, but yes you can't eat so many…It's better fruits and vegetables…

Child 5: Only one.

Teacher: Yes…and then you are rarely sick …and these are not proper biscuits, this is salty.

Child 6: Salty?

Teacher: Yes, salty! That means it contains a lot of salt.

The researcher observed that a good deal of learning took place during mealtime, for example by talking about what they were eating (e.g. *yoghurt, biscuits, blueberries, grapes*). Vocabulary was practised and enhanced, for example when the teacher used the word *salty*, which she needed to explain ('That means it contains a lot of salt'). According to Massey (2004:230), vocabulary can be enriched when an adult uses infrequent words and develops linguistic concepts. The teacher also gave advice about healthy foods (e.g. 'Yoghurt is healthy', 'Eat also some grapes and apple okay, It's good for you' and '…and then you are rarely sick').

Snacks time or mealtime can contribute to literacy development since children's manners and social skills are being developed during this relaxed atmosphere. They have the opportunity in the classroom to listen, ask questions about their food, and also talk to each other about what they may be thinking about at the set time. Sequence 13 below is another extract from the researcher's recording during meal time:

Sequence 15: Mealtime (lunch)

Anna: (*tries hard to open her lunch park)*

Teacher: Do you need some help Anna?

Anna: No thanks …I will do it all by myself.

Teacher: Ok, but be careful not to spill your lunch.

Anna: (opens it) I did it!

Teacher: That's good, you can now start eating.

Kayla: I love to have tomatoes in my sandwich for lunch…hmmm…yummy.

Selma: I don't like tomatoes in my sandwich, I love cucumber instead!

Teacher: That's okay, tomatoes and cucumbers are both vegetables with lots of vitamins and minerals.

Kayla: Is tomatoes vitamins and mi…ne..rals?

Teacher: Yes! The fruits and vegetables we eat gives us the vitamins and minerals our bodies need to grow and be healthy.

Kayla: Grow and be healthy…so I don't get sick?

Teacher: Yes, you are right dear!

Selma: Is cucumber vitamins and mi…mi…rals

Teacher: MINERALS *(helps child 2 pronounce it correctly),* yes sure, cucumber is a type of vegetable. It's very good for you.

Nathalia: Is carrot good for me?

Teacher: Yes, carrots are very good for you. They are packed with lots of vitamins and minerals as well.

Peter: Is pasta good for me?

Teacher: Pasta is good meal for you, but it is not a vegetable. Vegetables are usually added to it, like you have carrots in it. Okay ladybirds we have a couple of minutes to finish up our food. Sit properly while you eat please.

Children: okay.

 From the above interaction during lunch time, the researcher observed that the children developed some essential self-help skills during snacks time or mealtime. For example, Anna preferred to open her lunch box herself just like the other children did in the classroom, even though hers was a bit difficult. In the current research, the children in the classroom had the opportunity to learn some skills for effective social conversation. For example, Kayla commented that she loved tomatoes, giving Selma the thought to make her own comment about

what she will prefer in her sandwich instead. Moreover, the children learned about the benefit of the fruits and vegetables they had in their lunch pack. According to Massey (2004:229) mealtimes can be a great time to develop strong oral language skills but might be overlooked as an essential context for cognitive development.

4.2.4   Worksheets and printables

The worksheets and printables were usually the last activity for the children and involved, for example, drawing, tracing and painting of shapes, the alphabet, and numbers. Most of these activities were also done during free play in the morning and reviewed during circle time. It is important to note that the classroom was arranged and organised with different colourful boxes containing colour crayons and markers, letters of the alphabet, numbers, shapes and other worksheet materials for the children, such as plain papers, tapes, and safe scissors. Before each day, the teacher had prepared worksheets that were related to the theme of the week in the classroom, for example connect the dots alphabets and basic shapes worksheet. The support for literacy development was evident in the classroom because of the wide variety of printed material in regular use (Lancy 2004). In addition, the classroom contained resources, such as computers and a first aid box. The worksheet activities were not performed every day since the worksheet theme was generally reviewed earlier in the day during circle time. Generally, the teacher played an important role in helping the young children meet their learning needs.

    When talking about children participating in different worksheet activities, Chen and McNamee (2011) note that:

> When participating in activities with contrasting goals, materials, or cognitive demands, children experiment with different approaches, observe approaches that peers use, and can begin to appreciate why teachers insist on quiet at times, encourage interaction and talk to each other on another occasion, and coach them every so often in saying, ''Take your time, look closely…'' Supporting the development of learning approaches does not require a new curriculum. Instead, it depends on the teacher's conscious awareness of the importance of variety in

classroom activities, and explicit facilitation of the use of a learning approach responsive to the nature and goal of specific activity.

(Chen and McNamee 2011:77)

In this study, during the classroom observations, the children usually observed other children's paintings or drawings. The teachers gave room for interaction among the children and also encouraged questions, explanations or exchange of ideas. The teachers were able to support literacy development through thematic planned materials, the organization of these learning materials, and how they were set out. In addition, these printable or worksheet activities were well paced in a way that would help keep the pre-schoolers working on the activities, for example immediately after lunch. Furthermore, the teachers made comments that encouraged the young children, which were very important and helpful while the children were engaged in the worksheet activity. The following interaction occurred in the classroom during the painting worksheet activities:

Sequence 16: Worksheet activity -painting

Teacher: Hello sweetheart! Look at that…wow! This is so beautiful.

Sasha: I will show it to my mummy.

Teacher: I think so too.

Sasha: But it's not pink

Teacher: You actually wanted pink colour?

Sasha: Because pink is my favourite colour and my mummy also love pink …

Teacher: That's okay sweetheart. I'm sure mummy will love this because it's also beautiful…

Nathalia: I have pink on mine.

Sasha: I don't have pink here *(wears a sad face)*.

Teacher: *(to Sasha)* Look closely, Sasha. You will find pink colour crayon, it's right at your front … take your time okay.

Sasha: I found it! *(smiles)*

Teacher: That's good Sasha!

Chen and McNamee (2011:77) argue that '…interactive support helps young children in specific learning activities. It also helps them develop the mental awareness of learning new approaches, and ones they can use in other activities'. Furthermore, when talking about the contribution of worksheet activity materials in the pre-school classroom, Chen McNamee 2011:73 note that:

> Activity materials are diverse, including manipulatives, books, pattern blocks, crayons, and recorded music. Cognitive demands include familiarity with books and story listening skills (for Reading Books activity), fine motor skills to hold and manipulate a crayon (in Experimenting with Crayons), visual discriminations skills (for Solving Pattern Block Puzzles), understanding part-whole relationships (for Building a Model Car), and a repertoire of gross motor movements (for Moving to Music).

Finally, the researcher also noted from the observations that the children spent more time on worksheet activities when an adult was standing close to them than when they were far away from them.

4.3 Teacher interviews

4.3.1   Teacher Jane

The interviews with the teachers were conducted individually. Jane was the head teacher of the class and had been teaching for eight years. Jane had a Bachelor of Science in Biological Chemistry and a Higher National diploma in Early Education and Child Care. She had a great deal of experience in teaching English as a foreign language in Britain before she moved to Norway a decade ago.

In the beginning of the interview, general questions were asked to learn more about Jane's teaching experience in pre-school. She had taught the target class of 3 to 4 year-olds for two years. When asked if the pre-school classroom followed a curriculum, Jane replied they did and that they had divided the year up into specific themes, which usually lasted for about two weeks '… and within that theme, we try to help the children learn something about …see if it's wild animals, we do like a wild animal hunt outside, we have wild animals to play with, we look at them, name them and do colouring shades and read story books about them… that kind of thing'. Jane further said that they structured their teaching on a weekly basis by making a weekly plan.

When asked about how much freedom they were given as a teacher to decide on what and how to teach, she said they had a good deal of freedom, even though they had specific things they had to do on a typical day in class, '…but the rest in craft and how the children learn is really quite our own thing'.

As for teaching aims, Jane responded that her teaching aim in pre-school was to encourage the children to enjoy learning, because if they did, they were much more open and willing to tick on new information, and she wanted them to have fun, feel safe and feel loved.

When asked about what a typical day consisted of, Jane responded that firstly that the children came in and had free play for an hour in the morning, but within that hour they would do art craft of, for example, fingerprints or animals that was probably relevant to the theme or they would work on a worksheet of either learning a letter or number. Secondly, they would have circle time for 25 minutes. According to Jane, they may do some singing, but most importantly, they usually made sure they read a story. Sometimes they may do some letter work or number work and try as much as possible to make the story relate to the theme and also try to make it fun for the children in order to keep their attention. Jane further explained as follows:

> I try as much as possible to relate the story to the theme, because we do read a lot
> of story...ehm.. a lot more than we used to and I think as the children grow older
> and they get more used, they sit longer and they listen more…and they.. because
> I'm more interested in what's going on in a story, and then if you bring out the
> same book again, they say oh we've read this one, and they can start to remember
> what the story is about or part of the story.

When asked about how the children responded to these activities, Jane believed from her experience that children learned more from simple conversations than when you did letter work with : '…trying to teach them a letter …ehm they don't really pick it up'. They recognised letters or words more from getting them to write their names, listening to them and giving them back to them at this early stage. Jane stated that 'When they say recognise their names, then, they start to see the letters of their names in other children's names and then they start to notice the letters in words like *m* for *Mandy*, *m* for *Molly*, and so on'. She believed that it was just a case of repetition and also listening to the children. Jane further placed emphasis on adult-child conversations and just doing simple things with the children to get their attention was the key. She explained thus:

> At this early stage, they don't really read, but they do start to recognise letters in words more and more. When they do that, you give it back to them and follow them up by explaining to them. You can use anything around that have those letters which they have pointed out. I usually use big words because I am an adult and I don't have children…ehm…I have never talked at child level, so children in my class tend to use increasingly big vocabulary because I use big words which you don't normally use with children, and I also try to explain to them. The vocabulary expands at this age as well. Even if they are…even if they don't have English as a first language and don't have any English when they come to class, they start to pick up, because we talk to them all the time and they talk to us and when we're doing an activity, we talk to them, you know, we point things out, and we name them, we ask some questions I mean, make simple comments…so we are always talking at this time.

Jane emphasized that caregivers should not be so much into 'teaching and learning' as into interaction. She also said from her experience that children were more likely to learn more from interaction than from somebody just talking to them. Jane believed that conversation could also build up their vocabulary. Jane also emphasised that the children also loved free play and they used a good deal of language and imagination in their free play. They particularly loved to have

worksheets or craft than one-to-one connections with an adult '…they don't touch many of the activities on the tables yet, but if an adult goes over and starts to, then they will all come and start to do it'. She subsequently emphasized the importance of an experienced adult or a professional in this context, which made the teacher aware and conscious of the role of interaction in the children's development.

When asked about activities that were particularly significant to Jane, she responded that all the activities were significant but found reading a story to pre-schoolers particularly significant because it captured the children's attention and they seemed to get more motivated and interested in books as a result. It also involved a good deal of conversation and learning. Furthermore, the pictures in the storybooks caught their attention and helped them to remember the story. The children needed to be brought into the story in order to be interested and the story needed to be at their level. It should be read slowly enough and also in an expressive way. Even if you were reading the same ones over and over, if they were good quality stories, the children would learn from them and would also love them. Jane told the researcher about an interesting experience with a child while she was going through a book with a simple rhythm and repetition of words. The child did not read the book but she had just the right words as she turned the page as a result of the repetition. The child mastered the words in the book. As a teacher, she introduced even more storybooks that were suitable for their ages.

On the question of whether the children preferred some activities more than others, Jane responded that the children seemed to be excited about circle time because circle time was so varied. They enjoyed the weather, spontaneous funny movements, storytime, listening to songs especially 'action songs', and storybooks. Secondly Jane said that the children tended to enjoy pretend play '…because they are pirates this week and they've had a lot of fun'. They take things in from real life experiences and then they start to link them together. Sometimes you don't need expensive or complicated equipment'. You set them up and they go on and expand from there even on their own.

When asked about whether some activities were more important than others, Jane said that some activities were more important than others but they had to be child-oriented because, the more the child does it, the more important it is because it is his/her work. When commenting on introducing more of these literacy-promoting activities in pre-school, Jane responded she

would like to see more and better literacy resources than the ones she had got in her cupboard at the time of interview.

Finally, Jane concluded that she had always looked for new ways to bring more into a child's learning and she found out from her experience that it was important to be flexible when dealing with children to make an impact on their learning.

4.3.2 Teacher Julia

Julia was the assistant head teacher in the target pre-school classroom. She had been teaching in this class for almost two years. She had been in the younger pre-school class before she joined this class. She also had experience of teaching of English as a second language to adults and to Norwegian young children from ages 5-7. She had taught Business English to adults in university. Her experience and education was not so extensive, apart from the fact that she was a mother of three children and was a native speaker of English living in Norway.

When asked about following a curriculum, Julia reminded me that she was a classroom assistant but believed there was a curriculum because they had subjects they covered throughout the year related to the time of the year and theme. They did worksheets for the letters A-Z, and numbers 1-20, and read stories related to the theme of the week. On the plan or structure of teaching, Julia said she did not have anything to do with planning.

On the question of how much freedom was given to decide on how and what to teach. Julia said she could make different suggestions to the head-teacher anytime if necessary. Julia further stated '…Ehm…Of course, the head teacher and the pre-school is always open to new ideas because children love new ideas.'

On Julia's teaching aims, she wanted to see children responsible, independent, and learn new words every day because they had many children whose first language was not English. Julia further stated thus:

> Sometimes, children do not even have a clue of some strange words when
> mentioned during circle time, they sometimes don't even remember to ask
> because probably they are too busy trying to imagine what it is from the context

of the conversation. In some other occasion, some children will ask what that means. In both ways they are learning new words whenever they are engaged with this. So I think it is really important to explain to them all the time. Or like I said earlier, assisting them while teaching them to be independent, for example showing them the hook to hang their jacket themselves when they leave all their clothes on the floor and so on and so forth.

According to Julia, when talking about particularly significant activities in pre-school, the morning free play was very important and significant because the children learned how to play and play together well, they learned to cooperate, to share, and they learned manners. Julia also pointed out that '…. circle time is also an important time of the day as well because it helps the children to learn discipline and practise to sit quietly … since they should do more of sitting quietly in later years'. The worksheets, craft, the Lego, the building blocks, the props and toys were also regarded as very significant by Julia in her responses.

On the preference of the activities on the part of the children, Julia emphasized some activities during free play and told the researcher that the children especially enjoyed the dress-up play or costume play, building/construction play, and Lego. Julia further reported that she enjoyed the children's conversations mostly during imaginative play. Julia pointed out that it was important to keep an eye on them when they were engaged in pretend play because the children imagined and acted out amazing roles from real-life experiences. Furthermore, Julia stated:

For the most part children love stories, I think we are very lucky here with the storybooks, toys, costumes and craft that we have available to us in the classroom. The children have great imagination, they love dressing up… the dressing up area is so important to a lot of them. They can do some physical stuffs in the classroom, like climbing in the jungle and falling on the soft areas, which is great for them. They tend to like this family play pretend thing during play and construction stuffs or building like lego…I love lego myself. They also enjoy the book corner a lot. After lunch, we usually tell them to go to the book corner and read a book for about five to ten minutes. Well, they do. Sometimes when you go there after lunch, they are all sitting there with a book, looking through it, and it's

great, I mean it's great … and they have a bit of some quiet resting time, and it's interesting how much they kind of really enjoy that.

On the question of whether to introduce more literacy-promoting activities, Julia concluded that it was also important to take into consideration the ages of these pre-schoolers. Julia said she would not want to make it too formal, but make sure it was all fun and enjoyable for the children while learning. She emphasized playing while learning and learning through play.

Finally, Julia concluded by adding that: 'We could also learn from children as well, find some amusement while taking care of them, which is great for us as well since it is not easy to take care of a bunch of kids.'

5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The current study is about literacy-promoting activities in an English-speaking pre-school in Norway. The previous chapter presented the results of the research which was carried out in the case study pre-school, while the present chapter will discuss the main findings in view of the three research questions of the study in relation to the theory and literature review presented in Chapter 2. The structure of this chapter follows the research questions. Thus, section 5.2 discusses the findings in terms of the kinds of literacy-promoting activities that took place in the pre-school classroom. Section 5.3 discusses what the results show with respect to the role and value of these activities on literacy development in the pre-school classroom. Finally, section 5.4 discusses the teachers' awareness of the role the activities played in the development of the children's literacy. Finally, section 5.5 addresses some implications and recommendations from the study.

5.2 Literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school classroom

The first research question concerns the kinds of literacy-promoting activities that took place in the pre-school classroom, which was investigated through observing the classroom activities and through the teacher interviews. The findings of the study showed that a number of literacy-promoting activities took place in the target classroom. Examples of literacy-promoting activities that took place were children manipulating toys, storybook reading, environmental print, and oral interaction, such as pretend play and adult-child conversations at mealtimes. Other literacy-promoting activities which took place were worksheet activities, such as painting, tracing and the drawing of shapes, letters of the alphabet, and numbers.

It was evident from the findings of this study that the children had a high interest in active-role activities, such as during pretend or dramatic play, the manipulation of different toys, and adult-child interactions during story time and mealtimes. This supports Barton's (1994:133) view that:

Learning does not relate to an individual, but it includes the situation, the activity, and

the participants in it. Also learning is not a passive activity, as many simple views of the

reading process imply; rather it is an active one (as the word activity itself suggests!); the

child learns by being involved in an activity, by being part of the interaction.

Dickinson (2001) also concords with the view that children learn more when they are actively

involved in interactions or conversations. Furthermore, during the interview, Teacher Jane

asserted that an activity is more important than the others if it is child-oriented because the more

involved the child is, the more important it is because it is his/her work.

Based on the researcher's observations in the classroom, for example such as in

sequences one, five and six, it was evident that the physical environment is another significant

factor that promotes literacy. For example, in sequence 5, the children were preoccupied with

their worksheets displayed on the wall. One of the positive aspects of the physical classroom

environment was the fact that the children had easy access to books and materials, which were

deliberately organised in the classroom environment in a way that made them easily available. It

was noted from the classroom observations that materials and activities which were carefully

organised in the pre-school classroom could promote literacy development, which supports the

views of Dennis et al. (2012) on the importance of literacy being embedded in the physical

classroom. These activities, according to Cambourne and Turbill (1987), are a form of scaffold

for the children and are closely linked to written language that is significant in literacy

development. For example, the children were interested in the book corner, where they easily

picked up storybooks, flipped through them and interacted with each other over the books.

However, the time span for this activity was often short, as some of the children were

enthusiastic in the start, but their motivation seemed to fade in a short time. The reason seemed

to be a result of the absence of an adult getting involved at that particular moment.

It was evident from the findings presented in sequences 8, 9,10 and 11 that one of the most

positive activities in the classroom was storytime because the children seemed to learn a good

deal when an adult was reading aloud a storybook in an interactive form. For example, in

sequence 9 the teacher linked the story 'The rainy day' to the children's real-life experiences.

One of the strengths of storytime is that it involves shared reading and can be read in various

forms and contexts. This supports Vygotsky's social interaction theory and the view that social

learning occurs or precedes development (Vygotsky 1978:84). Vygotsky claimed that children learn a great deal by just interacting and exchanging ideas with persons in their environment. In this study, the teacher Jane also acknowledged that, from her experience, it was important to be flexible when reading stories to children or dealing with children in order to make an impact on their learning. Both Jane and Julia believed from their experiences in the classroom that children learn a great deal from interaction, rather than an adult simply talking to them. Generally, this study therefore supports the theory of emergent literacy (Teale and Sulzby 1986), which emphasizes that learning is a social activity which develops naturally when children interact with people in their environment.

The findings in sequences 1 and 6 show that children are equally able to learn from their fellow peers who are more knowledgeable. For example, in sequence 6 Sasha acted as a more knowledgeable peer to Kayala over a drawing activity. This is in line with the important concept of 'the zone of proximal development' in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of learning, which points to levels of development that particularly cause a higher level of cognitive development when children interact and communicate with adults or more knowledgeable peers in their environment (see section 2.2.2).

Concerning pretend play, the study recorded six sessions of pretend play and 11 sessions of exploratory play activities in the classroom. The pretend play usually involved verbal communication, while exploratory play may not involve verbal interaction. The pretend play seemed to be more important for the children's literacy development than the non-verbal exploratory play because it involved active use of language. This claim is supported by Welsch's (2008) research, namely that the oral interaction during pretend play promotes children's verbal skills crucial in literacy development. Welsch (2008) further points out that verbal skills are important in sustaining the process of play in taking and playing roles. Specific examples from the study were the toy (horse) manipulation by John and Karen (section 4.2.1), which involved no verbal interaction, while the doll manipulation by Sasha involved verbal interaction with the teacher, who gave explanations to Sasha about the consequences of human beings walking on their head, just like the doll did. This act of giving detailed explanations to young children supports Mercer's (2004) study on the quality and role of oral interaction. Furthermore,

Vygotsky (1978) points out that advanced and new knowledge are gained through social interactions with more competent players during pretend play activities.

Moreover, the children in the classroom used a good deal of imagination during both pretend play and exploratory play. For example, from the manipulations and sequences 2,3,4 and 6 presented in the results chapter, it is evident that the children displayed the use of imagination in their play activities. According to Welsch (2008), pretend play is a complex form of play because it allows young children to use their imagination to replace the meaning of activities and things around them. In the present study, when the children engaged in pretend or dramatic play in the classroom, it seemed as if they enjoyed acting out roles and they took pride in performing roles that made them feel and talk like adults. An example was in sequence 4, where Anna and Emma acted and spoke like adults who were taking their baby sister home on a train. This finding supports Vygotsky's (1978:102) view that pretend play creates a 'zone of proximal development' in a child because when a child is acting a role in a play, or pretending to be someone, he or she will act above his normal way of life. This, according to Vygotsky (1978), makes pretend play a major source of literacy development as well.

Moreover, mealtime and snack time in the classroom were good opportunities for the children in the classroom to discuss with each other and ask questions about food and social-related topics. The teachers seemed to focus on each child as they were eating, which provided room for the children to learn. For example, in sequence 14, the teacher taught Selma why it was beneficial for her particularly to eat more fruits and vegetables than salty biscuits. The teacher also explained what 'salty' meant when it appeared that Selma was unfamiliar with the word. When talking about vocabulary enhancement, Massey (2004:229) argues that: 'Vocabulary enhancement, narrative talk, and links to literature represent typical patterns of language use during mealtimes'. In this case, the mealtime exchange provided an opportunity to develop Selma's vocabulary.

Mealtimes also seemed to build the children's manners and self-skills, which were necessary for their development and which were important for gaining independence for later literacy growth. A specific example concerning manners was in sequence 14, where the teacher reminded the children that they should sit properly with legs under the table when they were eating and encouraged the children to be independent by making the right choices about healthy

food. Also in sequence 15, the teacher taught the pre-schoolers that the fruits and vegetables they eat gives them the vitamins and minerals that their bodies need to grow and be healthy.

Furthermore, the children seemed to enjoy the mealtime routine and discussed personal matters, for example their likes and dislikes. A specific example was when Kayla and Selma (in Sequence 15) discussed what they would prefer on their sandwich for lunch. As Massey (2012:230) points out, narrative talk can be enhanced when teachers encourage children to share their likes, dislikes, and experiences, which is part of their literacy development. In addition, Anna practised her motor skill in sequence 15 by insisting on opening her lunch pack herself, which is also linked to literacy development.

Concerning the worksheet activities in this study, the children typically sat on their child-sized chairs and tables in the classroom during these worksheet activities. It seemed that the children really enjoyed sharing their arts and paintings with teachers or fellow peers around them. It was evident in the classroom that the children performed better and learnt more during these worksheet activities when the teachers interacted with them or encouraged them as they worked. For example, in sequence 16, the teacher gave Sasha interactive support and encouragement during her painting activity. This finding is in line with Chen and McNamee (2011:77), who argue that support and encouragement assist pre-schoolers in various learning activities. It also promotes their cognitive skills linked to literacy development.

5.3 The role and value of the activities on literacy development in the pre-school classroom

Firstly, story time was found to be very valuable for the children's literacy development. The findings in this research show that new words and ideas were introduced into the children's language through adults (i.e. the teachers) reading stories to them. For example, the dialogue presented in sequence 10 shows how the children built their vocabulary and knowledge of kangaroos through the story time. These findings were not unexpected as several studies have found reading storybooks to young children to be very important in their literacy development (Arizpe and Styles 2004; Barton 1994; Dickinson 2001; Maclean 2008; Schieffelin 1984). For example, Barton (1994:144) found that children could benefit very much from story time by

learning many facts about life, and that they could acquire knowledge about human interaction, social practices, and particularly about literacy. Moreover, in this present study, it was evident from the observations that the children in the classroom learned about concepts during story time, such as colour, shapes, size and names of objects. For example, the colour 'red' was emphasized in the story dialogue 'the red coat' (sequence 13). Another important role of story time was that children learned important expectations and ideas, such as 'sharing', as in the story presented in sequence 11. This could help to enhance the children's social and emotional learning and competence (Zinsser 2015).

In this study, the story time interaction process was natural and informal. The children seemed to learn a great deal from the teacher simply reading the story to them. This natural process was also emphasized by the teacher Jane during the interview, where she stated that caregivers should not be so much into 'teaching and learning', but rather into interaction. According to Barton (1994:143) the story time process can be referred to as 'a common building block of spoken interaction'. Furthermore, it was evident that the story time activity provided the children with the opportunity and ability to think in a logical way. This enhanced their cognitive and emotional development, which is essential in literacy development. For example, this finding was evident in the story time sequence 9. In this sequence, child 7 thought it was very important that the character got away from where the tree was falling into the water on a windy day. In addition, the children's responses to the character in the story 'Share' in sequence 11, such as 'oh dear, 'oh-oh' and 'sorry baby', gives indications about how they think and how they feel about certain emotions.

It was also evident that the children linked pictures to their background knowledge and language in order to understand stories when listening to the teacher during story time interaction. This concords with Dickinson's (2001:176) study, which found that children learn by integrating images and language to fully understand the story being read to them. Furthermore, based on the researcher's observations, it seemed that the children interacted in a more confident way when they were familiar with a story than when they heard it for the first time. An example is in sequence 13 ('The red coat'), in which the children's responses were more confident and accurate because they were familiar with the story. According to Barton (1994:141), 'Reading will vary according to the type of text, according to the way it is used in the interaction, and

according to such details as whether a child is hearing the story for the first time. The children's contribution can vary and this too changes over time'. This was also acknowledged by teacher Jane in the interview with her, where she told the researcher about an interesting experience with a child while she was going through a book with a simple rhythm and repetition of words. The child did not read the book, but she had just the right words as she turned the page as a result of the repetition process. The child mastered the words in the book, even though she was not able to 'read' yet. According to teacher Jane, the children would learn from the same books over and over again as long as they were of good quality. This supports Barton (1994:144), who points out from his research that regular repeated interactions increase children's grammatical skills and vocabulary, which are closely linked to literacy development.

Concerning pretend play, the current research shows that this increased the reasoning skills of the children to a certain degree from the way they used one object to represent another during this activity. This finding can be directly tied to Vygotsky (1978), who argues that children's continuous experience of separating objects from the actual object, thing or person it stands for, can develop abstract reasoning. According to Vygotsky (1978:103), 'A reproduction of the real situation takes place'. Furthermore, it seemed that pretend play increased the children's ability to tell and comprehend stories linked to narrative skills related to literacy development. An interesting observation form the researcher's data was when a pair of children in the classroom linked their dress-up play to the story they had been told about pirates the previous day during storytime.

It seemed that the children's cognitive development was supported in pretend play, which enabled them to think in ways that may also build up problem solving skills. Vygotsky (1978:56) notes the significance of pretend play activities among children in his concept of internalization in cognitive development, which posits that information from external activity is transformed and becomes internalized through language. Moreover, it was evident that language and oral communication was being promoted from the pretend play through the children creating wonderful scenarios and at the same time exchanging spoken language during play. This is supported by Vygotsky (1978:56), who explains that information from external activity is transformed and becomes internalized through language.

In this study, the physical environment in the classroom could be regarded as a rich literacy environment, which is an important factor for literacy development (Cambourne and Turbill 1987). The children interacted with and figured out for themselves materials that were relevant to their lives and knowledge. For example, in sequence 5, the children interacted about their individual worksheets on the wall. It was also evident that the physical environment supported teacher-associated roles. In other words, the physical environment helped the children interact with books and stories on their own in the classroom, which ultimately increased early literacy awareness and print experiences. This finding supports Dennis et al. (2012), who emphasised creating an interactive environment in the pre-school classroom with books and print materials.

Moreover, based on the teacher's answers on thematic teaching, it seemed that the curriculum was set up in a way that there was cycle of relevant themes in the classroom and story experiences that could promote the children's learning. According to teacher Jane's response in the interview, the school year was divided up into specific themes, which usually lasted for about two weeks. Within those themes, they tried to help the children to learn about, for example, wild animals and did wild animal hunts outside. They had wild animals to play with and study, they named them, did colouring about them, and read storybooks about them. Wasik et al. (2006) suggest using a learning theme in the display of pictures in the classroom environment and further point out that thematic teaching has proved to be very effective in promoting vocabulary and language development, which are foundational for literacy development.

The role of oral interaction is a major factor in early development of literacy. Oral interaction was generally seen to be very important when integrated into any activity in the pre-school. When talking about the value of oral interaction, Dickinson and Beals (1994: 29) draw attention to the fact that the link between purely oral activities and literacy is not as clear as the link between reading and literacy. In this study, oral interaction was found to be very important in the pre-school classroom. Mealtimes and worksheet activities seemed valuable in supporting the children's literacy because of the rich oral interaction embedded in these activities. Dickinson and Beals (1994) emphasise mealtime conversations, since these can provide narratives and explanations of events, actions, and emotions with opportunities for children to

develop their literacy-related language skills. It was also evident from the study that oral interaction promoted learning during the worksheet activities as well.

5.4 Teachers' awareness of literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years

The third research question addresses the teachers' awareness of the role that the activities played in literacy development. In the current study, based on the answers from the teacher interviews and observations in the classroom, there were findings to show that the teachers showed awareness of the importance of literacy-promoting activities. First of all, the afore-mentioned literacy-promoting activities took place on more or less a daily basis, which was clearly not coincidental. This was in contrast to the study by Sandvik (2008), in which the studied pre-school teachers in Norway seemed to be aware of the importance of their role in helping children to develop their early literacy, but actually spent very little time on practising literacy-related activities.

From the example in sequence 2, the teacher responded to Peter's effort to draw her attention during the 'road construction' play. Thereafter the teacher explained to Peter that he could only fly by air to China from Norway, not travel by road. This supports Mercer (2004:123), who asserts that, through adult-child conversations, children participate in activities and adults instruct them on how to behave through information and explanations.

Furthermore, in this study, the teacher organized the supplies of costumes in the classroom, which created room for pretend play and more interaction in the classroom. Sequence 7 shows how the teacher interacted with the children during circle time by asking questions, praising the children when they gave correct answers, and giving necessary explanations to elicit information from the children. Moreover, the teacher encouraged abstract thinking during story-time by asking the children personalized questions, for example as in sequence 9 ('Have you had that happen to you?') and she checked the children's knowledge with questions such as 'Where do Kangaroos come from?'. As discussed in the findings chapter, when a child answered 'In the desert', when asked about where Kangaroos live, the teacher elaborated by saying '…they live in the bush…yes that's like the desert … in Australia', thus helping the child to develop both their knowledge and vocabulary.

These adult-child interactions in the classroom show how aware the teachers in the study were about literacy-promoting activities. Based on the teachers' responses from the interviews, it was evident that the teachers consciously promoted literacy from the explanations, discussions, use of vocabulary in the classroom, questions, encouragements, and organisation of literacy-promoting material in the physical environment.

5.5 Implications and recommendations

Having reviewed the literature and relevant research connected to literacy-promoting activities in the -school years, and having collected and analysed the data through the classroom observations and the teachers' interviews, it seems important to briefly discuss the implications of this study for pre-school learning experiences in relation to literacy development.

One implication of this study was that these young children's literacy development was being enhanced in numerous ways in the pre-school classroom. Shared storybook reading helped a great deal in promoting the children's learning, especially in terms of building knowledge about the world, supporting comprehension, reasoning, book/ print awareness and other literacy-related skills. Furthermore, the results of the study indicate that oral interaction, which was embedded in many of the children's activities, was vital for supporting the children's literacy development. Exposure to a print-rich environment familiarizes children with letters, colours and words, and thereby promotes reading and builds children vocabulary, which support literacy development. Thus, what was practised in the case study pre-school classroom supports much of the research on pre-school literacy-promoting activities.

Even though it seemed that the teachers were aware of the implications of the literacy-promoting activities, even more attention could be given to children during interactions. Pre-school teachers or caregivers should be as responsive as possible to children's cues, comments and questions, in order to give more room for interactions and learning that can promote children's literacy development.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school years. The research was performed in the form of a case study in an English-speaking pre-school. The study addressed three research questions: firstly, the kind of literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school, secondly, the role and value these literacy-promoting activities played in the children's literacy development, and finally, how aware the teachers were about these literacy-promoting activities in pre-school years.

The data for the research was obtained through qualitative research methods, namely classroom observations and interviews with the two teachers. The data collection techniques used during the observations were audio-recording and written field notes. The study took place in one of the 3-4-year-old pre-school classrooms, in which there were 16 children. The observations took place on 13 days during a six-week period. Unstructured observations were chosen to enable the researcher to choose from a wide range of activities and different reactions and behaviours from the young children in the pre-school classroom that were considered relevant for this research.

In order to investigate literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school classroom, Vygotsky's theory of learning was a central theoretical framework for the present study. Vygotsky's theories (see section 2.2) offer explanations on social interaction and the 'zone of proximal development' theory, which are important for early literacy development. The findings of the study showed that a number of literacy-promoting activities took place in the target classroom. Examples of these were children manipulating toys, storybook reading, environmental print, worksheet activities, and oral interaction, such as pretend play and mealtime conversations. Storytime was found to be especially valuable for the children's literacy development due to the fact that new vocabulary, concepts and ideas were introduced into the children's language during these interactions. In addition, the story time interaction process was natural and informal, which created more room for social interaction during the activity. Storytime took place on a daily basis in the pre-school classroom and the children found it very stimulating, even if a story was being repeated.

Another important finding in the current research was the frequency and learning potential of pretend play activities, since the children used their imagination, for example to act the roles of adults and speak like them. This important finding concords with Vygotsky's (1978) argument that, apart from the fact that pretend play builds young children's cognitive development, it also increases their ability to tell and comprehend stories linked to narrative skills related to literacy development.

Furthermore, environmental print and the general physical environment appeared to be very stimulating for the children's literacy development since the rich book and print environment helped the children to interact regularly with books and stories on their own in the classroom, which increased their early literacy awareness and print experiences. The children in the classroom also had a very positive attitude to story books by looking at them and flipping through them during free play, which seemed to be a result of their familiarity with story books in the classroom. These experiences were found to support teacher-associated roles in the classroom.

On the whole, when considering the promotion of the children's literacy development, a major factor found in this study was oral interaction. Oral interaction played a major role when embedded in the children's activities. Worksheet activities and mealtimes were found to be most beneficial when combined with meaningful oral interactions. These interactions encouraged the children and also answered some of their questions, thereby exposing them to various literacy-related social and language skills.

This thesis has reflected on the value, role and possible implications of literacy-promoting activities in young children's literacy development. This could be useful for other pre-school caregivers/ teachers to be aware of in order to possibly improve the choice of children's activities. As for the teachers' awareness of the literacy-promoting activities in the pre-school, this study shows that the teachers were considerably aware of the value of these literacy-promoting activities, especially because they were frequent and pre-planned on a daily basis by the teachers in the pre-school classroom. This finding is in contrast to Sandvik's (2008) research, in which the studied pre-school teachers in Norway seemed to be aware of the importance of their role in helping children to develop their early literacy, but spent very little time on practicing literacy-related activities.

One implication of this study is that these young children's literacy development was being enhanced in various ways in the pre-school classroom. In addition, the children learned in a natural, organized and relaxed atmosphere during interactive activities, which attracted all the children's attention in the classroom.

One of the main contributions of the thesis is that it has explored in detail how literacy-promoting activities were part of the daily routines of the case study pre-school classroom. As far as the researcher knows, no one has conducted this kind of research in an English-speaking pre-school in Norway before. There is reason to believe that the literacy-promoting activities contributed a great extent to the children's emergent literacy. Having interpreted the results of this research in light of Vygotskian theory, one can consider the long-lasting effects and the significance of these literacy-promoting activities to children's later literacy skills and development.

In terms of future research, it would be beneficial to conduct more observational research that would involve multiple pre-schools rather than only one, as in the present case. It would also be beneficial to use video recordings rather than simply audio-recordings. Finally, one could conduct a survey, as Sandvik (2008) did, perhaps comparing Norwegian pre-schools with English-speaking ones in relation to the promotion of literacy.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me. My research is about 'Investigating oral interaction and literacy promoting activities in the development of literacy in preschool years'.

The interview should take less than one hour and I will be audio recording the session because I don't want to miss any of your comments, even though I will be taking some notes too. All responses will be kept confidential between my Supervisor and I and we will ensure that the data is anonymous.

Background

How long have you been teaching in this pre-school?

How long have you been teaching this class?

What education do you have?

The lessons

1. Do you follow a curriculum? If so, can you say something about it?
2. How do you structure/plan your teaching? (i.e. on a daily basis, weekly basis, longer periods?)
3. How much freedom are you given to decide on what and how to teach?
4. What are your teaching aims?
5. Which activities are particularly significant to you?
6. How important are literacy-promoting activities in the class?
7. Can you give some examples of literacy-promoting activities in your classroom?
8. How do children respond to these activities?
9. Do the children prefer some more than others? Why/why not?
10. Can you comment on the importance of the following in terms of promoting the children's literacy: the physical environment and materials, the teacher reading story-books to the children, oral interaction between teachers and pupils and pupils and pupils, children's play (pretend play).

11. Do you consider some of these activities more important than others? Why/why not?

12. Are there other activities you feel are important to mention in this respect?

13. What is your general response to introducing more of these activities in preschool?

14. Is there anything else you will like to add?