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**Speaking of starting school : Investigating key perspectives on  
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**Speaking of Starting School: Investigating Key Perspectives on Children's Oral  
Language Development in the First Year of School**

Submitted by

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Bachelor of Science (Hons), Master of Teaching

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education

Faculty of Education and Arts

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## **Declaration**

This thesis contains no material that has been extracted in whole or in part from a thesis that I have submitted towards the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

All research procedures reported in the thesis received the approval of the relevant Ethics Committee.

Signature:

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

Date: 27<sup>th</sup> February 2022

Ethics Register Number: 2017-348E

Principal supervisor: Professor Susan Edwards (2016–2018: Professor Brendan Bartlett)

Co-supervisor: Professor Kathy Mills (2016–2018: Professor Susan Edwards)

## **Statement of Appreciation**

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## **Abstract**

Considerable research has identified sound oral language skills as a critical component of children's literacy learning, mental health, social competence and emotional wellbeing. This study addresses the problem of inadequate levels of oral language development in children beginning formal schooling. There has long been a recognition that early oral language development is linked to children's future development and success. There have been calls from education and health professionals, politicians and international organisations for increased access to preschool for all children, improvements in the quality of childcare received before the commencement of formal schooling, alignments in transition processes as children begin formal schooling, early identification of children's language difficulties, and various interventions aimed at improving parent knowledge and teacher pedagogy. So why is inadequate oral language development as children enter formal schooling still presenting as a problem?

Combining Vygotsky's view of the critical role of the proximal adult to the child's development with Bronfenbrenner's positioning of the child within proximal processes and nested systems, and adding Bandura's self-efficacy theories, this research focuses on the people who have the greatest and most immediate daily effect on children's oral language development: parents and teachers.

Parent and teacher perspectives are crucial components of change, as their actions have the most effect on developing oral language as children transition into and through the first year of formal schooling. Parent and teacher perspectives are pivotal in implementing and/or ameliorating any institutional or societal factors or initiatives that affect oral language development. Parents' and teachers' knowledge, understanding and perceived efficacy to support children's oral language development provide a critical link

between policy and practice. Identifying confluences and differences in their perspectives forms the basis for evidence-based theorisation of the importance of a shared understanding of key stakeholders' perspectives on children's optimal oral language development.

This study's findings indicate a strong agreement of views among parents and teachers on the importance of oral language in early childhood, with both groups seeing that parents have the greatest effect on children's developing oral language skills in the early years. However, both sets of participants expressed a perceived lack of knowledge to adequately support children's oral language. Recurrent themes of a perceived lack of time, perceived negative effects of digital devices, perceived paucity of specialist support and concerns about children's social competence all appeared to influence parents' and teachers' sense of agency in addressing the problem of low-level oral language development in the first year of school.

### **Keywords**

Bandura, Bronfenbrenner, children, development, early years, home learning environment, literacy, oral language, parent perspective, social skills, teacher perspective, Vygotsky

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## **List of Abbreviations**

|       |                                                                        |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| AAP   | American Academy of Pediatrics                                         |
| ACU   | HREC Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics<br>Committee |
| AEDC  | Australian Early Development Census                                    |
| DLD   | developmental language disorder                                        |
| ECEC  | early childhood education and care                                     |
| GP    | general practitioner                                                   |
| OECD  | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                 |
| RFU   | Reading for Understanding                                              |
| SES   | socio-economic status                                                  |
| STEM  | science, technology, engineering and mathematics                       |
| SVR   | Simple View of Reading                                                 |
| TALIS | Teaching and Learning International Survey                             |
| UK    | United Kingdom                                                         |
| US    | United States                                                          |
| ZPD   | zone of proximal development                                           |

## **Personal Background**

In my community work with an Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) group, which addresses the five domains of early childhood as related to the local context, I discovered that parents and caregivers did not appear to understand or value oral language activities and were often misled (especially by social media) to overfocus on other areas of development, such as writing letters of the alphabet and memorising sight words, when preparing their child for school. My conversations with occupational therapists and psychologists working in local schools, homes and childcare centres highlighted a great need for children to be able to orally express themselves in order to develop good mental health and social relationships. During my own teaching career, spanning Prep to Year 9 in England and Australia, I noticed older children with gaps in their language competence. These gaps appeared to affect their academic and social abilities, and I felt that the gaps were influenced by the children missing crucial steps in their early years. The desire to remedy this led me to focus my teaching and research on children's early years, particularly the first year of formal schooling.

Working in both state and private schools, and networking with other teachers instructing preschool and Year 1, it became clear that there was a considerable lack of priority placed on developing children's oral language. At one school, pre-service speech pathologists gained practical experience by regularly visiting the classrooms over two terms during the first year of school. The speech pathologists I spoke to found this a worthwhile experience that helped them appreciate the level of distraction and range of expectations (from teachers and peers) that children are subjected to in the classroom. However, while the teachers felt the visits were helpful, as the speech pathologists' reports raised parents' awareness of children's speech difficulties, the teachers did not incorporate

the speech pathologists' ideas and suggestions into their general teaching. Despite the shared goal of improving children's outcomes by meeting nationally set criteria, many of these professionals were not 'speaking the same language'. I considered that there was a need for a simple, universal measurement of children's oral language that could be utilised by teachers and shared with health professionals at the start of schooling. This could then be monitored throughout the early years, to help place children's oral language development as a central focus during this period of children's lives. Ideally, I believed some complementary form of this measurement could be given to new parents, so they could better understand their child's continuous development of oral language. This could lead to parents valuing and prioritising activities that promote oral language development at home.

However, for such an instrument to be developed and used, there would need to be agreement on how to best measure both expressive and receptive language, prioritising oral language activities at home and at school, and what constitutes effective oral language activities. With a plethora of research advocating play-based pedagogies as an optimal approach for developing children's oral language, there would need to be agreement on how this pedagogy is enacted in practice and what it looks like in both a home and school setting. In addition, there would need to be measures taken to ensure it is user friendly, cost effective, culturally appropriate and time manageable.

Most importantly, without the commitment of the parents and teachers closest to children, I felt that any attempt to administer such a measurement would fail. If it was not valued by those key to its successful implementation, it would at best be a 'jumping through hoops' exercise for teachers and, at worst, would increase parents' and children's anxiety. I thus realised that the complexities of developing such a measure meant it was beyond my expertise and capacity to do so.

Instead, I felt it reasonable to assume that most people living and working with young children do not intentionally wish to disadvantage them. But, without an understanding of the perspectives of the parents and teachers involved in caring for and educating young children, how could a shared understanding among those adults of the centrality of oral language development be achieved? Therefore, this study aimed to examine parents' and teachers' perspectives on children's oral language development to identify confluences and differences and develop a theorised perspective on how to best support oral language development in early childhood.

# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter details the study's context, purpose, significance and scope, and outlines the thesis's structure.

## **1.1 Context**

This study examines children's oral language development, because low levels of oral language development are exacerbating difficulties encountered when children move into the early years of formal schooling (e.g., Adlof & Hogan, 2019; Burchinal et al., 2020; Burgoyne et al., 2019; Chow et al., 2018; Collie et al., 2018; Logan et al., 2019; Romeo et al., 2018a; Yew & O'Kearney, 2017). Many studies warn that children entering school without the necessary skills to function in the school environment are at a major disadvantage. Problems related to low oral language development are even more challenging for children experiencing low income, racial/ethnic minority status and learning disabilities (Azad et al., 2020; Collier et al., 2020; Kabasakal et al., 2020; Lecheile et al., 2020; Lervåg et al., 2019; Merz et al., 2020). A recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) working paper stated, 'The evidence is overwhelming. Starting behind means staying behind. When children's early learning is not strong before they start school and continues to be weak in the first two years of school, the outlook for these children is bleak' (Phair, 2021, p. 17).

The present study focuses on the year that children begin formal schooling, as this is a common but crucial point when children are expected to have a level of language and communication skills that enables them to function within the school environment. The first year of school is a common, specific, recognisable transition point in children's lives, and a sensitive period in which adaptation to the school environment marks a key developmental point for children (Kokkalia et al., 2019). The first year of school is crucial

for building children's positive dispositions towards learning at a time when both brain development and physical growth accelerate (Asaridou et al., 2017; Boyce et al., 2021; Hagoort, 2014; Romeo et al., 2018b). This study posits that if experience helps to shape the architecture of the brain, then the sociocultural environment of the home and classroom, regulated by parent and teacher perspectives, could compensate for early language deficits by providing language-rich experiences that span the home–school environments.

Considerable research indicates that the oral language skill necessary to successfully navigate the first year of school, and provide a good foundation for future schooling, begins to develop long before school commences (Bornstein et al., 2016; Dicaldo et al., 2020; Hackett et al., 2021; Su et al., 2020; Von Hippel et al., 2018). Research has consistently shown that, from a very early age, children try to make sense of the world around them by communicating their needs and wants and reacting to the responses they receive from others (Arnon et al., 2014; Bretherton, 1992; Corballis, 2014; Levinson, 2016; Romeo et al., 2021; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). This emphasises a need for strong adult–child interactions when preparing children for the critical change that starting school creates (Altun, 2018).

Discussions around school readiness, school starting age and developmentally appropriate pedagogy have attracted much attention in popular and research literature (Bassok et al., 2016; Christensen et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2020; Dee & Sievertsen, 2018; Fortner & Jenkins, 2017; Needham & Ülküer, 2020; Norbury et al., 2016). High-income countries are currently investing in universal child health services, based on considerable evidence of the importance of strong foundations for children's futures (Black et al., 2020; Purtell et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2018). For example, the Starting strong V report (OECD, 2017) stated that governments in recent decades have recognised the importance of investing in early childhood education and care (ECEC; see also Starting

Strong VI, 2021). Notably, this varies greatly between countries, for example, 0.3% of GDP or less in Australia compared to at least 1% of GDP in Norway. Nevertheless, this would appear to have been instrumental for most OECD countries in raising the enrolment rate of four- and five-year-olds in education, in excess of 90% in 2018 (OECD, 2020). Relevant to the present study, the report also noted that two important challenges to improving transition to school were improving the professional education of teachers and ensuring high-quality learning at home (OECD, 2017).

However, despite increased uptake of preschool programs in many countries, there is little evidence of universal alignment between preschool programs and the early years of formal schooling in terms of oral language development (Purtell et al., 2020; Stipek et al., 2017; Takanishi, 2016). Early childhood services from birth to school entry vary greatly from country to country and within countries. It is worth noting that compared to most OECD countries, pre-primary education in Australia is relatively short, offered to children from three to four years of age, with children in Australia generally beginning formal education at four to five years of age (OECD, 2017).

With parents often the consistent factor in children's lives from birth, considerable research has demonstrated that the home learning environment is of critical importance prior to and during children's first year of school (Berger et al., 2019; Bingham et al., 2017; Bornstein et al., 2020; Knauer et al., 2019; Krijnen et al., 2020; Lehl et al., 2020; Madigan et al., 2019; Schmerse et al., 2018; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014).

Once children are in school, the teacher is the main influence on their developing oral language in the classroom (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020; Farrow et al., 2020; Grant et al., 2019; Hu et al., 2020; Paatsch et al., 2019; Rhoad-Drogalis et al., 2018). Therefore, the present study argues that the perspectives held by parents and teachers, as children

transition to and navigate the first year of school, provide insight into who can effect change and when during this key developmental stage.

The Vygotskian perspective places considerable emphasis on the cultural context for learning and the role of language in and through cognitive development, stressing that children construct their understanding of the world around them through their experience with people and objects (Eun, 2017; John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996; Reunamo & Nurmilaakso, 2007; Vygotsky, 1987). Vygotsky's (1987) zone of proximal development (ZPD) provides an excellent lens for this study, as it defines the "Level of potential development as determined by problem-solving under adult guidance" (p. 86). This places social interaction as a critical context for children's learning and development, with the potential of those closest to children to either negatively or positively affect children's oral language development.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is also used in the present study, placing children within the existing micro, meso, exo and macro level of systems that highlight how children and language do not develop in isolation. Bronfenbrenner (1986) argues that the world around children consists of many layers with varying degrees of influence on their development. In the present study, parents and teachers participate within the system closest to the child. This is important not only because of the significance of proximity but also the key gatekeeper position held by parents and teachers, allowing them to filter influences from other systems. The interrelational aspect of this model also makes it clear that the problem of children's low oral language skills cannot be addressed in the school context alone (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The home environment has a significant effect on children's readiness for school in terms of behaviour, wellbeing and early literacy (Hughes et al., 2016; McMullin et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2008; Trivette et al., 2010).

Teachers' relationships with children within the classroom environment are also a critical factor (Chow et al., 2020; Leyva et al., 2015; Sutherland et al., 2018). Further, De Gioia (2015) warns of the detrimental effects of cycles of misunderstandings when parents and teachers fail to communicate effectively, highlighting the importance of congruence in parent–teacher communication and the effects on children's learning and development when parents and teachers' values and expectations differ (Garbascz et al., 2015; Hauser-Cram et al., 2003; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010).

Bandura's (1997) efficacy theory was considered pertinent in the present study to uncover adults' perspectives on children developing oral language as they start and progress through the first year of school. Pesu et al. (2016) note that at the beginning of the first year of school, parents' beliefs play a much stronger role than teachers' beliefs in children developing self-concept. However, by the end of the first year of school, this is reversed, and teachers' beliefs become paramount, influencing children's disposition towards future learning. This foregrounds quality teacher–child relationships as key to children's positive school adjustment and highlights the importance of investigating parents' and teachers' perspectives on children's oral language development. The literature tells us that parents and teachers with high levels of self-efficacy to support children's oral language development will be more effective in doing so (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2017; Glackin & Hohenstein, 2018; Glatz & Buchanan, 2021; Grant et al., 2019; Yada et al., 2019). This is particularly important, as language difficulties often go undiagnosed or misdiagnosed in the school system (Goldfeld et al., 2021), and the literature attests to the negative long-term implications of poor oral language skill development (Schmerse, 2020; Snow, 2019; Snow & Powell, 2012; Vandell et al., 2016). Various interventions to minimise disadvantage for children from socio-economically vulnerable backgrounds and with speech and language difficulties have been suggested and reviewed (Taylor et al.,

2016; Wood & Blair, 2014; Yew & O’Kearney, 2013). In 2021 the OECD assessed children’s progress and recognised the importance of strong language skills at five years of age:

“A successful transition, along with active parental involvement in their child’s learning, both support positive early schooling experiences. Children’s progress in the first year or two of schooling also depends on how well their development needs are diagnosed and responded to”. (Phair, 2021, p. 27)

However, the problem of low oral language development during early childhood persists. Therefore, the present study investigates parents’ and teachers’ perspectives to illuminate their perceived enablers and barriers in children’s oral language development. This information, particularly confluences and differences in perspectives, contributes to an evidence-based theorisation of the view that a shared understanding of oral language development between parents and teachers is a basis for supporting sound oral language development for all children.

## **1.2 Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of low oral language skills among children in their first year of formal school by examining the perspectives of key stakeholders. The focus on the first year of formal schooling was important, as studies suggest that some children are entering school with under developed oral language development and that this is an indicator of other behavioural and cognitive concerns (Norbury et al., 2016, White-Schwoch et al., 2015). According to Rice and Hoffman (2015), this situation is creating a language gap that shows little evidence of closing over time without some form of intervention.

Despite substantial advancement in research, programmes and policies since 2000, including new neuroscientific evidence indicating how children’s brain development is

linked with their environment (Cao et al., 2016; Romeo et al., 2021), there is still concern that increasing numbers of children, including those in high-income countries, are not receiving the essential interventions necessary for oral language development at scale (Black et al., 2017; Richter et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies have shown that these early language problems have far-reaching consequences for children's education and later employment, and increase financial costs for health services (Skeat et al., 2011; Snow, 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). These findings demonstrate the need for the present study.

Selection of parents and teachers as the study participants was due to the important role of relationships in children's early development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Robinson et al., 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). The current move away from play-based learning towards more academically oriented pedagogies in many countries could limit the necessary conditions for assimilating and accommodating knowledge within the ZPD (Needham & Ülküer, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's (2001) ecological systems theory highlights the dynamic nature of the interactions between social networks such as parents and school for children's optimal growth and development. The bidirectional relationship between vocabulary growth and conversational turn-taking, often referred to as 'serve and return' interactions, between children and responsive, supportive adults has long been known to help build the neural foundation for the development of language (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016; Donnelly & Kidd, 2021; Romeo et al., 2021). Children's ability to communicate and interact well with peers at this stage is also a key psychosocial capability for mental health competence (O'Connor et al., 2021). The need for the present study is expressed by prior studies such as Dockrell and Hurry (2018), who highlighted that a significant number of children starting school have speech and language impairments that are not being picked up by parents or teachers at this crucial stage.

In line with scholars such as Ahrenkiel and Holm (2020), the present study agrees that there is a danger in limiting measurements of children's oral language development purely to learning to read and write. While these are certainly important, a socioculturally inspired perspective provides a more holistic understanding, in which, 'children's communal language use is regarded as a meaning-making space in a child culture that places greater emphasis on expressions of intention, creating meaning and establishing understanding in relation to the communicative context' (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020, p. 55). Hence, parents and teachers were asked about their perspectives on children's oral language development in relation to literacy, wellbeing and how they believe this could be best achieved.

The resulting research questions were:

1. What are parents' and teachers' perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?
2. What are parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to influence young children's oral language development?

### **1.3 Significance and Scope**

The research builds on and contributes to the literature on understanding children's oral language development in the early years, the transition to school, parent-child interactions in the home learning environment, teacher-child interactions in the classroom environment, and parent and teacher perspectives on early language development.

Although several studies have examined skills necessary for children as they transition to school and learn to read and write, there has not been a strong focus on the influence of parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development (McWayne et al., 2012; Marti et al., 2018; Russo et al., 2019). As such, this study provides additional

insights about the effects of parents and teachers on children's oral language development at this critical life stage. This research differs from previous studies in prioritising the perspectives of parents and teachers in children's lives as pivotal to effective and sustainable change in children developing oral language skills.

## **1.4 Thesis Structure**

Chapter 1 has presented an overview of the research problem, placing this study in the context of the importance of oral language for children and outlining the study's purpose. Chapter 2 examines the relevant literature on the importance of the development of children's oral language skills in the first year of school, establishing the need to address the problem of low oral language development. Literature on the influence of parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development as they navigate the first year of school is also examined.

Chapter 3 details the theoretical framework, building on notable theorists such as Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner and Bandura. Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology, that being a qualitative study of parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development in the first year of school. Chapters 3 and 4 together show how a sociocultural perspective is relevant, because participants' experiences needed to be prioritised for actual experiences to be documented, interrogated and used as the basis for an analysis of key stakeholders' perspectives concerning children's oral language development.

Chapter 5 reports key findings in response to the research questions. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the findings and consider their implications for addressing the phenomenon of children's low oral language development in the first year of school.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This chapter begins with an overview of the significance of oral language (Section 2.1) and then reviews the literature on the following topics: children's oral language development and literacy (Section 2.2), children's oral language development and transition to school (Section 2.3), children's oral language development and technology (Section 2.4), children's oral language development and wellbeing (Section 2.5), children's oral language development and parent influences (Section 2.6) and children's oral language development and teacher influences (Section 2.7). The chapter ends with a brief summary and implications for the present research.

A systematic search using terms such as: oral language development, early years, transition, efficacy, early literacy, parent and teacher beliefs and perspectives, play, reading, social skills and home learning environment was conducted across a range of digital databases, including ScienceDirect, Wiley Online, ResearchGate, ERIC, PubMed, JSTOR, EBSCO, Elsevier, Springer, ProQuest, Taylor and Francis, Springer and Sage using Google Scholar and the ACU online research bank and library. Search results were mainly restricted to materials published from 2012 onwards. Relevant early years, educational and science websites, journals and books were also consulted, as well as the Early Years Learning Framework Belonging, being, and becoming (Department of Education and Training, 2019) and curricula from Australia and other countries for the school-starting age group (four to six years old).

### **2.1 Significance of Oral Language**

According to Corballis (2014), language is regarded as uniquely human and evolved so that people could communicate about events occurring in the past, present and imagined future. The present research recognises that human language development is a

complex process involving much more than the production of speech. The beginnings of speech production in children, referred to as canonical babbling, is a critical step in oral language development across various languages and is often delayed in children with communicative disorders (Vanormelingen et al., 2020). Receptive language is a complex process that develops before expressive language, and children need time to understand what has been said by segmenting the sounds they hear and associating them with meanings (Bruner, 1966).

As language moves from simple sounds to words, children experiment with grammar and sentence structure when talking to adults and peers, to master expressive language. Adult engagement with early language is referred to as contingent reciprocity or, more commonly, serve and return and is critical for shaping the architecture of the young brain for language learning (Shonkoff & Bales, 2011). Research in diverse communities has found that the quality of responsiveness to children's utterances and the reciprocal nature of children's social environments highlights the complex nature of language development (Cai, 2021; Lee et al., 2018; Peute & Casillas, 2021; Rowe, 2018). Encouragingly, intervention studies have shown that when given the knowledge and tools to enhance their interactions, parents can change their approach to talking and responding to their children. (Dowdall et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2020; McGillion et al., 2017).

From the ages of two to five years old, children rapidly develop the skills of combining meaning into words and words into sentences (Sénéchal et al., 2008). As children map sound onto meaning, meaning onto sound and group words into longer utterances, they acquire language by combining lexical elements from memory, context and general knowledge (Hagoort, 2014). Examining children living with autism spectrum disorders and their difficulty with narrative discourse, Marini et al. (2019) note that there is growing evidence that the cognitive processes necessary for discourse (such as episodic

memory and episodic future thinking) emerge between the ages of three and five. This is highly relevant, as many children start formal schooling at four years of age, in the middle of this developmental process. Hutton et al. (2015) used blood oxygen level-dependent functional magnetic resonance to examine the effect of parent-child reading on children's brains. The children in that study were three to five years old, and the results indicated a positive correlation between parent-child reading and the areas critical for oral language. Romeo et al. (2021) examined language environments and the neurodevelopmental mechanisms linking language and development in a family-based intervention involving four- to six-year-olds. They found that growth in the language and social processing regions of the brain were strongly supported by conversational turn-taking.

It is also important to note that studies in behavioural genetics indicate the important role of heritability in children's language development, pointing to the need to consider both children's genetically influenced aptitudes and proclivity to seek out experiences that foster language development (Harlaar et al., 2014; Hart et al., 2010).

Vygotsky (1934/1962) originally noted how the development of private (self-directed) speech was strongly connected with the emergence of self-regulation, problem-solving and psychosocial adaptation. Numerous subsequent studies have supported the view that early language skills are associated with the development of attention regulation and behavioural competence, and can thus predict later cognitive and social-emotional functioning (Alexander et al., 1993; Aro et al., 2012; Chow et al., 2018; Hoff, 2013; Konza, 2011; Snow, 2014; Yew & O'Kearney, 2013). In this way, maximising children's oral language development can also lead to improvements in several other developmental domains.

In 1993 Halliday stated that language development was not just one kind of learning but the foundation for learning itself. Two years later, Hart and Risely (1995)

identified the 30-million-word gap, which refers to the difference in the vocabulary size of children from low-income families compared to children from more advantaged families. This gap magnifies over time due to the cumulative way that vocabulary develops, leading to what Stanovich (1986) referred to as the ‘Matthew effect’ (a phrase from the Bible meaning that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer). In 2017, Gilkerson et al. used a new system, the Language Environment Analysis System, to record children’s language finding that children experiencing lower socio-economic circumstances produced fewer vocalisations and heard fewer adult words than other children. Surprisingly, although much is now known about how adults can help improve children’s vocabulary development, such knowledge has not been put to effective use (Hindman et al., 2016). Research is still attempting to address this need (Greenwood et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2019; Romeo et al., 2018a; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016).

The critical influence of the home environment on children’s development has been well researched (Bingham et al., 2017; Knauer et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2019; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2014; Su et al., 2020; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). However, when considering children’s oral language capabilities in the first year of school, there is also an imperative to examine the perspectives of teachers. Moazzeni et al. (2020) noted that the development of children’s vocabulary through classroom discourse is limited to the input set by the main adult source in this environment—the teacher.

While the initial literature search uncovered a plethora of studies espousing the importance of children’s developing oral language through serve and return communication with others from birth (Levinson, 2016; Levitt & Eagleson, 2018; Reynolds & Burton, 2017), further searches uncovered a significant amount of research about the place of oral language in relation to learning to read and write, acknowledging that literacy is a crucial life skill and a key aspect of beginning school curriculums

worldwide (Chang et al., 2020; Goldfeld et al., 2017; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Snow, 2014; Stark et al., 2016).

Although there are variations between national school systems, the primary aim of formal schooling is to teach children how to read and write (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). The perspective of many governments, expressed via set curriculum, is that they need literate citizens to be able to function and compete in a global market. Workers now need to be highly skilled to complete ever more complex and interactive tasks (Van Laar et al., 2017). According to Fouly et al. (1990), the morphological and phonological skills, syntax, pragmatics and semantics that make up oral language can be viewed as sets of competencies that combine to develop language competence.

Language competence is more than being able to express meaning, it also involves a strong socio-linguistic element in order to use it appropriately in varying contexts and within particular cultures. This highlights the complexity of oral language development. Well-documented negative outcomes for illiterate adults, such as long-term unemployment, over-representation in prisons and greater likelihood of homelessness, has led to increased efforts to improve literacy rates (Law et al., 2017b; Snow, 2019; Snow & Powell, 2012; Snow & Sanger, 2015; Snowling et al., 2015). The first Sustainable Development Goal from the United Nations 2030 agenda for sustainable development is to “ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality” (Richter et al., 2017). This highlights the importance of oral language development.

Due to the proliferation of digital devices in society (Griffith & Arnold, 2019; Kabali et al., 2015; Palaiologou, 2016), the need to prepare children for a multiliterate Australian society is evident in publications such as the Child Family Community Australia’s [2018] Digital technology use in the child, youth and family sector and Early Childhood Australia’s [2018] Statement on young children and digital technologies.

Effective use of digital devices in pre-school and school settings, especially for supporting oral language development, relies heavily on the teachers' pedagogical resources and capabilities. Brenneman et al. (2019) find that many teachers do not receive the professional development needed to effectively implement technology use in their teaching, leading to many children not getting language-rich science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) experiences at the beginning of their school years. This is concerning, as rich STEM experiences are appropriate for oral language development. A review of the Early Years Foundation Stage in the United Kingdom (UK) found strong evidence of the need to increase digital learning opportunities of this type (Pascal, 2019). How parents use technology with children in the home environment is also an ongoing concern for researchers, with one study noting that 97% of children four years and under living in a low-income community used mobile devices (Kabali et al., 2015).

While there may be a desire at the political level to improve children's language development in a global context, the ways in which governments initiate change depends on how systems are already organised and able to be changed. This was evident in attempts by England, Scotland and Sweden (Cohen et al., 2018) to integrate early childhood services and improve developmental outcomes for children under eight years by moving responsibility from welfare services to education services. A review of the subsequent reforms by Cohen et al. (2018) found that Scotland's attempt was hampered by a lack of clear vision and appropriately devolved governing powers and England's effort was halted by political change (a change in the governing political party), while Sweden did achieve further integration and better access to services. This may have been due to Sweden being governed as a unitary state and having lower rates of child poverty and higher rates of taxation than the other two countries.

In a policy brief, Law et al. (2017b) demonstrated how trends in children's oral language difficulties were similar in the UK and Australia. Fragmented services for children aged zero to eight years highlights the core difficulties—access to services and funding as well as conceptual ambiguities between ECEC services and early childhood education within a school context faced by parents and teachers—that potentially affect children's oral language development. This is important because language difficulties in the early years lead to significant health costs (Cronin et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2017).

The OECD's International early learning and child well-being study assessment framework (Phair, 2021) is designed for five-year-old children but acknowledges that these children will have access to different forms of education and care across countries, with school entry age differing by up to three years across various systems. The framework states that early developmental domains are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. They note how oral language exemplifies this, describing how children's language skills help them interact with others and self-regulate, which in turn builds on growing cognitive skills that strengthen their ongoing language development. However, despite professing to develop “a shared language to learn about the diversity and complexities of early learning experiences across countries” (Shuey & Kankaraš, 2018, p. 68), the employed conceptual framework uses the term emergent literacy to mean oral language skills (Phair, 2021, p. 32), based on Honig's (2007) description of oral language. As Edwards (2021) cautioned when investigating the role of play in an educational context, using terms such as curriculum and pedagogy interchangeably can have implications for policy and practice. The same can be said about what is understood by the term emergent literacy. This has implications for parents' and teachers' understanding of how to help children learn to read. According to Adlof and Hogan (2019, p. 210), schools' literacy assessments are focused more on word reading than oral language development. To better inform literacy

instruction, they argue schools should be measuring oral language development early and often.

## **2.2 Children's Oral Language Development and Literacy**

The path to literacy involves multiple factors that begin long before formal literacy instruction takes place. Notwithstanding biological and environmental factors that can negatively affect the development of the central nervous system, a typically developing child will be able to speak using “the complex and coordinated movements of respiratory, laryngeal, velopharyngeal, and oral structures” (Feldman, 2019). However, to communicate effectively, a child also needs the ability to understand socially agreed signals such as words and sentences (receptive oral language) and produce signals of their own that convey meaning. By the age of six years, vocabulary, lexical and syntactic skills should all be developing rapidly (Lonigan & Milburn, 2017). This is important, as the initial aural input is subsequently added to by increasingly printed language as children progress through school. To develop high levels of conversational skills and read and write, the domains of morphology, phonology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics need to grow (Honig, 2007). In this way, the acquisition of language and developing the critical ability to read involves connections between a network of regions in the brain (Price, 2012). Tarvainen et al. (2020) succinctly describe the skills needed for a child to comprehend oral language as:

“Speech processing at an auditory and sound level, knowing the meaning of words, understanding the grammatical structures that words form, retaining all this information while completing the previously mentioned tasks, and integrating it within the context in which it is said”. (p. 2)

Consider then the ensuing expressive language skills involved in formulating and delivering a relevant response. The strength of the connectivity between cortical regions

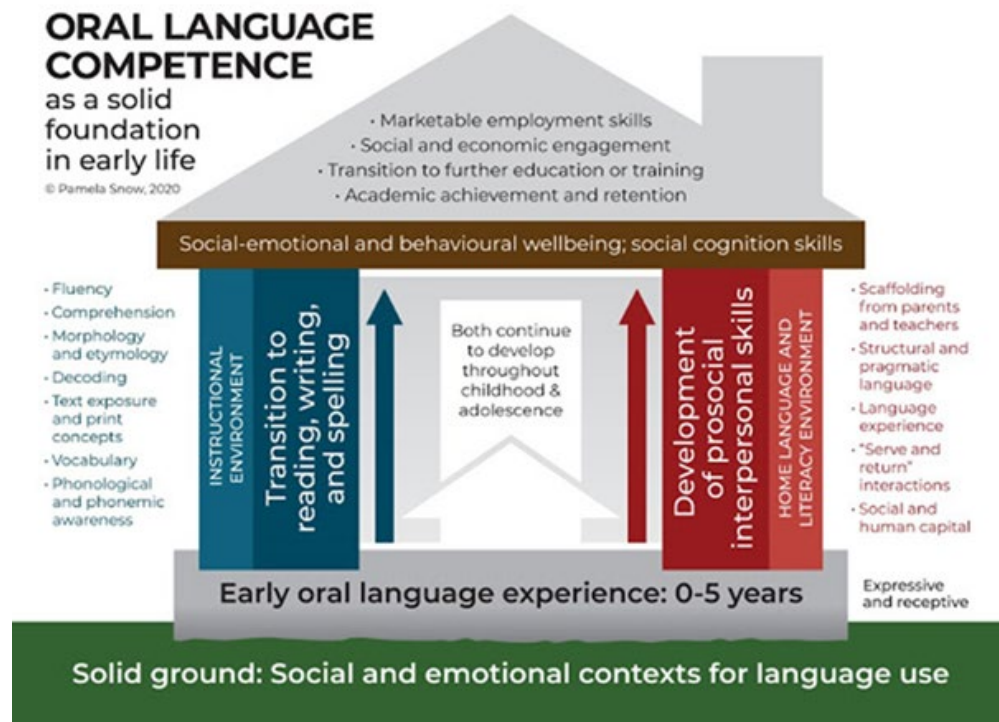
through multiple white matter tracts can be predictive of reading outcomes in typically developing children, and factors in children's early learning environment, such as parent-child conversational turns, shape the white matter tracts correlated with the ability to read (Myers et al., 2014; Romeo et al., 2018b). Therefore, to become competent and effective communicators, an increasingly complex system of neural, cognitive and linguistic development needs to take place in children (Boyce et al., 2021; Hagoort, 2014; Hall & Lindorff, 2017; Myers et al., 2014; Price, 2012).

The ongoing development of oral language skills thus provides a critical foundation for both phonics instruction and reading comprehension, highlighting the need for children to have secured foundational oral language skills before formal reading instruction takes place (Chang et al., 2020; Lervåg et al., 2019). Dolean et al. (2021) found that the strong effect of oral language skills suggests that intervention programs aimed to improve language skills could be effective in improving reading comprehension. Cain and Oakhill (2007) similarly stated, "not only are oral language skills linked to the code-related skills that help word reading to develop, but they also provide the foundation for the development of the more advanced language skills needed for comprehension" (p. 31). Children need to build a bank of language experiences in their memory so that they can transfer these into new contexts and build on their developing knowledge of language. Over time, this occurs through developing speaking, listening, writing and reading skills (Munro, 2011). If a word is already in a child's spoken lexicon, it will be easier to decode and place in context when reading or writing (Mitchell & Brady, 2013). This is important because children who struggle with the comprehension and production of words will have difficulties with learning and require intervention (Snowling & Hulme, 2021; Bowyer-Crane et al., 2019; Burgoyne et al., 2019; Yew & O'Kearney, 2017).

To visually conceptualise the process of promoting oral language development and reading success, Snow (2020) likened it to building a house (see Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1**

*The Language House*



Source: Snow (2020).

Snow's (2020) language house depicts the foundational nature of children's expressive and receptive oral language development for later societal achievement, as well as noting the importance of scaffolding from parents and teachers and the supporting roles of the home and school environments. This visual representation is helpful to show how both literacy and wellbeing arise from an oral language foundation and continue to develop into adulthood (Van der Wilt et al., 2020). Lervåg et al. (2019) found that children living with socio-economic vulnerabilities were missing some critical factors that make up the "solid ground" (due to stress) and "scaffolding" (due to low cognitive stimulation at home and school absences). In this way, the causal relationship between underlying oral language skills and reading comprehension is increased for children living in adverse

circumstances. Lervåg et al. (2019) recommended early targeted intervention as critical to avoid increasingly negative effects over time.

Reading is undoubtedly a crucial skill and debate has been ongoing for decades on the best way to teach and assess reading (Bowers, 2020; Cervetti et al., 2020; Ewing, 2018; Hornsby & Wilson, 2014; Kim, 2008; Snow, 2020). With adult illiteracy costing the global economy over US\$1 trillion (World Literacy Foundation, 2015), the perceived need to read as soon as possible appears to have reignited debates among education experts about the pedagogy involved in teaching young children to read (Kim, 2008). For example, Chapman (2000) takes an interactionist perspective that views language learning as an integration of learning from multiple domains in which nature and nurture are incorporated. Norton and Wolf (2012) posit that children are generally born with the necessary neural circuits for spoken language but to read print children must develop automaticity of letters and words. This study argues that the innate biological need to communicate with others underpins the social interactions that are necessary for literacy to be taught, regardless of which specific approach is adopted. In this way the perspectives of the key adults in the child's life are crucial to children's literacy attainment.

Further, oral language skills are necessary for both reading and writing (Kim et al., 2015), and children with weak oral language skills are at a high risk of developing reading and writing difficulties (Levlin & Waldmann, 2020). In many curriculum programs, children are expected to be able to communicate in writing by the end of the first year of school (Kirby et al., 2021). Bazerman et al. (2017) noted that the complexity of writing requires the convergence of many capacities working together, not least oral language development. Assessing oral language for literacy would appear to be of prime importance to detect risk factors related to reading, spelling and comprehension (Lonigan & Milburn, 2017). Adlof and Hogan (2019) noted, "Oral language abilities enable children to learn to

read ... Measuring language skills early and often benefits not only those who have language impairment but also all children, as it documents language variability to inform differentiated instruction” (p. 210).

The Ontario curriculum states that oral language is fundamental to literacy and essential for learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006, p. 9). In the UK, the revised Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (Department for Education, 2017) positions oral language as an overarching principle, acknowledging that children develop and learn well in language-rich environments. The Australian Curriculum defines literacy as:

“The capacity to interpret and use language features, forms, conventions and text structures in imaginative, informative and persuasive texts. It also refers to the ability to read, view, listen to, speak, write and create texts for learning and communicating in and out of school”. (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2016, p. 6)

In the United States (US), a recent review of the Reading for Understanding (RFU) initiative noted that for more than two decades, reading scores and reading comprehension have been low (Pearson et al., 2020). Pearson et al. reconfirmed reading as a cultural activity, the comprehension of which is driven by language (p. 3). They found that a better predictor of reading comprehension would be low early language skills rather than low letter knowledge (p. 49) and stated that their review ‘extends our conceptualization of language by documenting the predictive relationships of a broader array of language skills, including grammatical skill and morphological knowledge, to comprehension in the early elementary grades’ (p. 49).

Cervetti et al. (2020) agreed with this view, exploring how the RFU review complicated Gough and Tunmer’s (1986) Simple View of Reading (SVR), stating “this research has documented the importance of early oral language skills, which support both

decoding and listening comprehension in young readers and plays a critical role in students' success as readers as they move through school" (Cervetti et al., 2020, p. 1). Gough and Tunmer's (1986) SVR posits that print is translated into two main strands—word recognition and linguistic ability—and proficiency in both is necessary to inform comprehension. While acknowledging that the SVR model gives equal footing to decoding/word reading and language, Cervetti et al. (2020) point out that the SVR model has most often been used to justify a greater focus on decoding in reading instruction and assessment and public media, in the form of more systemic phonics instruction at the expense of other important components. The extensive research in this field on different approaches of reading instruction has led scholars such as Castles et al. (2018) to express concern about a purported gap between public understanding about learning to read and research knowledge.

Hay et al. (2007) found that improving classroom teachers' levels of dialogue could enhance early language development to improve reading. Bazerman et al. (2017) stated that to teach writing effectively, teachers require not only pedagogical knowledge but also specialised linguistic knowledge. However, several studies investigating the abilities of early years teachers and pre-service teachers have shown low levels of knowledge of language and literacy concepts (Moats, 1994, 2014; Stark et al., 2016; Tetley & Jones, 2014). Antoniazzi et al. (2010) found that teachers were not able to reliably identify children who needed further investigation for their oral language skills:

“While the first 3 years of formal schooling have obvious importance for the transition to literacy, it must be remembered that learning to read is a linguistically-based task that draws heavily on mastery of key oral-language skills such as phonemic and morphological awareness, vocabulary development, and early syntax. In order to support the transition to literacy, and because oral language

competence is important in its own right, it is vital that early-years teachers are skilled at identifying children who may be at risk of oral language impairment”.

(p. 244)

Teachers’ views on how best to teach reading in early years classrooms are important, as Moats (2019) noted that schools continue to use methods and programs that ignore consistent evidence for the importance of particular pedagogical practices. Requiring teachers to teach and assess in a way that is juxtaposed to their beliefs about particular pedagogies can add to underlying teacher tensions. Vygotsky (1933) posited that children learn through play practices, in which mediated actions with tools and artefacts are performed in sequenced patterns that help children make sense of their social and cultural environment. Children today live in a multiliterate society (Mills, 2009).

By advocating for play as a literacy in itself, teachers could have the flexibility to create curricular space for both physical and digital play to enable children to collaboratively develop meaningful literacy abilities, strengthen friendships and increase their sense of belonging (Wohlwend, 2018). In the US, Lewis Ellison (2017) points to the literacy gains of children’s choice, voice and perspective in digital, simulated role play. In Turkey, Kızıldere et al. (2020) highlight pretend play as a tool for children’s social interactions and language development. In Ireland, Cresham (2021) rallies against the traditional didactic classroom in favour of a more naturalistic play environment as central to the development of young children’s oral language skills. However, scholars also point to the difficulties encountered when teachers try to integrate mandated literacy practices within a play-based context (Armstrong & Sutherland, 2020; Banerjee et al., 2016; Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Ewing, 2019; Pyle et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2019). A great deal of research continues to focus on this aspect of starting school.

Meanwhile, “In the last 50 years, research has accumulated a large body of evidence showing that shared reading is important for literacy development in general, and for oral language development in particular” (Grolig, 2020, p. 5). Scholars agree that the quality of the dialogic processes used in shared book reading, both with parents at home and teachers in school, can help develop children’s oral language (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021; Bojczyk et al., 2016; Lenhart et al., 2021; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Silinskas et al., 2020).

Snow chose the title “Language is literacy is language” for her lecture highlighting the critical connection between early oral language development and the transition to literacy in the early years of school (Snow, 2016). In 2020, Snow again urged health and education sectors to work together to reduce the continuing high rates of reading failure (Snow, 2020, p. 222). Calls for a combined professional approach have been made in ongoing research (Ebbels et al., 2019; Oosterbeek et al., 2021; Sperry et al., 2019; Walker et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2017). Worth noting is despite similar urgent calls in the UK to identify language delays before they negatively affect literacy and other important early skill development (most notably in the Bercow report [Bercow, 2008]), Hancock (2019) reported no significant change more than 10 years later. Indeed, the Department of Education’s (2019) report on special educational needs in England recorded an increase in children with special needs for the third consecutive year, with 23% of these being speech, language and communication needs. McGregor (2020) insisted that failure to recognise language delays is of growing concern, particularly as it ‘often remains hidden from the two groups of adults who are a child’s primary advocates when it comes to securing services: parents and teachers’ (p.987). It would seem that research on identifying and supporting children’s oral language development is not translating effectively into

widespread practice. This is another reason why the present study investigated parent and teacher perspectives to better understand why this issue of translation remains prevalent.

With so many conflicting voices, it is crucial that the perspectives of parents and teachers—central to children’s developing oral language for literacy at this stage—are explored. Given their proximal influence on development, it is important to discover how much parents and teachers understand about how children’s oral language development affects literacy acquisition and why it is important. How capable parents and teachers feel in making and maintaining developmentally appropriate choices to support children’s growing oral language, is also of significant importance so that children can become proficient communicators.

### **2.3 Children’s Oral Language Development and Transition to School**

Takriti (2019) reported that the experience of starting formal school is a multifaceted process of huge significance not only for children themselves but also for their families. This is particularly so when today’s classroom environment is characterised by accountability, standardised testing and global competitive demands (Bassok et al., 2016).

The theoretical framework for the present study highlights the importance of conceptualising children’s transitioning into and through the first year of school within an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this way, both the home and school environments can be seen as having an effect on how well children transition into and through the first year of school. Lonigan and Milburn (2017) argue that because the environment is critical for children’s language development, these environments need to be language rich, providing a context in which children have lots of opportunities to use language and receive feedback about correct usage. According to the AEDC, children on track when they enter school will have “excellent communication

skills, can tell a story and communicate easily with both children and adults, and have no problems with articulation” (Australian Early Development Census, n.d.).

As previously indicated, if children arrive at school with well-established oral language skills, this indicates that they have had lots of opportunities to talk and experiment with several prerequisite literacy and social skills (Hogan et al., 2011; Van der Lely & Marshall, 2010). This is important, as children make rapid progress in oral language development between the ages of two and seven years (Kuhl, 2010); the first year of school is therefore situated within a critical and sensitive period for language acquisition.

According to Whitebread (2011), language is used by children to help them think. Whether they are talking to themselves or to others, speech helps develop higher mental functions such as self-regulation. Vygotsky (1933) considered play to be the highest level of development, as it creates the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) in which imaginary actions lead to the formation of higher mental functions such as memory and thinking. This is an important concept when considering children developing oral language skills, because children need mediation between what they can do and what they can do with support in order to internalise the cultural tools (such as language) necessary to engage higher mental functions. Therefore, the types of activities children engage in prior to starting school, and in the first year of school, are important for fostering language development. Bodrova and Leong (2015) noted from a sociocultural perspective that social pretend play in three- to six-year-olds could be considered a leading activity informing the realisation of higher mental functions rather than reflecting a development per se. Research by Stagnitti et al. (2016) comparing children attending a school with a play-based curriculum and children attending a school with a traditional curriculum found that the former performed much

better on standardised measures of pretend play and narrative language skills and had more complex language use.

Symbolic play and language development are arguably related. Quinn et al. (2018) examined the literature across several disciplines and concluded that the association between symbolic play and language development is so robust that the relationship is undeniable. Symbolic play in four- to five-year-olds elicits a significant amount of joint attention, and joint attention offers considerably more time for questions and conversational turns. Further, sociodramatic play has been shown to enhance and enrich children's language acquisition, and supportive adults can incorporate cultural artefacts into such play to ensure the environment closely resembles the life environments of children (Banerjee et al., 2016).

Bodrova and Leong (2015) noted that the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) appears earlier in play than in other areas (e.g., interactions with others), and children need to reach the stage of mature play to produce the necessary skills required for participation in society according to current societal norms. They pointed out that seven-year-olds today were engaging in play levels equivalent to preschool children of the 1940s. This immature play, they claim, inhibits the development of an optimal ZPD (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Despite this compelling research, not all schools have a play-based curriculum.

Barblett et al. (2016) conducted research with 200 Western Australian early years educators and found that play-based pedagogy was disappearing from programs for four- and five-year-olds. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) investigated early childhood teachers' views on play-based learning by synthesising 62 studies from 24 national contexts, finding that studies conducted in English-speaking countries mostly focused on a perceived erosion of play to accommodate an early focus on academic outcomes. Conversely, they also found that research conducted in Asian countries mostly focused on how to implement

play-based learning in cultures that traditionally value direct teaching and observational learning. They also noted different interpretations of the term ‘play-based learning’ and cautioned that “an understanding of play and learning as incompatible binaries will necessarily present a major challenge to embracing play-based learning both as a meaningful concept and as a useful pedagogical approach” (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019, p. 793). Pyle and Danniels (2017) also noted a lack of consensus around educator perspectives concerning the role of play in play-based learning for four- to five-year-olds. They argued that recent reforms in several countries to promote academic learning through play in the early years means that there is an urgent need to “move away from the current binary stance regarding play and towards an integration of perspectives and practices, with different types of play perceived as complementary rather than incompatible” (p. 311). They suggested a continuum of play-based learning to improve effectiveness by reducing teacher uncertainty when implementing this pedagogical approach.

As previously mentioned, children start school at different ages. Across the Australian states and territories, children start school at different ages. In Queensland, Prep year (the first year of formal schooling) only became compulsory in 2017, and children can now start school between four years, seven months and five years, six months. Children in the UK start formal school before the age of five years, prompting researchers such as Sharp (2002) to study the benefits, if any, of starting school early. Her research funded by the National Foundation for Educational Research found no lasting benefit to fast-forwarding, formal, school-based early reading instruction. Children only starting formal reading instruction at seven years had caught up with the others by the age of eight. She also highlighted that starting earlier often means less play, less child-initiated activities and less adult support in the younger years. Hesterman and Targowska (2020) recently noted that:

“Children aged three to five years now attend kindergarten and pre-primary on school sites (identified as the early years of schooling), where ‘whole school’ approaches to learning are largely adopted, and school practices aim to lift National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results”. (p. 32)

This push down approach to early education is what Bassok et al. (2016) also referred to when considering whether kindergarten is now the new First Grade.

Norbury et al. (2016) recruited 7,267 children aged four years, nine months to five years, 10 months attending their first year of school in England and found that the youngest children had relatively immature language and behaviour skills. This raises concerns about anxiety levels experienced by children required to meet reading levels and other classroom expectations for which they may not be developmentally ready. It is agreed by researchers that language difficulties in the early school years increase the risk of later psychopathology (Petersen et al., 2013; Yew & O’Kearney, 2013; Snow & Powell, 2012).

Considering the abovementioned age range, it is not surprising that difficulties at school entry are further compounded by disconnection between pedagogies as children move from one setting to another. Fisher (2010) highlights this problem, describing the difficulties for teachers trying to implement the UK Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum using a play-based pedagogy in the first year of school while following on with the more formalised English and Numeracy requirements in the Key Stage 1 curriculum (second and third years of school), mandated for children from five to seven years.

The age that children start school has implications for developmental skills across many domains. In Australia, the AEDC has been established to measure the level of ability that children are starting school with across five domains: communication, language, numeracy, physical and emotional. This range is in deference to the complexity and interconnectedness of early childhood development. It is the only triennial national census

of child development in the world (Collier et al., 2020). In the 2018 collection, 25.9% of children in Queensland, Australia, were considered developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains at school entry. When considering the domain definitions in the AEDC, it is worth noting that language development appears to play an important role in social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communication skills. While there has been a slight decrease in the number of children at risk or vulnerable in communication skills, general knowledge and language and cognitive skills, the number of children developmentally vulnerable or at risk in the areas of social competence and emotional maturity have increased. Collier et al. (2020) attribute the decrease in children's vulnerability in language and cognitive skills to increased preschool attendance. However, it is also worth noting that as communication and language are separated and then grouped with other school-based skills and general knowledge, it is difficult to gauge the actual level of oral language competence.

Using data from the German early care and education system, Schmerse (2020) found that higher classroom quality leads to more positive learning behaviour in four- to six-year-olds. Considering that children only start formal school at six to seven years in Germany, these results refer to school preparation. In Australia, children are generally already in formal school at this age, and by the age of six or seven years they could have already completed two years of formal school. This is highly relevant when the literature considers a central aspect of school adjustment, and a measure of the effectiveness of quality preschool to a successful transition, to be how well children adapt to demanding academic tasks. This can be very different for children in their fourth, sixth or seventh year of life (Schmerse, 2020; Sharp, 2002). The three related components of children's executive functioning skills (inhibitory control, working memory and attention shifting) are all associated with language skills among young children (Blair & Razza, 2007). From

a Vygotskian perspective, as children's outer and then inner speech improves, their executive functioning skills are also supported, as they become better able to monitor and plan their behaviour (Vygotsky, 1978).

Noting that the oldest child in the first year of school can be up to one year older than the youngest in virtually all education systems, Balestra et al. (2020) investigated the effect of this age difference and found that older children had consistently better academic outcomes and were less likely to have speech difficulties and behaviour problems. Recent research from Jerrim et al. (2021) also found that children who were younger at school entry were more likely to need to repeat grades later on. Interestingly, Lubotsky and Kaestner (2016) found that even though older children did score higher on cognitive and non-cognitive measures at school entry, younger children did catch up in a year or two.

Studying a range of countries in Western Europe, Bingham and Whitebread (2018) stated that while no child is considered to require 'schooling' until they are between six and seven years old, the problem for transition comes from the diversity of home environments and varied access to wide-ranging ECEC services. One study in India noted that while parents, teachers and principals had different expectations for children starting preschool, they were unanimous that three years of age was the right age for a child to go to school (Akhtar & Bilal, 2018). An assessment of the literature shows that caution needs to be exercised when studies refer to 'preschool' children due to the range in school-starting ages.

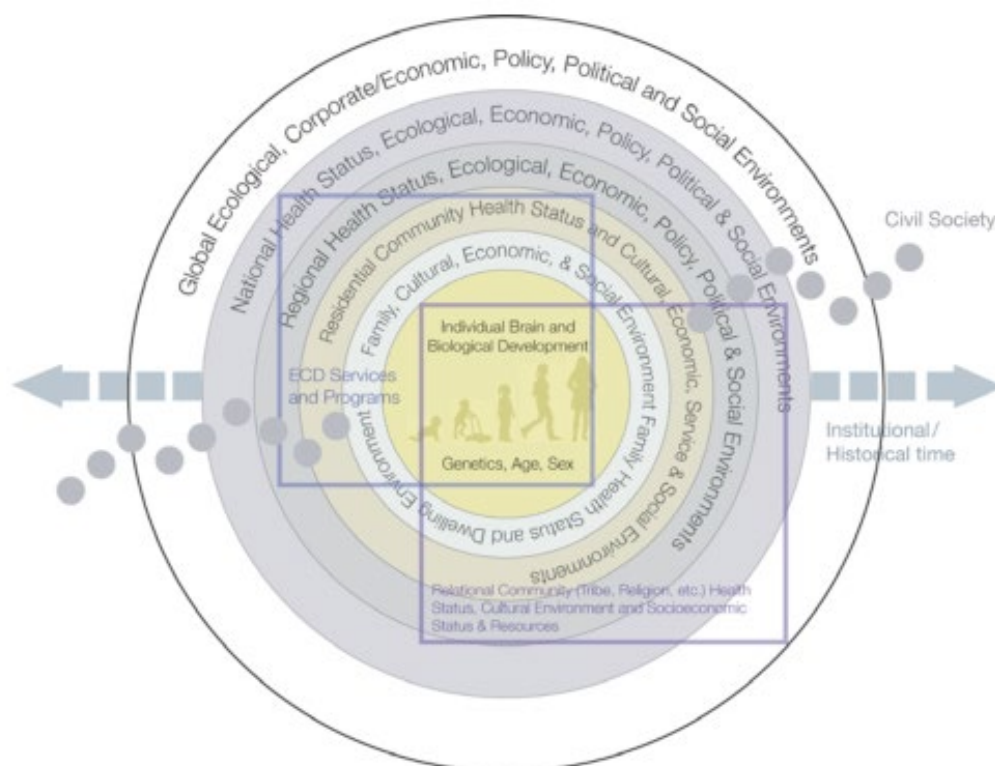
Another aspect of transition is the classroom itself. The classroom is not a static entity; over the course of the first year of school, the relationships between teachers and students evolve (McCoy & Wolf, 2018). School readiness refers to the behaviours, skills and attitudes towards child development associated with children's school-based outcomes (Altun, 2018). The theoretical framework of the present study acknowledges

Bronfenbrenner's (2001) view that children develop at the centre of complex nested environments that are dynamically linked. It also recognises Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural environment in which children's learning can be effectively scaffolded to lead to further development. In this way, school readiness must be considered as a holistic community concern. This is increasingly recognised in the research, with Christensen et al. (2020) noting that "school readiness is not just a question of whether the child is ready for school, but also whether the child's family, school and community are ready to support the child in going to school" (p. 2).

Goble et al. (2017) state that many children living with disadvantage are ill prepared for the transition into formal school. The importance of equity in early childhood development is undeniable (Siddiqi et al., 2012) but is affected and influenced by many factors. Siddiqi et al.'s (2012) Total Environment Assessment Model of early childhood development (see Figure 2.2) shows how the interdependencies between environments can influence conditions for child development. The model is used to focus on the social and material resources within each environment that enable families and communities to provide the optimal experiences for early child development, thus drawing attention to global inequities.

**Figure 2.2**

*Total Environment Assessment Model (TEAM) of Early Childhood Development*



Source: Siddiqi et al. (2012, p. 125), based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model of child development.

For the present study, the Total Environment Assessment Model illuminates the multitude of factors affecting the microsystem of parents and teachers, regardless of geographical location. The Institutional/Historical time aspect refers to the gradual improvement or decline of conditions resulting from decisions made at the institutional and/or policy levels over time. Research to improve understanding of children's development as they transition to school has tried to address the wide range of issues this entails (Barbarin et al., 2008; De Gioia, 2015; Garbascz et al., 2015). Interestingly, in their policy proposals for action, Siddiqi et al. (2012) stated, "one of the most efficient strategies for improving ECD [early childhood development] is simply to find ways to convince parents and caregivers of the importance of play and the ways they can promote it" (p. 132). However, data collected for the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in

the UK are regularly used to inform policymakers and influence curriculum designers. According to Alharbi and Alzahrani (2020), OFSTED's *Bold beginnings* report (2017) on the Reception Year (first year of school) "emphasizes transforming learning in the early-childhood setting from free play, exploration, and child-guided experiences to traditional, direct instruction based on literacy, mathematical understanding, teachers' guidance, and less play" (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020, p. 10).

Studies such as Besi and Sakellariou (2019) and Yoshikawa et al. (2013) have noted the importance of the connection between parents and teachers to children's successful transition to school: "the family-school relationship is critical at any stage of child's education, but it becomes more important during the transition to primary school" (Besi & Sakellariou, 2019, p. 1). A recent study by Kyrönlampi et al. (2020) in Finland found that despite government guidelines that teachers should initiate encounters and support parent participation, parents felt that teachers did not take account of their perspectives. Kyrönlampi et al. concluded that dialogue between parents and teachers requires time and a willingness to work together. An understanding of the barriers felt by parents and teachers can aid clear communication by simplifying the message of prioritising oral language in every way possible (Ring et al., 2016).

According to Besi and Sakellariou (2019), open communication, mutual respect and an understanding of each child's needs is foundational to good parent-teacher relationships. When teachers and parents are aware of perspectives, values, beliefs and expectations, this communication is enhanced. Whatever the age at which children start school, allowance and acknowledgement of their current developmental abilities, particularly language, must be made if they are to have a positive start to school, and all that entails for future trajectories.

## **2.4 Children's Oral Language Development and Technology**

The proliferation of digital media in the lives of young children has changed the way in which children and parents communicate, and the availability of touchscreen technology means that children can use devices from a very early age (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020). Previous research has outlined the negative effects of children passively watching television for extended periods of time (Beyens & Eggermont, 2014), and in 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement detailing concerns and recommendations for parents and caregivers (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). The AAP recommended that two- to five-year-olds should be limited to one hour of screen time per day and advised that an adult co-views and selects the digital content to ensure quality. The AAP also cautioned against using media as the only way to calm a child, as this may inhibit development of the child's emotional regulation. Pertinent to the present study, the AAP further recommended screen-free, parent-child playtimes to build language, cognitive and social skills (Council on Communications and Media, 2016). This is in line with Reed et al.'s (2017) findings of interruption to children's learning caused by parents' personal digital use.

It is worth noting that preschool children and young adults are the two most at-risk groups for smartphone addiction (Csibi et al., 2021). Madigan et al. (2019) also found that time with screens and background television negatively affected children's language development, whereas quality content and co-viewing supported oral language development. Further, Chaudron et al.'s (2015) study of 70 families with children under the age of eight years in six European countries found that while technology use aided most children's acquisition of basic operational skills, their interactions were influenced by their level of literacy skills.

Chen et al. (2020) considered the connection between parental self-efficacy and how parents mediated their young children's use of digital technologies. They found that a lack of parenting efficacy led to increased tablet and television viewing time and decreased home literacy activities. As home literacy practices are strongly related to children's oral language development, parents need to be aware of how new media and technology can foster children's development (Neumann & Neumann, 2017). Parents act as gatekeepers for young children's access to digital technologies in the home, and as such, the extent to which they facilitate or constrain access depends on parents' confidence with digital technologies and how they mediate children's use of devices (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2020). Therefore, parental mediation of digital media can be seen as varied, situational and dynamic, because parents' own media use influences children's use and vice versa (Zaman & Mifsud, 2017).

While technology is certainly more widespread and accessible than ever before, use of technology in classrooms depends on many factors, not least of which is teachers' self-efficacy and perceived skills with using technology effectively (Petko et al., 2018). Several studies have noted teachers' reluctance to regularly use technology in the classroom (Fraillon et al., 2014; Wastiau et al., 2013), leading further studies to identify barriers and enablers for educational technology use (Brenneman et al., 2019; Nikolopoulou et al., 2021; Petko et al., 2018; Sintonen et al., 2018). Nikolopoulou et al. (2021) in particular commented on the scarcity of research on understanding teachers' perceived barriers to using technologies with children at the micro-level. They argued that investigation of teacher perceptions is important as these affect the actual implementation of technologies in practice. Studies such as Voogt and McKenney (2017) attest to the severe lack of attention given in teacher training institutes to providing teachers with the knowledge they need to use technologies in the classroom to foster early literacy and oral language.

Studies have shown that effective integration with instructional processes is rare even in technology-rich classrooms (Davies & West, 2014). A recent investigation into pre-service teachers' views on technology use in the classroom found that teachers held positive perspectives of technology use but were dissatisfied with the lack of instruction they received to engage children in activities using technology and digital media (Alelaimat et al., 2020). Haynes and Shelton (2018) also warned that it is crucial that teachers do not ignore the challenges posed by the proliferation of technologies in children's everyday lives, noting, "Rapid technological advancements promise unprecedented educational opportunities to foster student-centred and personalised learning, yet many schools are underprepared, lacking comprehensive organizational strategies for technology enhanced learning" (p. 271).

Parallel to this, the last decade has seen a rapid increase rise in STEM jobs, which has resulted in a push for STEM education from the earliest years (Pila et al., 2021). Worldwide concerns over the lack of women in STEM has prompted focus on incorporating technology in early years curricula, to engage girls before gender stereotypes develop (Sharma et al., 2021; Fisher et al., 2020). However, Manches and Plowman (2017) note that:

"There is a danger that the pace of change has mitigated against sufficient time to develop a research-informed pedagogy. It is challenging to develop an evidence-based approach to teaching computing to younger children in an environment in which educational tools evolve rapidly and teachers feel under-prepared, but without it there is a risk of demotivating children in an important area of the curriculum". (p. 198)

One use of technology advanced by Gràcia et al. (2020) is a digital tool that teachers can use in the classroom to reflect on and improve their students' oral language

competence. This tool is designed to help teachers build quality linguistic interactions through monitoring the dialogic processes they use to foster learning in the classroom.

Another important aspect of technology use is the considerable debate about appropriate guidelines, including between education and health, when education policies promote technology use for learning and social participation and health policies promote screen time restrictions (Paciga et al., 2017; Straker et al., 2018). A recent update to the Australian Movement Guidelines (Department of Health, 2021), similar to the AAP's advice, recommends no more than one hour of screen time per day for children aged two to five years, adding that too much unsupervised screen time can affect children's language development and readiness for school. From the age of five years, they recommend no more than two hours sedentary, recreational screen time, not including time spent on homework activities.

Arnott and Yelland (2020) suggest that new and evolving technologies should be considered as artefacts in the life of children. They acknowledge that as resources for learning, technologies affect how children learn about the world and make meanings of self. They note that digital texts are often equipped with an array of interactive tools to facilitate children's reading and learning that are not available in traditional books. As parent-child book reading has long been shown to improve children's language and literacy (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021; Bojczyk et al., 2016; Dowdall et al., 2020; Preece & Levy, 2020), some researchers have examined digital technologies as offering solutions to longstanding problems, such as utilising the motivating power of electronic books for boys to reduce the gender gap in reading attainment (Rvachew et al., 2020). One study by Kucirkova et al. (2015) employed a Vygotskian perspective on parent-child talk while sharing a story on an iPad and found evidence of parent-child interaction patterns similar to those recognised in children's literacy development. However, another study comparing

parent–child book reading with electronic iPad books found that parents while talked more about the book format and environment when using the electronic book, children comprehended more when using the traditional book (Krcmar & Cingel, 2014). It remains to be seen whether the different format and subsequent difference in cognitive load aids or hinders children’s comprehension of digital books.

Sung (2019) examined a digital literacy program for adults supporting children’s computer play in Taiwan. Similar to the framework used in the current study, it was based on two important concepts of Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory: human activity is mediated by technical tools and children’s development is mediated by a more knowledgeable other (ZPD). Bandura et al.’s (1977) social cognitive theory (was also employed as part of Sung’s (2019) iPad loan service in the way that the facilitator modelled effective use of tablets for the adults to observe and imitate. The success of this program led Sung (2019) to recommend this approach to meet children’s and families’ literacy needs in a digital age.

Use of devices in an early childhood context was previously the subject of much debate, but the prevalence of technologies in children’s lives has changed this (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Yang & Gunn, 2020). Early childhood research has now moved to focus on appropriate ways to incorporate technical or digital pedagogies within and beyond the home environment (Bleumers et al., 2015; Griffith & Arnold, 2019; Lytle et al., 2018; Palaiologou, 2016; Yelland, 2018; Zabatiero et al., 2018).

As the present study is concerned with factors that may influence or impede children’s oral language development in the first year of school, it is worth noting that there has been extensive research on parenting practices around children’s use of digital technologies and mobile devices (Konok et al., 2019; Livingstone et al., 2015; Mantilla & Edwards, 2019; McLean et al., 2017; Neumann & Neumann, 2017). Mobile learning refers

to the integration of teaching and learning with mobile digital devices (Grant et al., 2019). Due to its flexibility, it can support personalisation, contextualise learning in formal and informal contexts and enhance children's motivation and communication (Nikolopoulou et al., 2021). According to Marsh et al. (2017), "in the light of socio-cultural developments in the new media age, a change in focus from family literacy to family digital literacy is required" (p. 1).

As stated earlier, play provides optimal conditions for language learning. Edwards (2014) challenged existing ideas about play, learning and development in light of children's increased access to digital technologies. For young children (zero to eight years old), Edwards argued that play has always been deeply connected to children's cultural world. From a sociocultural perspective, as children's play moves from one play competency to the next in order to develop mature play, it could be that play in the digital context still provides the means to connect with culture and make meaning, but with enhanced opportunities for direct participation across a continuum of digital to non-digital activity (Edwards, 2014). Fler (2020) makes the argument for new pedagogical practices for teachers to make the most of the fact that "digital tools are increasingly a part of the young child's life, and that when used in preschools and homes, they productively contribute to their play and learning" (p. 2). However, Hosokawa and Katsura (2018) warned that regular use of mobile devices without educational content was significantly linked to behaviour problems in their study of 1,642 children in the First Grade of elementary school (aged six years) in Japan.

In response to the overwhelmingly large range of apps advertised as educational, for touchscreen and mobile devices marketed to children under eight years of age, Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2015) developed a framework to help identify apps that align with known processes in children's development. For the purposes of the present study, the four pillars

identified for apps by Hirsh-Pasek and colleagues are—active, engaged, meaningful and socially interactive—and all components of optimal engagement with children that can enhance the development of oral language. They also recommend that the apps are used in a scaffolded way, in which the adult supports the child in a guided exploration of age-appropriate content, helping children to reach a point where they can accomplish tasks independently. There is currently no consensus in early years curricula on specific mobile applications that best support learning (Nikolopoulou et al., 2021).

Recent emergency remote learning offered by schools in response to the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the urgent need for parents to be able to integrate technologies at home in positive, productive and meaningful ways to enhance children's oral language development. Gaudreau et al. (2020) demonstrated the increased responsiveness of children to live and video chat conditions over pre-recorded ones during virtual story times, incorporated by many families in response to government COVID-19 restrictions. Pavlenko and Pavlenko (2020) further showed how the digital literacy of parents was a critical condition for the positive online experiences of young children during COVID-19 lockdowns.

With an increasing number of young children accessing mobile technology and a strong relationship between parent screen use and that of their children, Mantilla and Edwards (2019) conducted a systematic review of the literature to advise adults about appropriate use of digital technology. They found that adult perspectives were both diverse and complex, testament to conflict between taking advantage of the benefits and opportunities to aid children's development afforded by increasingly advanced digital technologies versus concerns for children's health and safety while using digital technologies. This review went on to inform Early Childhood Australia's (2018) statement on young children and digital technologies. Similar to the statement by the National

Association for the Education of Young Children in the US (2012), Early Childhood Australia's (2018) statement recognised the importance of a contextual approach to optimal use of technologies with, by and for children.

## **2.5 Children's Oral Language Development and Wellbeing**

From the age of four years, the co-occurrence of language disorder and social and emotional difficulties becomes evident (Levickis et al., 2018; McKean et al., 2017). Streubel et al. (2020) found that children needed to acquire a 'theory of mind' before they can name the facial expressions of basic emotions and recognise other people as having different mental states that can affect emotions. They asserted that children's oral language could support their emotional competence by developing their emotional specific vocabulary. In this way, the cognitive linguistic processes of conversing in an educational environment assumes an adequate development of theory of mind, meaning the ability to understand that other people have intentions, beliefs and perspectives different from one's own. Frith and Frith (2006) noted that although children develop at different rates, it is generally at around the age of five that theory of mind is fully utilised and children understand that everyone does not have the same knowledge of events that they have experienced or witnessed. It is only then that children realise they need to supply more information in their responses. However, this ability to process information and respond appropriately relies heavily on the development of linguistic and neural pathways that are in turn influenced by the stimulation a child receives from those around them and the environment.

A recent study by Burchinal et al. (2020) of 1292 children starting school found that children with high levels of language, executive function skills and low levels of internalising problems were the only school entry skills that predicted large gains over the first four years of school. This is in line with research by Vernon-Feagans et al. (2016),

who found that children with strong language skills are less likely to have social-emotional problems. This has important implications for future trajectories. For example, a UK study by Bryan (2004) investigating language and communication difficulties in a prison population of young offenders found that 67% did not have basic literacy skills. An Australian study by Snow and Powell (2012) also found that 50% of young offenders had a language impairment, the majority of which had been identified in their early school years.

The Australian Literacy Educator's Association (2015) stated that the ability to communicate effectively in contemporary society is a necessary condition of access to employment, social support services, political, civic and domestic decision-making. Snow (2016) asserted that children with early externalising behaviours such as conduct disorder and internalising behaviours such as anxiety could have underlying expressive and receptive language deficiencies. Snow (2016) warned that if untreated, this could be detrimental to children's mental health and academic success.

Children manage their emotions through internal and external language, particularly when coping with change such as school transitioning, and behavioural regulation plays an important role in social outcomes for children (Aro et al., 2012; Bendezu et al., 2018; Ayers Denham et al., 2011; Carpenter et al., 2016). Given that many classroom tasks require a level of emotional knowledge, Clegg et al. (2015) noted that support from teachers and parents is critical to help children access information and resources to enable them to focus on learning. Noting the scarcity of longitudinal studies between physical aggression and low language ability, Girard et al. (2014) assessed children aged 17 months to six years using parent reports and standardised tests and found significant associations, reasoning that parenting behaviours could play an important role during this period.

Analysing the results from a parent survey of 53,256 children starting school in Australia, Hughes et al. (2016) found that 10,868 (20.4%) of these children had either behavioural or language difficulties. They concluded that this was strongly associated with family and community vulnerabilities, such as parents' educational attainment, domestic violence, living in a deprived area and/or a history of parent mental illness, indicating that these children are at a heightened risk of developmental difficulties. This has implications for teachers managing behaviour in the classroom.

## **2.6 Children's Oral Language Development and Parents' Influences**

Based on the literature reviewed thus far, it is evident that the first year of school is crucial for building a positive disposition towards learning and a time when both brain development and physical growth accelerate (Burchinal et al., 2020; Burgoyne et al., 2019; Evans, 2021; Romeo et al., 2018b; Taylor et al., 2021; Yew & O'Kearney, 2017). Using a sample of over 4,000 children in their first year of school in Australia, Christensen et al. (2020) examined the multidimensional nature of school readiness. Recognising the broad ecological context of starting school, Christensen et al. examined a range of characteristics and the relationships between these, concluding that measures of school readiness cannot be defined by easily measured child characteristics. Instead, they recommended a multidimensional approach that includes parent and school factors.

The way in which parents interact with their children has long been known to shape the foundations of language development, increase vocabulary and greatly influence learning (Field, 2010; Rowe, 2006). In a study by Mendelsohn et al. (2018), children's hyperactivity at school entry was significantly reduced by promoting parent and child reading aloud and play. The AAP's recent policy statement (Garner et al., 2021) asserts that stable and nurturing relationships mitigate childhood toxic stress by fostering the skills necessary to cope with adversity.

While some studies indicate an important role for fathers in children developing oral language (Pancsofar et al., 2010; Seven & Goldstein, 2020; Swain et al., 2017), other studies (e.g., Schady, 2011) find that the schooling and vocabulary levels of mothers are the strongest predictor of children's later cognitive development.

Resnick and Snow (2009) noted that before children learn to read, the only way they expand developing language skills is by engaging in stimulating talk. Snow and Powell (2012) further stated that it is the responsibility of adults in children's environment to ensure a strong oral language foundation and avoid a 'risky start' that could result in societal marginalisation. Garbascz et al. (2015) used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory to reveal that the communication that occurs within and across systems of home and school influenced perspectives that affect oral language development.

Parents thus play a critical role in outcomes for their children. For example, Field's (2010) report found that parenting was the single aspect of early childhood with the most influence on children's life outcomes, noting that disadvantaged children who did well also had good relationships with their parents. The report also called for better connection between health and education services so that parents could build key relationships across sectors.

Ellwood-Lowe et al. (2020), noting the well-established link between parents from disadvantaged backgrounds speaking less to their children compared to parents with greater educational and economic resources, examined whether financial scarcity itself was the cause. They concluded that structural constraints such as financial scarcity can reduce child-directed speech by shifting parents' attention away from children. That is not to say that parents from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot improve their children's language and social functioning at school entry. It may be more accurate to say that supporting a successful home learning environment acknowledges structural inequalities in low income

and improves parental self-efficacy for engaging with children by reducing parental stress (Canfield et al., 2020).

Romeo et al. (2018a) state that all young children need to have ample opportunities to participate in conversations in order to address the huge difference in vocabulary exhibited between children from different backgrounds when they start school. Golinkoff et al. (2019) state that there are at least two reasons for studying differences in children's language skills: "First, the study of individual differences advances theories and knowledge on the science of language learning. Second, it is crucial to understand the source of these differences to design effective, evidence-based interventions" (p. 1). This present study considers the individual perspectives of parents and teachers to increase knowledge and understanding of children's developing oral language at a critical transition time in the children's lives. Much research has focused on the importance of the parents' role in providing rich oral language experiences at home to develop early language and literacy skills (Bingham et al., 2017; Garrett-Peters et al., 2019; Law et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2019; Vallotton et al., 2017; Wade et al., 2018).

A study of the parents of 170 four- to five-year-olds in Canada found that collaborative parent-child involvement in children's interests at home significantly affected school achievement (Lukie et al., 2013). However, Hornsby and Wilson (2014) found that parents' influence on children's oral language development can be overshadowed if politicians, bureaucrats and commercial program writers promote one type of instruction as more important and critical than any other. Similarly, despite much research on the importance and validity of play for children's learning and development, Colliver (2014) noted that mothers are divided in their commitment to the role of play in early learning. It is posited that most mothers agree that learning occurs through play in early childhood settings, but concerns are raised by these same mothers when they perceive

a danger that their child may not be learning the specific content necessary for successfully starting school. Here, while play is considered important, it is positioned at risk of being displaced by content learning in a manner that may disrupt rich opportunities for children's oral language development.

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory states that parents are more likely to be involved if they feel they have skills and knowledge to help. Studies show that a wide range of positive child developmental outcomes, such as improved behaviour and mental health, can be correlated with higher levels of parent self-efficacy. Likewise, a perceived lack of ability can result in negative outcomes (Gilleece et al., 2015; Green et al., 2007; Reyhing & Perren, 2021; Wittkowski et al., 2017). Trivette et al. (2010), investigating the influences of family systems intervention practices on parent-child interactions and child development, found that the way in which professional help was given to parents influenced parents' self-efficacy beliefs. This, in turn, influenced parent wellbeing. They concluded that the combined effects of parents' self-efficacy and wellbeing influenced child-parent interactions, which affected child development. Wittkowski et al. (2017) questioned whether addressing inconsistencies in terminology and ambiguous theory in many self-efficacy reports might mean parents with low self-efficacy could be better supported by instilling belief in their own abilities.

Of great concern and relevance to the present study is that many parents are not aware of oral language difficulties in their children (Hendricks et al., 2019) or whether their children have the necessary language skills to start school. Norbury et al. (2016) noted that teachers viewed younger children starting school as appearing to have greater difficulty with language, behaviour and academic progress compared to their older peers. Therefore, increased knowledge of oral language development may help parents and

teachers collaborate to ensure children's language skills are sufficiently developed to meet the demands of the classroom.

The Home Literacy Model (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014) postulates that parental engagement with children in literacy activities at home promotes children's reading and literacy outcomes at school. The type and frequency of activities have been linked to the development of children's reading ability by enhancing language skills. Krijnen et al. (2020) identified three critical categories of home literacy activities: code, oral language exposure and oral language teaching. In a study of Finnish children from kindergarten to Year 2 (aged five to seven years), Silinskas et al. (2020) found that parental engagement was particularly important with the six-year-olds as they moved from kindergarten into Year 1.

Bingham et al. (2017) examined parenting styles and home literacy opportunities associated with children's oral language skills in a study of 181 ethnically diverse parents. They concluded that parents' educational attainment was consistently and positively related to children's oral language development. In line with the theoretical stance of the current study, some scholars such as Madigan et al. (2019) believe that children whose parents display high levels of sensitivity and responsiveness have stronger language skills than other children because this type of parenting operates within the child's ZPD, providing a secure base for exploration, joint attention and language. However, studies such as Knauer et al. (2019) show that parenting behaviours, both affective and cognitive, are responsive to interventions, and evidence from both low- and high-income countries show that quality parenting enhances child development from birth to at least five years of age (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2016). Wade et al. (2018), acknowledging the role that parenting plays in determining how children's development is influenced by the wider social environment, stated that this awareness is being recognised as a powerful way to

support parents to improve childhood wellbeing and educational outcomes, and, ultimately, improve social equity.

In terms of preparing children for school, Davies et al. (2020) found that most parents believed schools would favour literacy and numeracy skills over physical, social and emotional health; therefore, parents overemphasised supporting development of these skills. Davies et al. argued that this emphasis becomes a concern if it is prioritised at the detriment of other important aspects of children's development. Instead, parents are well placed to help their children with broader aspects of development, such as speech and language. According to Azad et al. (2020), effective parent–teacher communication is important for optimising children's development, but it is a complex and multifaceted concept. Parent–teacher communication may be theoretically grounded as a concept in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) as a means of aligning home and school practices. However, one meta-analysis of family literacy programmes (De la Rie et al., 2016) found methodological flaws and unreliable indicators of implementation from this perspective, finding that programs targeting focused activities at home were more effective than programs that combined home and school activities. Azad et al. (2020) also reported improved teacher self-efficacy through increased communication with parents but not vice versa.

## **2.7 Children's Oral Language Development and Teachers' Influences**

The quality delivery of any early childhood education program depends on teachers' knowledge, attitude and practice (Kane et al, 2005). Mashburn et al. (2008), in their study of 2,439 children to examine the development of language, academic and social skills in four-year-old children, used three measures: classroom environment, program infrastructure and design, and teacher's emotional and instructional interactions with children. To do this they used the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (La Paro et al.,

2004) to measure classroom quality as it focuses more on the interactions between children and teachers and how teachers make use of the environment. Mashburn et al. (2008) found that positive teacher–child relationships were crucial and that highly skilled teachers could create moments of linguistic responsiveness (i.e., incidences of joint attention and joint action). This, they argued, increases children’s ability to make deeper connections and provides opportunities for thinking, questioning and problem solving. Pakarinen et al. (2010) tested the validity of this system in a different cultural context and found it to have high item and scale reliability.

O’Connor and McCartney (2007), using the data of 1,364 children from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, also discovered positive associations between quality teacher–child relationships and achievement. Also, King and La Paro (2015) examined teachers’ ‘mental state talk’ in early years classrooms and found that teachers’ use of verbal language contributed to positive and sensitive teacher–child interactions. Mental state talk is verbal speech that references internal states of cognition and emotion (i.e., think, believe, happy, angry; Frampton et al., 2009). A recent study by Voltmer et al. (2021) demonstrated how a teacher-led intervention with four- to five-year-olds in Germany, called “Feeling, Thinking, Talking”, could promote children’s complex language processing abilities at this age. Acknowledging the substantial language gains of dialogic book reading with children in one-to-one and small groups, they considered measures that could effectively support developing oral language in large varied ability and diverse groups. Voltmer et al. attributed the success of the intervention to the programs’ effectiveness in sensitising teachers’ use of their own language while integrating support strategies when talking with children. However, similar to other studies, children living with disadvantage scored lower than others and had showed no significant effect on vocabulary growth.

According to Croft et al. (2016) achieving a balance between parental and curricular demands is difficult, as educators are often blamed for failure to deliver results on standardised tests at a time when confidence in teachers is at an all-time low. Rooney (2015) found that teachers working in high-stakes accountability programs described a ‘loss of joy’ in their work, and Herman et al. (2018) found that, unsurprisingly, teachers with high stress were associated with the lowest student outcomes

Recent research indicates an ongoing concern that teachers do not have the strategies and conceptual knowledge to implement intensive oral language intervention (Goldfeld et al., 2021; Meeks et al., 2017; Moats, 2014; Sheridan & Gjems, 2017; Snow, 2016; Stark et al., 2020). Amorsen and Wilson (2020) caution that teachers’ focus can shift from the spoken aspects of language to the written form, thereby limiting opportunities for rich dialogue. Adlof and Hogan (2019) highlight a further complicating issue for teachers - being able to identify, and therefore adequately support, children with language difficulties. They state that there is currently no systematic measurement of children’s oral language skills in schools. Dockrell and Marshall (2015) noted that existing screening measures are limited in their ability to meet psychometric prerequisites to identify language problems. Alexander (2020) suggested “dialogic teaching” as a way to “Harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend pupils’ thinking and advance their learning and understanding. It helps the teacher more precisely to diagnose pupils’ needs, frame their learning tasks and assess their progress” (p. 1).

In dialogic teaching classrooms, interactions are reciprocal, supportive, collective, cumulative and purposeful, and are very different from traditional question and answer routines. Adlof and Hogan (2019) argued that substantial investment has resulted in the development of frameworks for word reading in schools, but to truly improve literacy for all children and foster positive long-term trajectories, language comprehension skills

should be taught alongside word reading skills from the first year of school. This places the teacher in a key role to undertake early and ongoing measurements and adjust planning to support all children. However, this requires relevant knowledge of how children's oral language develops in order to identify problems and enhance instruction. There is an urgency for this, as less than one-third of children with language impairment are identified early enough to prevent reading difficulties (Adlof & Hogan, 2019).

In relation to the theoretical framework of this study, what and how teachers are expected to teach are influenced by wider economic, historical and political values that change over time (Sheridan & Gjems, 2017). Genishi and Haas Dyson (2009) recognised the important role of classroom culture in children's language development, and Hibben (2016) suggested that specific activities such as oral storytelling in early years classrooms could be used to incorporate a range of sociocultural backgrounds and expand the boundaries of literacy instruction. Rowe (2006) noted that schools are only as effective as the collaboration between those responsible for making them work (teachers) and those for whom they are intended (students).

Therefore, it would seem that early years teachers need to be well skilled at analysing what children can and cannot yet do, to ascertain the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) and support children in their learning. A balance needs to be struck between building capacity for children to make their own decisions and working within ever-increasing pressure to improve data on standardised tests and meet increased accountability measures (Datnow, 2011; Croft et al., 2016). Genishi and Haas Dyson (2009) described this as a very puzzling disconnect between classroom curricula and demographic reality. A biblical term, the "Peter effect" (referring to not being able to give what you do not have), has been used to refer to the important connection between teacher knowledge and student outcomes (Binks-Cantrell et al., 2012). This has led to research initiatives, such as the Oral Language

Supporting Early Literacy implemented by Victorian Catholic schools in 2011, designed to strategically target teachers' professional knowledge of children's oral language development in low socio-economic status (SES) schools to improve literacy scores.

Studies on teacher self-efficacy indicate that those with low efficacy often concentrate on the better-able groups of children, viewing others as possible sources of disruption (Ross & Bruce, 2007). Conversely, teachers with a greater sense of self-efficacy are able to innovate on learning experiences to differentiate the curriculum and communicate better with parents (Kim, 2010). Takahashi (2011) warned that teachers who perceive themselves to be less efficacious often reduce their efforts and expectations for children with challenging behaviours, resulting in low performance and outcomes that perpetuate and affirm their self-perception of low efficacy. Grant et al. (2019) noted that teachers who expect order but encounter chaos in their classroom can experience a situation-specific sense of self as a failure. Compounded over time, teachers' belief in their mastery of important teaching skills diminishes. Studies around the world have drawn connections between teachers' reduced beliefs in their abilities and increased attrition rates (Bogler & Somech, 2004; Chan et al., 2008; Klassen et al., 2013; Ware & Kitsantas, 2007).

Reinke et al. (2013) noted that teacher self-efficacy was closely related to classroom management, with more effective classroom practices delivered by teachers who felt more confident in their own capacity. In their study of 121 teachers, 97% were found to have high levels of stress. However, teachers who reported high stress but also high self-efficacy had positive student outcomes. More recently, Amorsen and Wilson (2020) supported this view and stated that teachers are more likely to adjust their teaching to account for student differences if they have high levels of self-efficacy.

It is important to note that teachers bring their own attitudes and beliefs to the classroom, and their particular implicit assumptions may be very different from those of

children and parents (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Ryan & O'Toole, 2014). Teachers have particular expectations of parents and children, and also have to respond to school system requirements and expectations. Costantino (2019) found that many kindergarten teachers in Canada believed that the (mostly five-year-old) children in their classes did not have the language ability to communicate effectively, yet, under current legislation, they were expected to focus on reading and writing skills. The majority of teachers believed that oral language development is an important precursor to reading, yet time spent on Science, Arts and other subjects that enhance oral language were being decreased to allow more focus on phonic-related reading activities. This creates a perceived mismatch between teachers' beliefs of what children need to learn and what they are instructed to teach them.

The debate over theoretical orientations of reading instruction continues to be controversial in the UK, New Zealand and Australia (Campbell, 2020). Early childhood curricula in these three countries specify the importance of play as essential to support children's learning and development (Department for Education, 2017; Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). One of the assessment criteria for early childhood centres from the National Quality Framework in Australia states that educators need to use intentional teaching to scaffold and extend learning (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). However, many educators perceive the intentional role as misaligned with long-held facilitative approaches when children are learning through play (Colliver, 2014). Given that this refers to children aged zero to five years in prior-to-school settings, it is worth noting that many children in Australia are already in the first year of school before they become five.

Colliver (2014) noted a disparity between some early childhood educators' belief in play-based holistic learning and a need to deliver subject content outcomes for high-stakes testing. Per Elkind (2007), "Play operates as more than a creative urge; it also functions as

a fundamental mode of learning” (p. 3). He cautioned that children’s physical, emotional and social situation can all have limiting effects on their capacity for learning. We know from Vygotsky (1934/1962) that play helps children to verbalise their inner thoughts and feelings about the world around them, which in turn helps them to acquire new concepts. Rose et al. (2018) also noted the positive effects of play for receptive language development and the ensuing effects on behaviour and emotional self-regulation in children from three to seven years old. In this way, enhanced language and social skills are just some of the benefits of play (Armstrong & Sutherland, 2020). O’Keeffe and McNally’s (2021) study addressing the return to school of many young children following COVID-19 lockdowns found that 82% of teachers recommended play activities to parents while 99% said they would use play as a pedagogical tool to support young children’s transition back to school.

Instead of a push for play-based learning as subscribed to by many early childhood teachers, there has been an increase in the amount of commercially produced phonics programmes used in the preschool sector (Campbell et al., 2012). As teachers’ views about play crucially influence their classroom practice (Vorkapić & Katic, 2015), it would appear that a strong alignment is needed between teaching approaches in prior-to-school and school settings to address the continuing controversy between child-initiated play-based practices and adult-directed phonics. Pyle et al. (2018) studied teachers integrating play with literacy learning and found that direct instruction took a central role despite the teachers endorsing play as a vehicle for learning, and play itself was considered to be difficult to structure and plan. Overall, they found that teachers felt a lack of confidence in implementing guided play. Regardless of studies demonstrating that children in play-based classrooms outperform those in direct instruction classrooms in literacy, numeracy and cognitive outcomes (Lewis-Presser et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013), when

teachers are unsure about their role, the quality of their teaching is ultimately affected (Walsh et al., 2019). It is argued that an essential part of early childhood teachers' job is to foster children's dispositions and promote knowledge and skill acquisition through participation in children's playful experiences (Fleer, 2018; Lovatt & Hedges, 2015). In line with the Vygotskian perspective, the teacher aids children's developmental processes by interacting with them in their environment, making it the teacher's responsibility to promote meaningful learning by engaging children's prior knowledge and understandings (Walsh et al., 2019).

It seems evident that teachers of children in the first year of school have a complex role to fill. Competing discourses about where the teaching focus should be in children's first year of school shape public understanding and policy (Fairclough, 2003). Scholars around the world advocating play-based learning also differ in their focus. For example, Weisberg et al. (2013) in the US emphasise the teacher's role in guided play, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) in the Netherlands promote developmental education where the role of the teacher in children's play is enhanced, Wood and Blair (2014) in the UK advocate a need to oppose reductionist policy discourses about play and pedagogy, and Kejo (2017) in Tanzania reports that play is primarily seen by educators as a way to motivate students but not recognised as contributing to academic development.

Efforts to improve teachers' capacity and coping should take account of the broader socio-ecological context, such as pressures from parents, administrators and society, in order to foster a nurturing environment and adequately prepare teachers (Reinke et al., 2013). Many studies have found a positive correlation between high-quality instruction and children's oral language development (Burchinal et al., 2020; Curby et al., 2010; Downer et al., 2012; Hamre et al., 2017; Leyva et al., 2015). Interestingly, other research has shown that while high-quality instructional support is effective for developing children's

expressive oral language, the effect on children's receptive oral language development is less effective, with receptive language growth slowing down in the second half of the first year of school (Hu et al., 2020). It is argued that timing is important, and there may be a need for a higher level of teacher–child interaction quality in the latter part of the first year of school to maintain growth in children's oral language development.

It is argued that the concept of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) can be used as a professional tool for teachers to observe the inner developmental processes taking place within the child (Barrs, 2017). In Australia, Crowther (2021) writes of how investing in teachers' sense of efficacy, purpose and passion is crucial because “both education systems and schools may be somewhat out of balance, to the detriment of students, the teaching profession and the Australian community, but we know how to redress the problem and we have the resources to do it” (p. 152). Referring to the current state of schooling, Hargreaves and Shirley (2021) note the renewed focus and importance of wellbeing in schools worldwide and highlight the reciprocal connections between teacher and student wellbeing.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

The literature highlights the rationale for the present study. Problems with early oral language skills lead to long-term issues for children with literacy acquisition and emotional wellbeing. Combined, these create negative trajectories for children throughout school and beyond. Parent and teacher perspectives on the importance of children's oral language development in the first year of school and their sense of efficacy to support it are significant aspects of children's oral language development. This study contributes to the literature by raising awareness of the importance of children's oral language development in the first year of school and the critical role of parents and teachers as adult stakeholders in children's lives during this time.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework**

This chapter details the theoretical framework of this study. As previously mentioned, strengthening early childhood education is increasingly seen in many countries as a way of ensuring future economic growth and societal equality (OECD, 2017; Purtell et al., 2020). With children's language development forming a strong foundation for children's learning and school success, it is important to be aware of how language development is being theorised, conceptualised, supported and assessed (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020).

A sociocultural framework was chosen for the conduct of this study. This perspective posits that human activities take place within social contexts, which are mediated by language (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). There is a need to focus on how the individual makes meaning from their environment and to examine the recursive role of the environment. Hess and Schultz (2008) noted that the "proximal processes" occurring in children's immediate environment and necessary for development are, in turn, affected by influences from other systems (school administration, social welfare, politics, media, etc.). For this reason, the present study used Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Bandura's (1982) research on self-efficacy to investigate parent and teacher perspectives and their perceived efficacy to influence children's oral language development as they begin formal schooling.

Both Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1986) viewed the individual as being developed in and through society. Bandura's (1982) explanation of human agency as occurring through the self-efficacy of individuals in society is helpful for understanding the perspectives of parents and teachers in the present study. To address the issue of children

starting school with a low level of oral language, it is important to recognise the pivotal role of parent and teacher perspectives in developing children's oral language skills and facilitating the development of accompanying higher mental functions (O'Sullivan & Ring, 2021).

### **3.1 Vygotsky**

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a Soviet psychologist whose focus was developmental psychology. He is known as the founder of cultural-historical theory, in which he proposed that the development of higher psychological functions emerge through interpersonal connections with the social environment, mediated by the use of signs.

Vygotsky studied the significance of interpersonal communication and cultural mediation in child development, evidenced through processes of internalisation. At the heart of his theory is the sociogenesis of human mental functions that originate as interactions between people first in the interpsychological plane and, once internalised through assistance and mediation, begin to function in the intrapsychological plane (Vygotsky, 1978).

The work of the Gestalt movement in the 1930s influenced Vygotsky's ZPD, which provides a prospective view of children's cognitive development by focusing on the potential skill level attainable by a child with the support of a more capable person. This concept continues to be widely cited, critiqued and researched, offering a valuable insight into cognitive development through human interactions (Eun, 2017). Vygotsky's (1933) writings have transcended his historical location and time, having been translated into many different languages. (Although it must be noted that while English translations of Vygotsky's writings were published in the 1960s, it was not until the 1980s that they became more well known.)

Vygotsky (1978) explained 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)” (p. 57). In this way, children’s oral language development can be seen as originating in social, historical and cultural interactions, mastered through meaningful, collaborative action with a more knowledgeable other within the ZPD and used as a psychological tool to mediate the development of higher mental functions. Vygotsky (1978) centralises the notion of the dialectic in understanding the relationship between the person and society in human development. This helps our understanding of the problem of children’s low oral language development in the first year of school in its entirety rather than as a compartmentalised issue.

### ***3.1.1 Dialectic Approach***

A key feature of Vygotsky’s (1934/1962) theorisation is his dialectical approach to the study of change and interrelationship between the human and society:

“We are dialecticians. We do not at all think that the developmental path of science follows a straight line, and if it has had zigzags, returns, and loops we understand their historical significance and consider them to be necessary links in our chain, inevitable stages of our path”. (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 336)

By taking this approach, language can be investigated as a social and cultural process rather than as the acquisition of a separate object by children. By analysing the internal contradictions of language development and the social interconnections of language within the process of their change, we have what Dafermos (2018) called the “internal essence of the process of development”. Vygotsky (1934/1962) saw language and thought as systems that merge together:

“The earliest speech of the child is ... essentially social. ... At a certain age the social speech of the child is quite sharply divided into egocentric and communicative speech ... Egocentric speech emerges when the child transfers social, collaborative forms of behaviour to the sphere of inner-personal psychic functions ... Egocentric speech, splintered off from general social speech, in time leads to inner speech, which serves both autistic and logical thinking. ... the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialised, but from the social to the individual”. (Ch. 2)

In this way, a child’s social environment plays a mediational role, not only as the place where development occurs but also as the source of that development.

### ***3.1.2 Social Situation***

Vygotsky’s (1978) hypothesis on the interpersonal nature of the development of new higher mental functions suggests focusing on social relationships between individuals when analysing early childhood language development. Ahrenkiel and Holm (2020) argued that a literacy-centred approach to children’s development of oral language focuses only on certain elements of language considered necessary for learning to read. Conversely, analysing children’s communal language use from an interactional perspective means “Child culture is seen as an arena for the development of academic, social, cognitive and discursive skills” (p. 55).

Children create social rules as they use their imaginations in play situations (Hakkarainen et al., 2017). Vygotsky (1978) considered play as a leading activity, in that the goal of play is to act as a bridge between emotion and memory, and a central psychological foundation (e.g., higher mental function):

“Considering play as the leading activity in the development of young children is different to thinking about play as the ‘child’s world’ or the ‘child’s work’. A

cultural–historical study foregrounds the motives, needs and interests of children alongside of the cultural contexts which privilege and value specific practices”.

(Fleer, 2009, p. 14)

A leading activity must be mastered for a child to enter a new social situation of development, which provides the impetus for a new psychological function from which the next leading activity can emerge. Considering play as a leading activity means recognising play as socially and culturally situated, so much so that mastery of it bridges the development of psychological functions, which in turn leads to a change in a child’s social situation. Interestingly, in terms of oral language development, ‘Mastery of a leading activity is said to occur when a child is able to discuss what he or she has been doing within that particular activity’ (Edwards, 2011, p. 197). Further:

“It is observed that children change their intonation, register and even use particular words to signal they are pretending. They also use language to regulate the actions of others, so that the play narrative can continue in particular ways. In mature forms of play, children tend to spend longer discussing the roles of players and rules of play, than actually playing”. (Fleer & Veresov, 2018, p. 64)

Reunamo and Nurmilaakso (2007) stated that language can be seen as functioning on a continuum from interpsychological to intrapsychological, meaning that it starts in a social context, between people, and only then inside the child themselves. In this way, language appears to play a mediative role in social processes to influence or be influenced by others.

Vygotsky’s (1978) distinction between tool and symbol is mirrored in the functions of speech. Although they are both mediated activities, tools are directed towards mastering nature (externalised) and signs are aids to mastering oneself (internalised) (Emerson, 1983). Speech, according to Vygotsky (1934/1962), first arises with a singular purpose:

communication between the child and the people around them. Only later does it develop into egocentric speech connected to patterns of thought and problem solving. In this way, speech becomes a child's inner psychic function, a basis for a child developing the ability to think. Vygotsky (1934/1962) explained that, initially, speech develops independently of thinking as a conditioned reflex, but by approximately the age of two years, a child experiences a growth in vocabulary followed by a phase of questions ("What is this?" and "What is this called?"). A child thus masters the external connection of word and object long before the internal connection of sign and meaning. For this reason, children often use social speech to think out loud, and it is not until around the age of seven or eight that they are able to utilise inner speech. Once speech is internalised, it can regulate thinking in a self-monitoring way that originally would have required another person's input (Vygotsky, 1934/1962). Mahn (2003) highlighted how central speech and thinking were to Vygotsky's work, because when thought and speech are unified, the concept of meaning is used as an internal structure, so much so that the meaning of words mediates mental processes.

However, the school-age children Vygotsky (1934/1962) was referring to were seven or eight years old—much older than the children currently starting school in many countries, including Australia. Yet the same processes of planning, self-regulation, problem solving, etc. are considered by many as essential skills needed to facilitate formal learning in the first year of school (Scott-Little et al., 2006). Vygotsky (1934/1962) contested that formal learning in one area did not transfer into others if taught discretely; rather, the central psychological functions of attention, memory, observation, etc. need to be developed in ways that can be concentrated on a diversity of subjects, because they are achieved via a change in social situation as leading activities are mastered, not via content knowledge as such. Vygotsky (1934/1962) further argued that school is not the beginning of the learning journey; a child arrives at school with established psychological functions.

Ehrich (2006) argues that language is the key ingredient in the process of internalisation for transformation in thinking to occur. Starting school is a critical period when a transformation of thinking is necessary, particularly with the emphasis on learning to read. Ehrich (2006) contends that although Vygotsky did not investigate the role of inner speech in the reading process specifically, it can be said to play a critical role, as activities such as silent reading require sub-vocal rehearsal of reading problems.

Vygotsky's (1987) analysis of critical periods in child development centred around two main themes: development of social relations and children's meaning-making processes. Because Vygotsky (1978) situated the process of development within the sociocultural environment, critical periods are therefore those when social relations need to be restructured in response to fundamental change. In this way, a critical period such as starting school can demand such rapid transformations in social and mental functioning that they can lead to crises for the child. This, according to Vygotsky (1987), provides more scope for examination than stable periods (where growth is slower). At these times, Vygotsky (1987) noted that children make meaning of social changes and leaps in the development of personality and awareness of themselves. Mahn (2003) further explained this:

“Children vary in the onset, duration, and impact of critical periods, but they are all affected in a fundamental way – during this period a new mental formation, a psychological structure of the personality, is formed. Examples of these mental structures include language, verbal thinking, and thinking in concepts” (p. 123).

Applying a Vygotskian perspective to children's oral language development in the first year of school would mean alerting teachers and parents of the need to examine the origin and driving forces that give rise to changes in children's meaning-making during this critical period, as this would help reveal the internal dynamics taking place. The

external pressure of developing oral language to communicate in print form involves a tension between a child's dominant mental structure and a new cognitive formation that will evolve in a specific meaning-making way for the child. This internal process is evident in a child's changing social relations and a change in the way they make meaning within their sociocultural environment. In this way, a child may appear "relatively difficult due to the fact that the pedagogical system applied to the child does not keep up with the rapid changes in his personality" (Vygotsky et al., 1998, pp. 193–194). As supportive adults, teachers and parents can best support children's oral language development by being sensitive to the fact that the new mental formations "determine the consciousness of the child, his relation to the environment, his internal and external life, the whole course of his development during the given period" (Vygotsky et al., 1998, p. 190).

In this way, there arises the need to understand systems by beginning to think conceptually and logically. Rather than a linear succession of stages, Vygotsky (1987) argued that child development can be characterised by a distinctive "system of generality", referring to the generality of meaning formation. The emergence of each new level of generality transforms the pre-existing relationships. Thus, earlier understandings of preconcepts are crucial for the transition to understanding true concepts. He gives the example of written speech building on the developed system of oral speech in the same way that algebraic thinking builds on the mastered principles of arithmetic (Vygotsky, 1987). Kim et al. (2015), examining how language was related to the growth trajectories in writing skills, concluded that children with language impairment have a significantly lower growth rate than typically developing peers. This provides further support for the importance of the development of early oral language skills.

The social situation of development considers the available interactions children can have with others following mastery of the previous leading activity (Bodrova & Leong,

2003). In this way, a social setting may trigger mastery of the leading activity, but it is not the same as the social situation of development. Most children in Australia will experience a change in their social setting as they move from long day-care centres, family care, in-home care or kindergartens prior to starting school. From three to six years of age, a child's use of language transforms their central mental functions. Attention and memory are new mental functions that emerge from the social situation of development. Children also begin to control their own behaviour through self-regulatory private speech, often facilitated by imaginary play. As children move from what can be immediately perceived in the environment around them, memory, greatly enhanced by children's use of language, enables them to communicate and problem solve. Bodrova and Leong (2003) also noted that this is when private speech emerges, making this "the period when children's use of oral language undergoes the most dramatic change" (p. 160).

Therefore, school is more than just the presence of a system; it contributes a fundamental change in the child's development. To support and enhance this development, Vygotsky (1978) stated that it is not enough to identify an actual development level by means of tests (i.e., what a child can achieve independently), but it is also necessary to discover what psychological functions are beginning to grow and develop by focusing on what the child can achieve with a little support (i.e., the ZPD).

### ***3.1.3 Mediation***

Ivić (1994) referred to Vygotsky's (1934/62) theory as a 'socio-historico-cultural theory' to stress the importance of the development of higher mental functions and highlight the primary role of human culture. Higher mental functions arise from the social situation of development, which involves adults who have access to historical and cultural ways of thinking, working and relating. As stated so far, child development, according to Vygotsky (1978), is a socially and culturally mediated process, occurring first in the

community context before being individually internalised. It is connected with an evolution of mental functions relative to the social situation of development enabled by a child's mastery of any given leading activity. Socially shared activities and personal development are interdependent as children's practice of talking, listening, and interacting with others gives rise to the higher mental functions necessary for continued psychological growth.

Vygotsky (1934/1962) noted that from early infancy, a child interacts with adults who convey culturally specific messages in the form of signs to assist communication. Later, these signs and semiotic systems can be utilised as tools to control individual behaviour. According to Ivić (1994), this is the key element of Vygotsky's theory, because without certain types of mental development, complex emotions could not evolve without the initial social interaction. An important aspect of this interaction is assimilation into a culture through interactions, with products of that culture mediated by the supportive adults (i.e., within the social situation of development).

Vygotsky (1978) also believed that language as a psychological tool, transforms thinking through a process of internalisation. According to Ehrich (2006), Vygotsky referred to three levels of transformation:

1. when an external operation is reconstructed as an internal one
2. when interpersonal processes are transformed into intrapersonal processes  
(higher mental functions; i.e., memory, concept formation, attention)
3. once internalisation has occurred, after a long series of development, cultural forms of behaviour follow their own systemic rules.

In terms of the transition from natural to cultural behaviour, within Vygotsky's (1978) mode of thinking, what has already developed influences further development, creating a new system that restructures and integrates emerging processes.

Looking at this from the supporting adults' perspectives, in the context of children's oral language development, what knowledge parents and teachers induce from their communities and how that is represented to them, in combination with their daily opportunities to put any change into practice, will affect their perceptions of children's oral language development. In this way, the cultural availability of knowledge about children's oral language development also constitutes the social situation of development in which children are likely to develop the very mental functions associated with (rich or otherwise) oral language development. Thus, the accessibility of cultural knowledge about oral language development for parents and teachers (as key stakeholders in the developmental lives of children) may influence children's oral language development at school commencement.

In this way, effective teaching within the ZPD means being aware that engaging a child with their social and cultural surroundings supports developmental processes that will undergo inner development and become part of the child's identity. Goodman (2014) argued for a Vygotskian approach to teacher evaluation of children's abilities because accurate assessment can occur by understanding how language development aids conceptual understanding. Knowing how to look for signs of growth, being consciously aware of one's own biases and philosophical orientation, and understanding that more varied and rich environments and interactions enhance children's oral language is critical. Goodman (2014) further stated that the more knowledge teachers have, the better equipped they are to evaluate materials and tests to use them wisely. Rather than labelling an unexpected response by a child as merely a language error, close observation of the unexpected can provide clues to and understanding of a child's growth, development and personal and cultural history (Goodman, 2014).

According to Barbarin et al. (2008), parents' perspectives are shaped by public discourse, their own beliefs and experiences, culture and history. An understanding of parents' perspectives is crucial, as this will influence the nature of parental practices that cultivate skills considered essential for children's development. Parents' level of engagement with promoting the acquisition of skills will also depend on the extent to which they view themselves as responsible for building these competencies (Barbarin et al., 2008). For the ZPD to be utilised effectively, children need to interact successfully with teachers and parents, as specific cultural artefacts and activities are central to the social situation of development. The language of others experienced in this area may later become internalised as part of a child's inner speech (Ehrich, 2006). What parents and teachers do with various forms of text to aid language development can be described as occurring on two levels: the concrete and the symbolic. Vygotsky (1978) referred to this as dual representation.

In the increasingly digitalised nature of modern society, Vygotsky's (1967) view of language and play as culturally mediated tools used in the process of constructing knowledge and collaborative meaning-making within the social situation of development has major implications for both teachers using technology in the classroom and parents using technology at home. Different recommendations regarding the role of play-based pedagogy in an academic-focused curriculum have resulted in confusion for teachers (Danniels & Pyle, 2018). This uncertainty could have negative implications for the effectiveness of the ZPD and teachers' role within the ZPD for supporting children's oral language development through play. Eun (2008) referred to a third voice additional to the parent and child within the social situation of development. This third voice—the larger social context—can have a huge effect on children's development, as it is likely to be mediating adult cultural knowledge and practices. It could be the institutional or historical

forces that shape interactions between children and adults, as this third voice has the power to direct the nature and goal of such activity and the tools employed by participants (Eun, 2008). While sociocultural theory emphasises the interdependence of socially organised activities and human interaction, learning within the school environment “entails always the dynamic relationship of teaching and learning and is tied to the curriculum by the teacher” (Kangas et al., 2017).

### ***3.1.4 Play***

Vygotsky’s (1934/1962) explorations on the interrelationship of language and thought, as inner speech develops from external speech, further contends that thought itself develops socially. An excellent vehicle for the development of thought and speech is play, referred to by Vygotsky (1978) as a leading activity and crucial in periods of crisis, such as starting school. To resolve the tension of not having desires fulfilled immediately, a child “Enters an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealisable desires can be realised and this world is what we call play” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 93).

According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), engaging children in different types of play across a continuum from teacher-directed to child directed provides the optimal platform for teachers to realise both developmental and educational benefits of play. Vygotsky (1934/1962) stated that it is at the preschool age that the divergence between meaning and object first become apparent. This can be evidenced during play, as thought is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than things. Vygotsky (1934/1962) provided an example of a child playing with a stick that represents a horse. In this sense, the object has become a pivot for detaching the meaning of horse from a real horse, and the child’s relationship with reality is dramatically altered. He suggested that the child is now beginning to see the world with sense and meaning, not simply shape and colour. He argued that this tells us that the child’s imaginary play is evidence of its emancipation from

situational constraints. In play, a child exerts great self-control, as they follow internal rules of self-restraint and self-determination. The child understands the role they need to perform to play the game and can, therefore, relate to a fictitious “I”. Vygotsky (1978) stated that play not only creates the ZPD but is the source of the development itself, as in play, the child can and does act above their average age:

“As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behaviour.... Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives – all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development”. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102)

Bodrova et al. (2013), noting the current pressure to replace play activities with academic ones in many early childhood classrooms, devised a tool based on Vygotsky’s (1933) theory to judge the quality of make-believe play, the Mature Play Observational Tool. The tool helped demonstrate that particular types of play and adult interventions are required to create the ZPD. This was in response to studies such as Lillard et al. (2013) that failed to prove a strong causal link between pretend play and development. Vygotskians consider adults as performing a crucial role in supporting children in what is essentially a cultural activity (Bodrova et al., 2013). This suggests possible limitations in childhood development if adults are not willing or able to perform this supportive role. Consider, for example, the 25% of caregivers in the US who reported never reading with their children, despite overwhelming research and public awareness campaigns on the many developmental benefits of an adult and child jointly focusing on a text (Logan et al., 2019). It is important to note that while reading to children may be beneficial some families and

adults are challenged in this provision by circumstances beyond their control, including poverty, homelessness or domestic violence.

### ***3.1.5 Zone of Proximal Development***

According to sociocultural theorists such as John-Steiner and Mahn (1996), Vygotsky was responding to an urgent need to educate a largely illiterate population after the Russian Revolution of 1917, meaning literacy acquisition was a central concern. Other theories at that time focused on processes of child development as independent of learning, merely providing a precondition for learning. However, these approaches relied heavily on assessing independent skills already achieved, rather than gauging potential development through assessment of tasks with assistance. Mediation is a key theme throughout Vygotsky's (1934/1962, 1967, 1978) writing—time and again he stated that it is through the use of psychological tools and signs that higher order mental processes emerge. Wertsch (1994) argued that crucial to Vygotsky's (1967) account of mediation is an understanding that language and technical tools do not just facilitate forms of action but can alter the structure and flow of mental function. Vygotsky (1978) referred to the role of psychological tools as mediators between the subject and the object and necessary for developing higher intellectual processes.

Vygotsky (1934/1962) pointed out that, initially, language is used as a means of communication between a child and more able people in the immediate environment. Only subsequently, upon conversion to inner speech, does language become a mental function to organise thoughts. To distinguish the function of tool use to develop higher order thinking processes in humans, Vygotsky (1978) referred to the earlier work of animal psychologist Kohler (1917/2018), who studied animals' ability to imitate problem solving with tools only if they already had the ability to do this by themselves. Through the ZPD, Vygotsky (1978) argued that human learning can go beyond that which is already developmentally

achieved to focus on abstract learning—that is, in advance of development. As a tool, language acquisition does just that.

Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD provides a means to examine the social and participatory form of learning and development:

“The distance between the actual developmental level as determined through 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, p. 86)

Hakkarainen and Brėdikytė (2014) noted how children master the structures of their own thinking through play as it provides the foundations for expression of emotions. Therefore, by understanding play as a key activity creating the ZPD, we can better examine the development of children's oral language in a relevant cultural context. This would better position us to understand the effects of the educational and home experiences that shape children's oral language development.

### **3.2 Bronfenbrenner**

All human development is characterised as a function of interactions between various factors (e.g., biological, psychological and environmental), and child development occurs within certain social spheres. This is the view espoused by Urie Bronfenbrenner, and detailed within his bioecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1986), greatly influenced by Vygotsky, further suggested that children's development is enhanced if there are strong links between the two settings in the meso system—that is, the school and home environments. As far as the wider system of government is concerned, ‘It is essential to determine which policies and programs can do

most to enable families to perform the magic feat of which they alone are capable: making and keeping human beings human' (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, p. 738).

Several features of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, in all its iterations, builds on aspects of Vygotsky's (1978) theory. This is not surprising given that Bronfenbrenner himself notes the influence of Vygotsky's work on his own thinking, especially through Bronfenbrenner's collaborations with Leontiev as a close colleague of Vygotsky (Bronfenbrenner, 1975). The child or individual at the centre of their development, possessed of biological, genetic or 'lower mental functions' (Vygotsky, 1978), matures in development by making meaning from the environment through interactions with signs, symbols, objects and people. The dialectic nature of human development becomes evident in the way that the processes of internalising the external (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) or converting lower mental functions into higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978) occurs within a sociocultural context in which the child themselves exerts influence.

Bronfenbrenner explained:

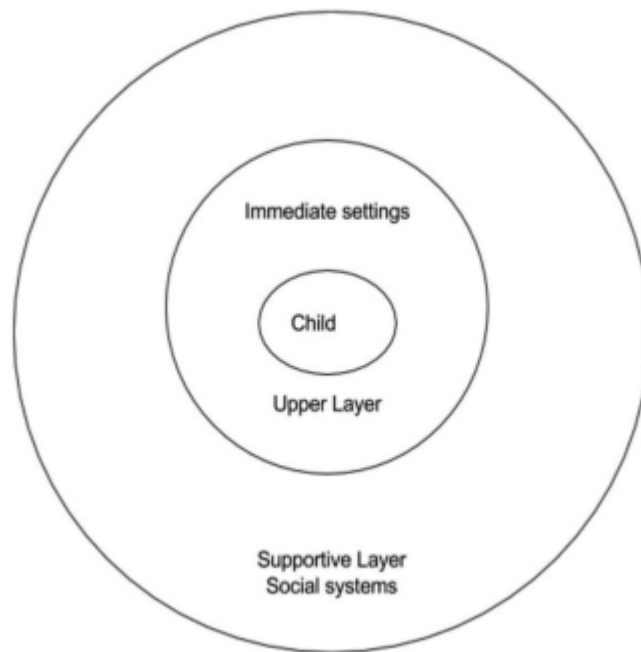
"More specifically, in humans, the content turns out, early on, to be mainly about people, objects and symbols. These entities exist initially only in the environment: that is, outside the organism. Hence from its beginning, development involves interaction between organism and environment. Moreover, interaction implies a two-way activity. The external becomes internal and becomes transformed in the process. But because, from its beginnings, the organism begins to change its environment, the internal becomes the external and becomes transformed in the process" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, p. 177).

Bronfenbrenner pioneered his theory in the 1970s with the ecological model (see Figure 3.1). This represented a child's immediate physical settings, the people in the child's life and the social meanings of the activities in which the child engaged with others.

The word ecology denotes Bronfenbrenner's belief that development emerges from the interactions between the context and child. The supporting layer, according to Bronfenbrenner (1974), both limits and shapes what occurs in the immediate setting.

### Figure 3.1

*Bronfenbrenner's (1974) Ecological Model*

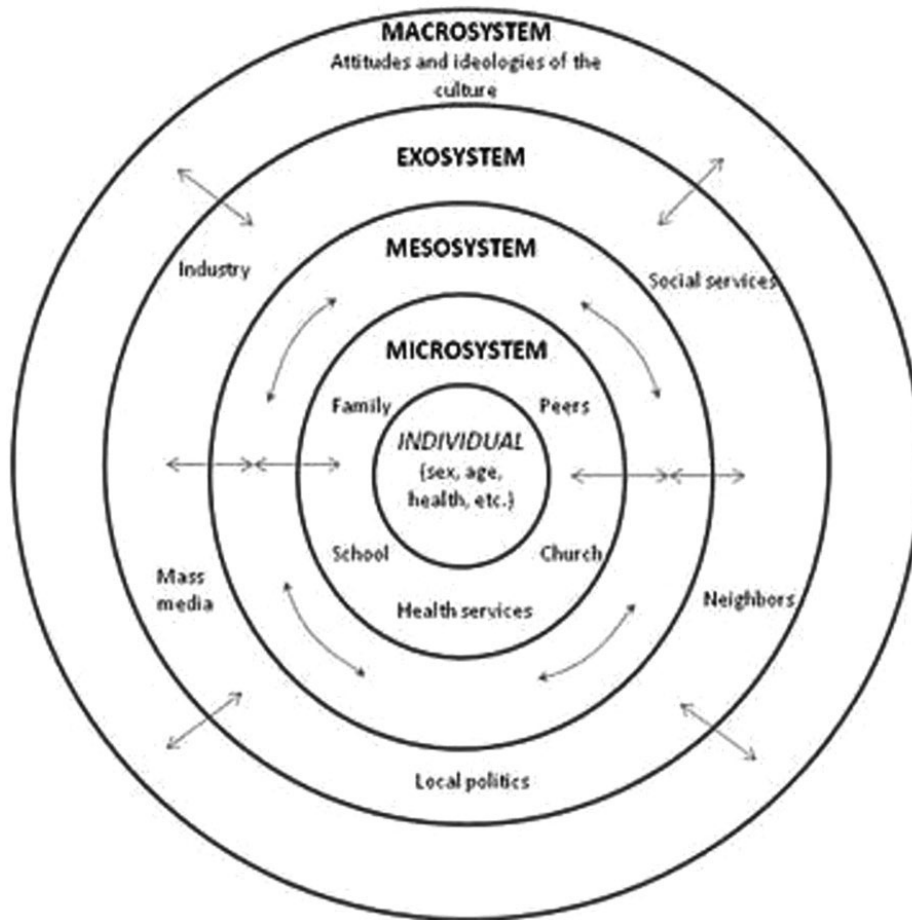


Source: Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017, p. 901).

Considering the changes to a child's immediate environment as they grow and how this change is affected by "relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 514), Bronfenbrenner modified his model in 1977. The new model depicted the individual's ecological environment as a set of nested systems (see Figure 3.2).

**Figure 3.2**

*Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Theory of Human Development Model*



Source: Vélez-Agosto et al. (2017, p. 902).

Over the next 28 years (until his death in 2006), Bronfenbrenner further updated his model to focus more on how an individual's personal characteristics and context mutually affect development through proximal processes. Another system was also added, the chronosystem, to recognise the influence of historical time on these processes (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The final version of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development posits that to understand any aspect of human development, the individual needs to be considered within the settings in which they spend time and their relations with others in the same settings. According to Bronfenbrenner (1986):

“It is true that individuals can and often do modify, select, reconstruct, and even create their environments. But this capacity emerges only to the extent that the person has been enabled to engage in self-directed action as a joint function not only of his biological endowment but also of the environment in which he or she developed. There is not one without the other” (pp. 223–224).

Proximal processes became, for Bronfenbrenner, the driving force of development, simply because they are the types of interactions and activities (symbols, objects, people) that the individual is consistently engaged with daily (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). For the current study, this means that the driving force for children’s oral language development can be found in the interactions of children with the symbols, objects and people in their home and school settings. Historical time is also of interest in terms of continuity and change in the wider sense of current societal expectations of development, and at the individual level of children’s oral language development examined in this study (the first year of school).

Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) viewed the development of the individual child as being connected with and through society and set within a larger ecology, the *microsystem*. This is at the centre and represents the child’s direct interactions, such as those with parents and teachers. The *mesosystem*, where interactions occur between parents and teachers that can affect the child, is of particular interest in the current study, as these individuals are considered to have the greatest effect on the child’s immediate environment through their words, actions and decisions to hinder or support (knowingly or otherwise) the influences of the other systems. The *exosystem* could be, for example, a parent’s workplace, where interactions that can affect the parent’s mood occur and, therefore, affect interactions with the child. The *macrosystem* refers to factors such as government regulations, family structures, economics and so on that can affect all other

systems. Finally, the *chronosystem* highlights the significance of time, within which individuals and societies change (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this way, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory help illuminate how difficulties with children developing oral language could be explored through the increasingly complex web of societal interactions.

For the purposes of the current study, Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) proximal processes of adult-child interactions within the microsystem were seen as building on Vygotsky's (1978) interactions within the ZPD, and, as such, were helpful in prioritising the critical role of mediating factors from other systems. For example, the literature shows that the effects of family and parenting stress on children's behaviour have been found to be mediated by parent-child interactions (Garner et al., 2021; Mak et al., 2020). Other scholars agree that mediated action refers to the tension between the features inherent in the sociocultural setting and the use of these features to carry out actions, and this 'situates children's actions with learning materials and interactions with each other within histories of material use and histories of social practices' (Wohlwend, 2009, p. 223).

In this study, transition to school was conceptualised as a macrosystem construct, as it affects how the microsystemic factors function and describes the environmental conditions under which oral language is developed at an important life stage. This conceptualisation thus describes the processes and conditions that affect human development, rather than describing *how* humans develop. Proximal processes were described by Bronfenbrenner as the driving forces of development, and the present study considered the perceived capability of those adults closest to children to support children's oral language development as paramount.

### 3.3 Bandura

Parents' and teachers' belief about their capability to support children's oral language development determines how they think, act and feel. Bandura et al. (1977) referred to such belief as self-efficacy and demonstrated how mastery of an experience or task can increase self-efficacy:

“Knowledge, transformational operations, and component skills are necessary but insufficient for accomplished performances. Indeed, people often do not behave optimally, even though they know full well what to do. This is because self-referent thought also mediates the relationship between knowledge and action. The issues addressed in this line of inquiry are concerned with how people judge their capabilities and how, through their self-percepts of efficacy, they affect their motivation and behaviour” (Bandura, 1982, p. 122).

If parents and teachers feel that they have the necessary skills to support children's oral language development, they are more likely to engage in activities that do so (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). It is also worth noting that parents and teachers could have low self-efficacy in supporting children's oral language development but high self-efficacy in other areas (Pajares, 1996). Bandura (1997) theorised that people's self-efficacy is formed by how they interpret and perceive information from four main sources: vicarious experiences, mastery experiences, social and verbal persuasions, and emotional and physiological states. Based on his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1997) stated that self-efficacy is: “Belief's in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3).

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is achieved through self-regulation (the cognitive process of engaging in particular behaviours to achieve goals), self-esteem (how an individual feels about themselves through beliefs, judgements and perceptions),

imitative learning (copying others to develop new behaviours) and human agency (the ability to influence one's own behaviour through action). One focus of the present study is parents' and teachers' self-efficacy to effect change and improve children's oral language development. Bandura's conception of self-efficacy beliefs was vital to the present study, as it explains how and why people are motivated to act in particular ways (Bandura, 1997).

Research on teacher self-efficacy has indicated that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy not only demonstrate reduced stress and greater job satisfaction but also tend to use more proactive, student-centred approaches (Glackin & Hohenstein, 2018). An effective way of enhancing children's oral language development in the classroom is to encourage and enable more authentic and exploratory children's talk. However, many teachers feel unable to create the kind of environment that scaffolds children's language development, decreasing their self-efficacy (Peterson & Greenberg, 2017). Concerns about the high attrition rates of early childhood teachers (30%) and primary school teachers (17%) led Grant et al. (2019) to examine teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in relation to the classroom environment and their job commitment. They concluded that the mediating role of self-efficacy is important for both teacher retention and teachers' ability to provide high-quality education and care.

Research on parent self-efficacy has indicated that parents with higher confidence in their parenting ability are more likely to believe change is possible; therefore, intervention with these parents is often more successful (Benedetto & Ingrassia, 2017). Thus, it may be important to attempt to improve parents' self-efficacy before implementing an oral language intervention plan. Wittkowski et al. (2017) stated that reliable, efficient and valid measurements of parent self-efficacy can help identify and support parents with lower levels of self-efficacy to have conviction and belief in their parenting ability and thereby improve the quality of their parenting.

As stated earlier, Bandura et al. (1977) proposed four sources of self-efficacy and “Mastery experience” is the first and most powerful. It refers to previous experiences of failure and success and how individuals process the efforts made to overcome obstacles and subsequently frame these past experiences in a positive way. For parents and teachers, this means those who interpret their past teacher or parent experiences as successful are more likely to have higher self-efficacy than those who interpret their past experiences as less successful.

Second, “vicarious experience” refers to modelling the attainments of others; depending on the relationship with others, this can either enhance or diminish self-efficacy. Parents and teachers can consider their own abilities by watching others perform a task.

The third source, “verbal persuasion”, relies on positive and sincere feedback on an individual’s capabilities. If feedback is perceived as critical, self-efficacy will be reduced. This has implications for the evaluative component of any oral language intervention program for parents or oral language professional development program for teachers.

Fourth, “psychological and affective state” refers to the way in which people use somatic information to judge their capabilities. Just as negative psychological and affective states such as fear and anxiety can undermine self-efficacy, positive psychological and affective states such as confidence and excitement can enhance it (Yada et al., 2019).

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural thinking is drawn upon in this study because it positions language development relative to tool mediation in the construction of knowledge to form the mental functions of the child. This includes the Zone of Proximal Development as the site for children’s oral language development in collaboration with supportive adults. Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological theory provides a mechanism to better understand the proximal processes and conditions within and between systems that

affect human development, including children's oral language. Parents and teachers are situated within the most immediate systems relative to the child and have potential to create favourable conditions for children's development of oral language skills. Bandura's (2014) social cognitive theory of self-efficacy contributes to this thesis by defining how and why parents and teachers are likely to be motivated, or hindered in their capacity to support children's oral language development, both within the ZPD and the systems closest to the children.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

This chapter describes the chosen research methodology. It first discusses the employed paradigm (Section 4.1), then outlines the ontology (Section 4.2), epistemology (Section 4.3) and axiology (Section 4.4) used. This is followed by a description of the research design (Section 4.5), developed from the theoretical framework detailed in Chapter 3, including the data generation and collection process, setting and participants. The chapter then notes the ethical considerations (Section 4.6) and how validity was ensured (Section 4.7).

### **4.1 Paradigm**

This study employed a constructivist paradigm within a qualitative research design. A qualitative design was chosen because the aim of the study concerned adult stakeholder perspectives on children's oral language development. Perspectives are most readily captured by engaging with people, rather than seeking objective measurements of what they believe (Creswell, 2012). Further, a quantitative approach assumes that social facts have an objective reality that is single and tangible with causal linkages. Conversely, a qualitative approach assumes a socially constructed reality that is multiple and holistic (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A constructivist paradigm was useful for this study because it places value on the communicative, interpersonal nature of development and emphasises the idea that people actively construct the meaning of their lived experiences. The guiding assumption of constructivism is that knowledge is socially constructed (Schwandt, 2001). It can be traced back to the works of Piaget (1952), Dewey (1929), Bruner (1966) and Vygotsky (1933), among others, and differs from an objectivist paradigm, which views knowledge as constituted within an external, objective reality (Palincsar, 1998).

Further, a constructivist approach considers knowing to be more than representing reality, instead treating it as an active process of constructing individual representations of knowledge (Jonassen, 1991). This is done by analysing abstract symbols that represent the subjective realities of the participants, such as language. The present study considering the implications for supporting the development of children's oral language therefore focused on the perspectives of parents and teachers. Per Palincsar (1998):

“What unifies postmodern constructivist perspectives is rejection of the view that the locus of knowledge is in the individual; learning and understanding are regarded as inherently social; and cultural activities and tools (ranging from symbol systems to artefacts to language) are regarded as integral to conceptual development” (p. 348).

From this perspective, knowledge can be viewed as a collaborative process in which socially shared activities can be transformed into internalised processes (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Therefore, a constructivist paradigm provides a way to investigate social phenomena, such as children's oral language development, in a way that is best suited to explore participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2012). Constructivism as the social construction of personal meaning shared with others resonates with cultural mediation. As children and adults interact with their environment and each other, they use sign systems such as language that have been created by societies over time (Vygotsky, 1962). Both the researcher and participants have been influenced by individual cultural and historical contexts, and this has shaped how each person views the world, subjective meaning of truth and forces of creation (Mills et al., 2006). Therefore, an exploration of children's oral language development benefits from understanding the socially constructed perspectives of the key stakeholders in children's lives, these being parents and teachers.

## 4.2 Ontology

Ontology refers to the study of the nature of being; an ontological assumption is concerned with what constitutes reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This study takes the ontological stance that reality is subjective and contextually constructed. Bryman (2008) stated that the nature of reality takes a very different position in each of the four dominant ontologies (positivism, postmodernism, critical theory and constructivism). Working within a constructivist paradigm indicates the belief that social phenomena (such as adult stakeholder's perspectives of children's oral language development) are constantly shaped by those involved, constructed by individuals from a shared context and experientially based. The chosen approach of this study was to access the knowledge held by parents and teachers about children's oral language by asking participants what they thought. This was done by canvassing initial aspects of significance about oral language (determined by a review of the research literature) via a questionnaire, the findings from which were used to inform the design and conduct of an extended semi-formal individual interview with parents and teachers.

Recognising that particular realities can change over time as individuals become more knowledgeable or experienced, this study focused on the current, personally constructed realities of parents and teachers engaging with children in their first year of school. Liu and Chen (2010) stated that culture, lived experience, context and time are all part of the interdependence between social and individual processes. The present study's ontological assertion, informed by the relevant literature is that many children have low oral language skills at school entry (Law, 2019; Norbury et al., 2016; Reilly et al., 2016; Snow, 2016). This prompted an epistemological consideration of parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development, with potential to identify barriers and enablers to children's oral language development during the first year of school.

### **4.3 Epistemology**

Allison and Hobbs (2006) stated that ontology is concerned with “What is the nature of the knowable, or what is the nature of reality?” and epistemology is about “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower and the known?” The present study’s theoretical framework employs Vygotsky’s (1978) view of knowledge as a sociocultural construction and Bronfenbrenner’s (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model of human development to contextualise participants’ perspectives on children’s oral language development relative to the problem identified in the literature concerning low oral language development among children in early years. In this way, epistemological beliefs are acknowledged as part of parent and teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982) in enabling children’s oral language.

### **4.4 Axiology**

In terms of axiology—the study of values, value judgements and the validity of one type of knowledge over another—the question is, what sort of knowledge is intrinsically valuable? (Heron & Reason, 1997). This study was primarily concerned with parents’ and teachers’ perspectives on children’s oral language development. According to Hiles (2008), any research inquiry is based on a range of assumptions and choices that are inevitably value laden. There are personal values that consciously or unconsciously guide a researcher and how their research outcomes are used and who will benefit from them (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016).

In line with this study’s ontological (see Section 4.2) and epistemological (see Section 4.3) stance, importance was placed on the perspectives of key stakeholders due to the theoretical argument made in the preceding chapter that what these adult stakeholders do to support children’s oral language development is likely of significance in terms of children’s ZPD, and the position of adults in children’s sociological systems. In this way,

perspectives may yield insight into parent and teachers' self-efficacy for supporting oral language development with children in the ZPD and the nearest system to the child.

## **4.5 Research Design**

A qualitative design was chosen for this study, using the five interrelated steps of data collection (Creswell, 2012) to gain an insight into parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development. In step one, the place and people that can best help understand the problem were identified. In this way, this study's sampling method targeted the adults most actively involved in children's oral language development in the first year of school (i.e., parents and teachers). In step two, permissions were gained from the relevant authorities to begin the study (i.e., University Human Research Ethics Committee; school leadership of the participating school). In step three, data collection began by using a short questionnaire to inform the consequent development of a semi-structured, individual interview conducted with participants. Step four entailed recording and organising the interview data. The raw interview data were coded and recoded into categories using constant comparison, an inductive data analysis procedure of generating and connecting categories (Creswell, 2012). Step five involved reconfirming that all procedures were conducted ethically and sensitively throughout the process.

### ***4.5.1 Data Generation and Collection***

Following the constructivist approach, Charmaz (2006) noted of data collection, "Data do not provide a window on reality. Rather, the "discovered" reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts" (p. 523). Given the impossibility of collecting data from the entire population of parents and teachers of children in their first year of school, convenience sampling was used. The author had easy access to a year-level group of parents and teachers of children starting their first year of school through her existing professional network.

Data collection began with the administration of a questionnaire to participating parents and teachers in Term 1 of the school year. Questionnaires are a useful research tool to gather insights into values and perspectives and can be effectively combined with other research tools such as interviews (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). A questionnaire was used to inform the development of focussed interview questions with parents and teachers.

The questionnaire wording was concise, and instructions were clearly defined in format and font, with the online version using simple graphics to help with navigation. The number of questions was limited to six to prevent completion of the questionnaire being too onerous. The layout was designed to be uncluttered, with plenty of space for written responses. The questionnaire was designed in consultation with the researcher's supervisors and informed by the literature on children's oral language development. Estimated time for completion was approximately 20 minutes (Appendix A). The questionnaire was trialled with a teacher and parent (who were not part of the subsequent respondent group) prior to being provided to participants.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to identify what participants already understood about children's oral language development, so as to inform the design of the consequent semi-structured individual interview questions. Background details, such as parents' highest level of education and the child's place in the family, were also sought. A cross-sectional questionnaire design was used as the focus was on a population at a specific point in time, namely, parents and teachers of children in the first year of school. This design was chosen as it can be used to make inferences about possible relationships, such as key stakeholder perspectives of children's oral language skills (Lavrakas, 2008).

The questionnaire was administered in hardcopy and online to increase accessibility for all participants, with the online option including an immersive reader. Several studies have found little difference in the results of web-based and traditional paper and pencil

questionnaires (De Looij-Jansen et al., 2008; Hays & McCallum, 2005; McCabe et al., 2005).

The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter detailing the purpose of the research, expected time to complete, information about confidentiality, and how and when to return the completed questionnaire. A reminder email was sent to all participants close to the return date. The questions were based on a canvassing of the literature, as reported in Chapter 2 (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1**

*Questionnaire Rationale*

| Question                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Relevant literature                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Do you agree with the view that low oral language skills in children's first year of school are related to low reading and writing achievement in national standardised tests in later years? Why do you think that? | Building children's early oral language skills will help prepare them for school success (Golinkoff et al., 2019).<br><br>All of the inequality observed at the end of second grade was already present before the start of first grade (Von Hippel et al., 2018).                                                                                |
| Do you agree with the view that low oral language skill development is related to behavioural issues and anxiety in children? Why do you think that?                                                                 | Children's language skills need to be scaffolded in order to be successfully integrated into the development of emotion regulation (Bendezu et al., 2018).<br><br>Early childhood anxiety disorders are common, and predictive of anxiety disorders later in childhood. Epidemiological studies indicate that the prevalence of impairing anxiety |

| Question                                                                                                                                     | Relevant literature                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                              | disorders in preschool children ranges from 0.3% to 6.5% (Carpenter et al., 2016).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Do you think that it is essential for teachers to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that? | <p>Teachers devoted more time to literacy and math content, teacher-directed instruction, and assessment and less time to music, science, art, and child-selected activities (Bassok et al., 2016).</p> <p>Teachers need to have thorough didactical knowledge about how to support children's language learning in order to effectively teach them (Sheridan &amp; Gjems, 2017).</p>                         |
| Do you think that it is essential for parents to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?  | <p>Children's early language exposure affects their later cognitive abilities, linguistic skills, as well as academic achievement (Romeo et al., 2018a).</p> <p>When parents read to children and talk to them, children acquire more than just language. They acquire skills that are essential to listening and reading comprehension and learn how to focus their attention (Mendelsohn et al., 2018).</p> |
| To what extent do you feel confident in your ability to help your child/children develop their oral                                          | Once parents have belief in their own abilities, the quality of their parenting can be optimised (Wittkowski et al., 2017).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

| Question                                                                                                                                 | Relevant literature                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| language skills successfully? Why do you think that?                                                                                     | <p>Self-efficacy is a crucial predictor of people's behaviour and their wellbeing (Reyhing &amp; Perren, 2021).</p> <p>'An efficacy expectation is the conviction that one can successfully execute the behaviour required to produce the outcomes' (Bandura, 1997, p. 193).</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Do you believe that play-based learning provides the best opportunities for children's oral language development? Why do you think that? | <p>Time for children and adults to engage in serious play with words and sounds is critical (Ewing et al., 2016).</p> <p>When play-based, interactive strategies and activities are used to promote language and communication, oral language development is most effective (Banerjee et al., 2016).</p> <p>Symbolic play and language are closely related in development (Quinn et al., 2018).</p> <p>'Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky, 1933, p. 62).</p> <p>'As in the focus of a magnifying glass play has all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102).</p> |

The consequent data source to the questionnaire was the conduct of individual semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers. Silverman (2016) stated that rather than focusing on an objectivist–constructivist divide, in which scholars argue about the representation of “truth”:

“Interviews reveal evidence of the nature of the phenomena under investigation, including the contexts and situations in which they emerge, as well as insights into the cultural frames people use to make sense of these experiences and their social worlds” (p. 58).

Semi-structured interviews also allow for a comprehensive view of the phenomenon to be expressed in everyday terms and explored in depth (Roberts et al., 2019b). Twelve interviews were conducted with eight parents and four teachers. Guest (2006) suggested that for a study investigating participants’ experience, thematic saturation is likely to occur with a sample of 12. Individual interviews were conducted in a private room at the participating school, at a time that suited participants and the school. Parents were invited to participate via letter or email according to the Australian Catholic University Human Research Committee procedures. The letter explained the purpose, likely duration and focus of the interviews (see Appendix B). Interviews took place in Semester 2 (Terms 3 and 4) of the school year (see Appendix C) and were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. McNamara’s (2009) eight principles for conducting interviews were followed:

1. choosing a setting with few distractions
2. explaining the purpose
3. addressing confidentiality issues
4. explaining the format
5. indicating the time allowed

6. letting the interviewee know how they can contact the researcher afterwards
7. asking them if they have questions before the interview starts
8. recording the interview.

Creswell's (2012) advice on being flexible and having follow-up questions to ensure the interview stays on track also proved useful. During interviews, the researcher maintained a neutral stance (as much as possible) as well as an encouraging tone and refrained from sharing opinions. The researcher was conscious of expressing personal expectations and beliefs and remained respectful towards interviewees throughout the interviews. It was anticipated that interviews would last approximately 30 minutes each. Interviewees were informed that they would have the opportunity to check the transcripts for verification and to add any further information.

The researcher was conscious that people go through many sequences of clarifications and questions as they move towards mutual understanding (Arnon et al., 2014). For this reason, time was allocated between the initial questionnaire, interviews and member checking. Member checking was the third and final tool used for data collection and provided respondents with the opportunity to read the transcript of their respective interview in full and confirm, add to or change any of their statements. Per Creswell (2012), "Member checking is a process in which the researcher asks one or more participants in the study to check the accuracy of the account" (p. 623).

**Table 4.2**

*Interview Question Rationale*

| Initial interview questions                                                      | Rationale from questionnaire responses                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| What do you feel are the most important skills children need to have in order to | Strong agreement on oral language being important but not necessarily a priority. |

| Initial interview questions                                                                                                                  | Rationale from questionnaire responses                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| be successful in their first year of school?                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| My studies have shown that lots of children are starting school with very low oral language skills, what do you think might be causing this? | Range of comments related to possible causes given.                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| What sort of activities do you do to support your child/ren's oral language?                                                                 | Not clear from answers given if respondents are aware of how to help children develop oral language skills.                                                                                                                                                                |
| How do you feel your child/ren's oral language is developing now that they are halfway through their first year?                             | Unanimous agreement that play-based learning was important, understanding of connection with oral language was not clear.                                                                                                                                                  |
| What would you say are three things that need to happen if every child is to have a successful first year of school?                         | Related to the self-efficacy responses that showed a higher level of parent efficacy than teacher efficacy.<br><br>By articulating possible solutions, respondent's focus may indicate their individual perspective of barriers to oral language development at this time. |

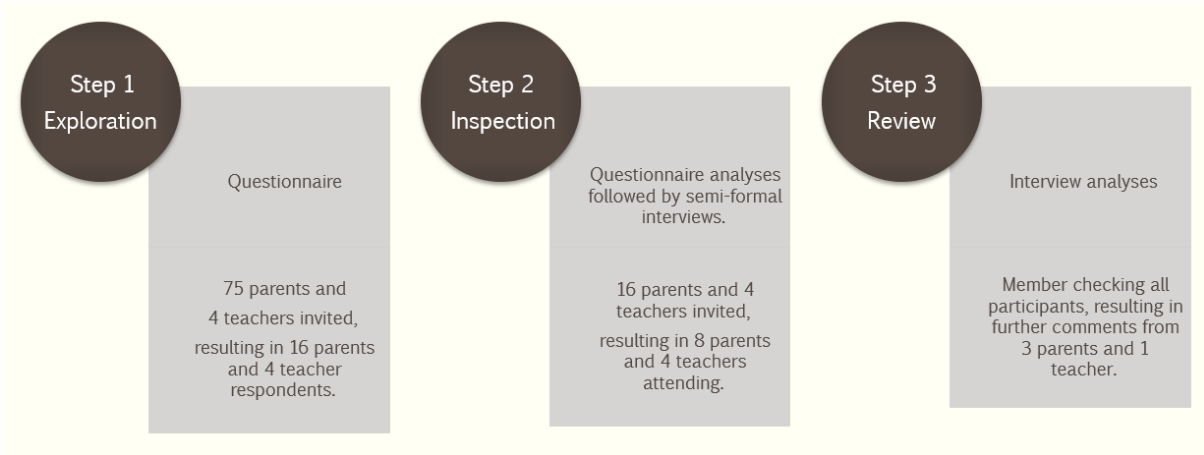
After asking respondents to think about whether they agreed with particular statements, the researcher asked the open-ended question "why do you think that?" to encourage thoughtful responses and elaboration. Questions were worded clearly and succinctly to minimise risk of misinterpretation or misunderstanding, and were worded so

they applied to both parents and teachers, with technical language kept to a minimum. Caution was taken to remain mindful of the interactive nature of the interview process (in that the researcher and participant can influence each other; Mertens, 2014) and acknowledging that any statement of “fact” is affected by values, as symbolic representations of events are not simply symbols corresponding to an objective reality and inherently entail forms of power within the social relations (Carspecken, 2013).

Figure 4.1 presents the phases of data collection and Figure 4.2 provides an overview of the research design.

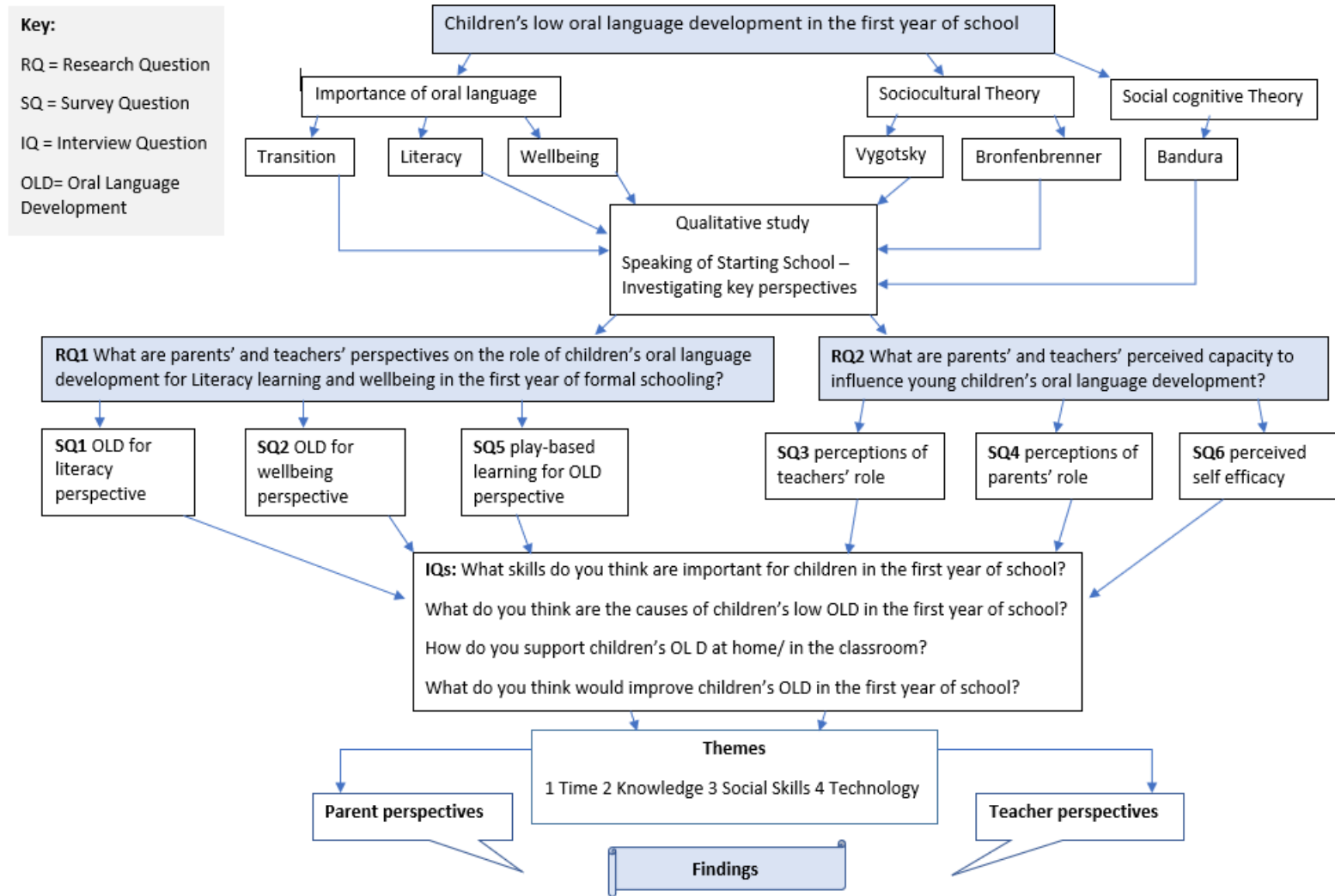
**Figure 4.1**

*Data Collection Phases*



**Figure 4.2**

*Overview of the Research Design*



#### ***4.5.2 Setting***

The study was conducted in a school where the researcher currently teaches a different (i.e., non-first-year) student level to that involved in by the participants. This location was chosen primarily for convenience. Selection of this school meant that members of the target population were easily accessible for invited participation in the research (Etikan et al., 2016).

Awareness was maintained that convenience sampling in this manner placed the author in the position of an “insider” researcher, which could affect the data generated (Unluer, 2012). Insider methodologies have become more common, particularly in the field of education, because by understanding the perspectives located in a similar social situation more authentic data may be generated. The researcher’s role as a member of the community being studied means they are well positioned to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, given their familiarity with the situation (Fleming, 2018). In this study, the researcher had knowledge of the school (i.e., policies, procedures, mission, values) and the politics of the institution (access to resources, staffing allocations, strategic directions), and credibility and respect with parents and staff, therefore enabling the establishment of trusting relationships with participants. On the benefits of insider status, it is pertinent to reflect on the view that “Unlike the Insider, the Outsider has neither been socialized in the group nor has engaged in the run of experiences that makes up its life, and therefore cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathetic understanding possible” (Merton, 1972, p. 15).

To maintain objectivity and ensure the researcher did not intentionally look for confirmation of views shared by other insiders, a neutral stance was adopted throughout the interviews. In this way, the researcher was able to resist the temptation to share experiences among participants and delve deeper into questions with participants, due to

existing and sustained engagement with the cultural environment comprising the study site. One ethical challenge that can arise from insider research is privacy and confidentiality. To address this, the study site has not been named, and participants were coded (as “Teacher #” and “Parent #”). To safeguard against premature conclusions based on preconceived ideas due to familiarity with the context, regular discussions with the researcher’s supervisors were conducted.

The school in which the study took place is a co-educational primary school for students from Prep to Year 6 in an upper medium socio-economic catchment area, located in Brisbane, Australia. At the time of the study, there was an even mix of boys and girls, with approximately 2% of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. The demographics of the area<sup>1</sup> show that 85.1% of households had at least one person access the internet (through a desktop/laptop computer, mobile or smart phone, tablet, music or video player, gaming console, smart TV or any other device) compared to 83.2% nationally, 37.2% had two registered motor vehicles compared to 36.2% nationally, and 76.1% of occupied dwellings were family households compared to 71.3% nationally. The average number of bedrooms per occupied private dwelling was 3.4 and the average household size was 2.6 people.

The literature review demonstrated that many studies had been conducted in low socio-economic areas, with the focus often being on addressing areas of disadvantage. By situating the present study in an area of economic advantage, and with lower levels of children speaking English as a second language, some previously documented major barriers to children developing oral language were not evident. However, the findings for children developmentally at risk in the area of language and cognition at this school,

---

<sup>1</sup> From the Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2016: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/2033.0.55.001>. Precise area not disclosed in this study due to confidentiality considerations.

10.81% (see Figure 4.3) was greater than the national average of 9% and the state average of 9.6% (AEDC, 2018).

**Figure 4.3**

*Australian Early Development Census Results for the Study Area\**

| Domain                                     | Total number of children with valid results | Developmentally on track |                        | Developmentally at risk |                        | Developmentally vulnerable |                        |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|
|                                            |                                             | Number of Children       | Percentage of Children | Number of Children      | Percentage of Children | Number of Children         | Percentage of Children |
| Physical health and wellbeing              | 74                                          | 64                       | 86.49%                 | 5                       | 6.76%                  | 5                          | 6.76%                  |
| Social competence                          | 74                                          | 63                       | 85.14%                 | 7                       | 9.46%                  | 4                          | 5.41%                  |
| Emotional maturity                         | 74                                          | 67                       | 90.54%                 | 4                       | 5.41%                  | 3                          | 4.05%                  |
| Language and cognitive skills              | 74                                          | 65                       | 87.84%                 | 8                       | 10.81%                 | 1                          | 1.35%                  |
| Communication skills and general knowledge | 74                                          | 61                       | 82.43%                 | 12                      | 16.22%                 | 1                          | 1.35%                  |

*Note.* \* The area in which the children of the participating parents and teachers lived.

Source: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data>.

Since 2009, the AEDC has taken measurements every three years in Australia to map how children are progressing within five developmental domains in their first year of formal schooling. It is a federal government initiative designed to help identify resources, services and support to meet community needs and is considered a measure of how well families and children are being supported from conception to school age (AEDC, 2018).

#### **4.5.3 Participants**

The recruitment procedures involved securing permission from the school leadership (i.e., the school principal) to conduct the research with parents and teachers. This was initially carried out in person and then followed up with written confirmation. Once permission was secured to conduct the study, consent was obtained from the school to inform parents about the study via the school newsletter and a bulk parent email. Potential teacher participants were informed through face-to-face discussion, outlining the benefits of both professional development generally and increased knowledge of the children under their education and care (see Appendix B).

There were two sets of participants. Seventy-five parents (the total number of children enrolled in the current Prep year) were invited to respond to the questionnaire. Four teachers instructing children in the first year of school, or with recent experience of teaching the first year at this school, were surveyed using the same questionnaire. Of these 16 parents and four teachers completed the questionnaire.

The next stage of data collection, individual, semi-formal interviews, took place with both sets of participants. The aim was to select parent respondents with similar and different perspectives to the teacher respondents (to ensure a representative diversity of views) and invite at least six parents and four teachers for participation in the interviews. However, as only 16 responses were eventually received for the questionnaire, the researcher decided to invite all 16 respondents for interviews (see Appendix C). This resulted in eight parents and four teachers participating in the second phase of the study.

#### ***4.5.4 Data Sources***

Demographic information from the questionnaire indicated that 19% of parents held postgraduate qualifications, 25% held bachelor's degrees, 25% had diplomas, 12% had certificates and 19% reported their highest level of education as high school. As all of the parent respondents were mothers, this compares with the national average for women of 13% with post graduate qualifications, 50% with bachelor degrees and 27% with qualifications below a bachelor degree level (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Parents' level of education has been shown to play an important role in children's academic achievement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Guo & Harris, 2000). The demographic information also showed that 35% of the children were the eldest child in the family, 30% were middle children and 35% were the youngest child in the family.

The questionnaire provided a brief, definition of oral language, as no prior knowledge on behalf of participants was assumed. The definition was: "Oral language

refers to the use of speaking and listening skills to express and comprehend knowledge, feelings and ideas”. Support for participants was offered in the form of arranging a time to meet with respondents and to share a reading of the questions if required. The questions could also be translated into non-English languages if necessary. Neither of these measures were requested. (None of the respondents reported a language limitation themselves and all respondents spoke English as their first language.) In case of unforeseen technical difficulties with setting-up and administering electronic questionnaires, access to technical support was secured. Limiting the questionnaire to six questions was intended to reduce the necessary time to complete it and thus encourage responses.

As the target parent group were parents of children in the first year at the study school, 75 families (the total number of children enrolled in the current Prep year) were invited to participate. The target teacher group were the three teachers currently teaching the first year at the participating school and another teacher who had recent experience teaching this year level at this school.

Thorough preparation took place in the form of ensuring there was more than one method of return (online or hardcopy returned to school), which was clearly indicated to participants. The questionnaire was short, and sending them home with children relatively ensured delivery. However, the initial parent questionnaire return rate was low; only seven responses from 75 families (9.3%) were received. This may have been due to timing as there were a lot of other activities occurring in the school in the early part of the year and it may have been missed. Also, the deadline to return the survey may not have been sufficiently advertised. The questionnaire was re-sent after a couple of weeks with the closing date highlighted and a total of 20 questionnaires were returned. However, four parent questionnaires could not be used as they did not fit the inclusion criteria (i.e., they

did not currently have a child in the first year of school). These parents had heard about the research from other participants and had completed the online version.

Twenty questionnaire responses out of 79 (four teachers and 16 parents) were used in this study. Nine (45%) were completed in the online format and 11 (55%) were completed in the hardcopy format. According to Baruch and Holtom (2008), the average response rate for surveys from individuals is 52.7%, with a standard deviation of 20.4%. They reported a decline in individual survey responses since the 1950s, possibly caused by increasing numbers of popularity polls leading to survey saturation. Of course, some non-response bias could be inferred; however, the questionnaire for this study was intended to support the content of the consequent semi-structured, individual interview. The questionnaire data were not intended for focused analyses. In qualitative research such as this study, the intention of a questionnaire is to establish factors associated with participants perspectives on children's oral language development for development of more targeted interview questions (Kelley et al., 2003).

#### ***4.5.5 Questionnaire***

Questionnaire results were collated in preparation for the semi-structured individual interviews. By classifying responses into general descriptive categories, a simple picture can be created of the more complex meanings and social operations underlying participants' perspectives expressed in the text. Although a brief description was provided in the accompanying letter of what oral language is, no assumption was made that participants would have a shared understanding of the definition. Apparent variability in interpretation is one of the strengths of using a questionnaire to provide a basis for further investigation of perspectives in interviews (McGuirk & O'Neill, 2016). The range of parents' and teachers' responses to the questions were documented and considered, along with their provided background information. Participants' agreements and disagreements

with questions and written explanations indicated strong agreement on the importance of oral language, but for a range of reasons. Parents and teachers strongly agreed on the importance of play. One of the benefits of the researcher's insider status was that the researcher was aware of the espoused play-based approach advocated by the participating school. Comments from parents and teachers referring to the current young age of children when they start school and that there was not enough play in school warranted further investigation.

The question of whether parents and teachers need to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops elicited comments about specialist services and the ability to identify problems and delays with language. The question about the connection between oral language and literacy returned strong agreement from teachers but partial agreement from parents, suggesting another avenue for further investigation. Responses to the question about the connection between children's oral language development and wellbeing indicated strong agreement from both sets of participants, with several comments mentioning children's frustration. Finally, the question about efficacy to support children developing oral language had a range of answers, with parents expressing more confidence than teachers.

The interview questions were drawn primarily from the empirical rather than the theoretical literature concerning adult perspectives on childrens' oral language development. The stated importance of social interaction and Vygotsky's theorization indicate that adult-child interactions are at the heart of the phenomenon. The interview questions were designed to help answer the research questions by addressing four broad categories identified in the literature review that impact adult-child interactions at this critical time:

- importance of oral language for literacy and wellbeing

- perceived attitude of others (teachers' view of parents' role and vice versa)
- value of play-based learning to enhance oral language
- perceived self-efficacy to support oral language

These themes appeared repeatedly throughout the literature review as possible barriers to children's oral language development (e.g., Banerjee et al., 2016; Bassok et al., 2016; Carpenter et al., 2016; Ewing et al., 2016; Vygotsky, 1933, 1978; Wittkowski et al., 2017).

#### ***4.5.6 Interviews***

The data analysis was approached as an inductive process, to systematically categorise and organise the thematic data. This method was chosen because key themes can often be obscured due to preconceptions imposed by deductive data analysis (Thomas, 2003).

A process of immersion in the text was employed to compile the large amount of data into an organised description of the phenomena being studied, namely, key adult stakeholders' perspectives on children's oral language development in the first year of school. This was done to associate the meaning of the data with findings from related research (Saldaña, 2015). Immersion involved repeated listening to the audio-recorded interviews and thinking about the meaning of participants' words (see Figure 4.4). After transcribing the audio files, immersion continued by reading and re-reading the transcripts and cross-checking these with the questionnaire responses.

#### Figure 4.4

*Excerpt from Transcript Analysis (Teacher 1 Transcript)\**

*The age that they come into school,*

possible reference to recent lowering of age of entry to 4 years 6 months

(implied) haven't had enough time to prepare, not developmentally ready?

*maybe parents not reading to them enough as they're growing because sometimes,*

*parents think that when they're one or two that they don't need to read to their children*

*and that's the best time to start reading to them,*

indicating belief that children need to be read to by their parents from one or two years

of age (implied) considers parents have limited knowledge of the importance of this

*and also, I think a lot of parents are so busy,*

time factor, indicating belief that parents do not have enough time

*they put their child in front of the TV or a computer or iPad and that becomes the*

*babysitter instead of talking to their children.*

tech. taking the place of parent, used as a babysitter—indicating busy schedule, lack of

time to spend with children (implied)

*I feel that they don't talk to their kids enough and they don't have that communication*

*and ask them things enough these days.*

parent choice to not talk enough to children? lack of time/knowledge? awareness of the

need to ask children questions—build communication?

*Note.* \* Interviewee statements in black-coloured font and researcher notes in red-coloured font.

To retain transparency throughout, careful attention was given to any bias on the part of the researcher and potential assumptions that might affect interpretation of the data.

This was done by constant comparison across participants' responses, awareness of

alternative interpretations that could be made and adopting a continual reflexive attitude. According to Pillow (2003), reflexivity is the researcher’s critical awareness of their position within the research process. It is iterative in nature, as the researcher continually considers how their own interests, assumptions, gender, class, ethnicity, etc. may shape their relationship and understanding of the information given in interviews.

Data reduction was achieved by eliminating any data not relevant to the research questions. Data could then be reorganised to eliminate off-topic and digressions to connect relevant discussions of the same topic for thematic analysis. By breaking the qualitative data into discrete parts, it was possible to closely examine patterns and compare for similarities and differences. This was done in an iterative way using a codebook approach and transferring data into the NVivo 12 software program to aid sorting, clustering and comparison (Roberts et al., 2019).

Table 4.3 demonstrates how codes and definitions were derived from teacher and parent responses. Codebook field explanations are in Appendix D.

**Table 4.3**

*Excerpt from Codebook*

| CODE        | DEFINITION                                                                                         | DATA EXTRACT                                                                                          | DATA                                                                         |
|-------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|             |                                                                                                    | TEACHER                                                                                               | EXTRACT<br>PARENT                                                            |
| <b>TIME</b> | Respondents talking about a perceived lack of time to support children’s oral language development | ‘It requires much one-on-one support, which I cannot give with 30 children in the class’ (Teacher 3). | ‘You just get so busy in life, that it’s just come home, bath, showers, do a |

|                      |                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      |                                                                                                                          | little bit, you know' (Parent 7).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>KNOWLEDGE</b>     | Respondents talking about lack of knowledge and their need for knowledge to support children's oral language development | 'Prep teachers need to be either trained or aware of, or have some professional development in early learning as a specialty' (Teacher 4).<br><br>'But they [parents] don't know the types of questions or how do I ask questions' (Parent 5).                                                  |
| <b>TECHNOLOGY</b>    | Respondents talking about any form of digital devices                                                                    | 'I find a lot of the time; children are stuck in front of the TV or the computer playing video games' (Teacher 1).<br><br>'I try to choose educational things; they're still watching rubbish as well' (Parent 1).                                                                              |
| <b>SOCIAL SKILLS</b> | Respondents talking about social aspects of children's oral language development                                         | 'They need to be able to have good oral skills so that they can express their needs, they can explain their thoughts, they can say what they need and what they don't need, they can say what they're feeling' (Teacher 2).<br><br>'They need to be socially and emotionally ready' (Parent 4). |

The frequent use of particular words and phrases provided an important alert as to what was important to the participant and illuminated and consolidated meanings. Coding these led to the emergence of themes, as similar codes linked together to form a major idea (Creswell, 2007). Using open-ended questions meant that respondents were not limited to a predetermined set of answers. The intention was to collect rich, meaningful responses that reflected participants' perspectives on children's oral language development in the first year of school.

Emerging themes related to the research questions were assigned codes by analysing the data line by line and labelling relevant phrases, then comparing these to other passages with similar labels. These were further analysed for viewpoints that supported and did not support the themes. As more information was discovered, codes were added and refined, and previously coded transcripts were revisited to check that the code still applied. In this way, the researcher was able to move backwards and forwards through the data, relating thinking to the literature, research questions and theoretical framework.

For a deeper layer of understanding, interrelating themes such as time constraints, early identification of delays, use of technology and social competence were then ordered to find the essence of participants' meaning. This was done by continuing the constant comparison analysis; reading and re-reading the data to develop the themes; and assessment of themes' adequacy, meaningfulness and relevance (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007).

In this phase, the NVivo 12 program was utilised. This software was particularly useful to review, merge and refine the collected data and visualise connections and main ideas.

When analysing data, it was important to be able to examine the extent to which parents' and teachers' perspectives aligned with the presence or otherwise of opportunities for language development, to ascertain if they viewed language, culture and environment as significant for the development of children's oral language in the first year of school. Further, being mindful of the proximal processes from Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model, consideration was given to the extent that parents' and teachers' responses showed an awareness of these processes, as an indication of their perceived capacity within them to support oral language development. The coding process was continually refined to understand participants' perspectives and gain insight into their attitudes and beliefs about children's oral language development in the first year of school.

Through data logging, which refers to all of the collected data (including participants' responses, researcher's description, views, insights and assumptions) being documented and iteratively revisited to check, compare and clarify, followed by fragmenting and classifying the text, the data were reduced into manageable and meaningful transcript segments (Creswell, 2012).

To investigate perspectives on the importance of children's oral language development, it was necessary to look for evidence in interview responses of the influences parents and teachers viewed as relevant to children's oral language development in the first year of school. Having coded the data against emerging categories, several main themes were identified:

- lack of time to support oral language development
- need for professional support to foster oral language development
- social interaction
- technology.

An example of interview data being organised by theme is provided in Appendix E.

## 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are present in any research, and researchers need to anticipate ethical issues throughout the process, but particularly when collecting data and writing reports, as “Of all the steps in the research process, it does tend to relate closely to the data collection and reporting and distribution of reports than any of the other phases of research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 23).

Qualitative research involves situations and relationships that are complex, unpredictable and embed concepts of power relations between participants and researchers (Orb et al., 2001). In this way, the ethics involved in this kind of research go beyond anonymising data, storing data securely and obtaining consent. Therefore, it is important to adhere to ethical principles such as autonomy, beneficence and justice. In this study, autonomy was observed by ensuring voluntary and informed consent from participants, providing information to participants and ensuring participants knew they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Beneficence was ensured by being available and contactable throughout the data collection period, adhering to confidentiality and anonymity protocols, and ensuring respectful conduct at all times. The principle of justice was implemented by limiting the length of the interview time, allowing participants with care-giver responsibilities to bring young children to the interview with them, and providing member checking so they could confirm or amend the content of their interview transcripts.

This research complies with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated May 2015; Appendix F). It embodies the National Health and Medical Research Council values and principles of respect for human beings; research merit; and integrity, justice and beneficence. The risks of this study were minimal, being no more than minor inconvenience to participants, and there was negligible risk to the

researcher, university and school community. All data were stored in computer files in de-identified form and will be disposed of five years after the study, per ACU HREC requirements. The possible benefits of improving children's oral language development through increased awareness of parents' and teachers' perspectives are appropriate compared to the low risks posed to participants in this research. Information from this research could benefit teacher-student relationships in the classroom, inform and improve teaching practice, and enhance parent-child communication to improve children's oral language development in the first year of school. Throughout the research, participants' perspectives and cultural and religious beliefs were respected through careful selection of language to ensure no offence or harm to participants or the school community.

Participants were given an explanation letter and consent form (Appendix B) to indicate their agreement for the data to be used in this thesis. The explanation letter and consent form outlined the purpose and process of the research and interviews, and provided assurances of confidentiality and the ACU HREC ethical approval number. Respondents were informed that their names would not be included in any write-up of the research, and all participants had the option to opt out of the study at any time.

#### **4.7 Validity**

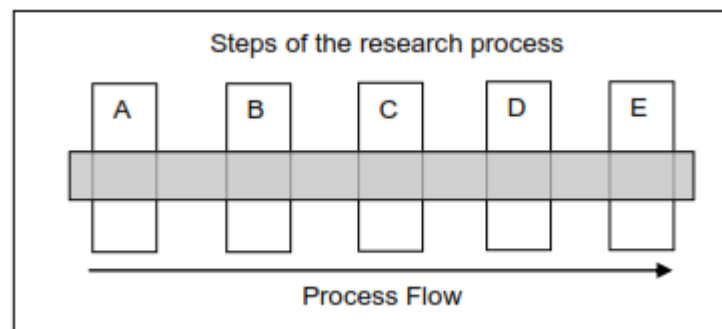
Validity in any research is important, as it provides evidence of the quality of the research. However, because qualitative research methods are not as centrally focused on measurement as quantitative methods, there is no universally agreed on criteria to assess validity in qualitative research studies (Hayashi et al., 2019). Maxwell (1992) referred to investigation, descriptive, theoretical, interpretive and evaluative validity, and Lather (1993) suggested four framings (ironic validity, paralogical validity, rhizomatic validity and voluptuous validity) that move the discussion of validity "From epistemological

criteria of truth as a correspondence between thought and its object to criteria grounded in the crisis of representation” (p. 686).

Common procedures for qualitative researchers to establish validity include triangulation, member checking, peer review, thick description and external audits (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Morse et al., 2002). Creswell and Miller (2000) suggested that the choice of validity procedures should be governed by the paradigm assumptions of the researcher. In the current study, a constructivist paradigm was used to collect evidence, member check and maintain researcher reflexivity. By ensuring congruence between the questions asked and relevant literature, and by systematically checking the data, the analysis and interpretation were monitored and constantly confirmed. Processual validity (Hayashi et al., 2019) posits that validity involves clear identification of the steps involved in the research process (see Figure 4.5).

**Figure 4.5**

*Processual Construction of Validity*



Source: Hayashi et al. (2019).

Each step, from A to E, indicates clarity as follows:

- A—The criteria used by the researcher to establish the domain, design and limits of the study.
- B—The choice of methods used to collect the data.

- C—The way the researcher codified the data to establish concepts and categories.
- D—The discussion of the results and a return to the theory underpinning the study.

To ensure validity in the present study, the indications were:

- A—Examination of relevant literature identified the problem and key stakeholders. The chosen sociocultural theoretical stance framed the study in a way that would best explore parent and teacher perspectives of the phenomenon.
- B—Convenience sampling, an initial questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were the chosen methods to support this qualitative study.
- C—An iterative process of coding and recoding audio transcripts for themes, aided by the NVivo software program and in discussion with research supervisors, established concepts and themes.
- D—A member checking opportunity was provided for participants to review their transcripts and clarify, change or add perspectives.

Participants were sent a transcript of their interview with four questions (Table 4.5; Appendix G). All participants responded. Three parents and one teacher added further comments, which were included in the overall data analyses.

**Table 4.4**

*Member Checking Questions*

---

|   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Do your answers adequately express your perspective of what you know and understand about children's oral language development and its relation to literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling? |
|   | Yes / Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:                                                                                                                                                                        |

- 2 Do your answers adequately express your perspective on your capacity to influence your child's oral language development?

Yes / Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

- 3 Do your answers adequately express your perspective on what can be done and when, to tackle the problem of declining oral language skills?

Yes / Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

- 4 Do your answers adequately express your perspective on what you see as barriers preventing teachers/parents from fully supporting children's oral language development?

Yes / Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

---

If knowledge is socially constructed, the interview process itself has an influence on participants. This is one reason why interviewees were given the opportunity to reflect on their answers and change them via member checking (Creswell, 2012). The study has merit in that the findings are likely to help advance understandings of children's oral language development in the first year of school. The study is justifiable in that the findings may contribute to changes in how parents and teachers approach supporting young children's oral language development in the first year of school. Finally, the study was conducted with integrity, in that all procedural ethical requirements were followed and member checking was undertaken to confirm participants' contributions. To ensure the research was just, fairness was prioritised in the selection process so that everyone could benefit from the research. No one was disadvantaged by this research, and it did not place any undue burdens on participants or the school.

## **4.8 Conclusion**

A constructivist paradigm was used in this study to understand the perspectives of parents and teachers concerning children's oral language development. Axiological importance was placed on the values and beliefs inherent in the perspectives of parents and teachers. Ontologically, participant realities were considered subjective and contextually constructed. Epistemologically, beliefs were recognised as mediated by socially and historically constituted relations, and acknowledged as part of parent and teacher efficacy. Using a qualitative approach, a questionnaire was employed to inform the design of individual semi-structured interview questions. The collected qualitative data were then examined via thematic analysis. Ethical conventions were adopted, with a processual approach used to support the validity of the research.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

This chapter presents the study findings. The study was guided by two research questions:

1. What are parents' and teachers' perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?
2. What are parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to influence young children's oral language development?

There were four key findings in relation to research question 1 (Section 5.1) and two key findings in relation to research question 2 (Section 5.2). The findings for each question were broadly similar for parents and teachers, with a slight difference in emphasis according to their role in a child's life. The findings for research question 1 (perspectives on oral language) mediated those for research question 2 (perspectives of efficacy) in terms of influencing children's oral language development.

### **5.1 Research Question 1: Parent and Teacher Perspectives on Children's Oral Language Development**

Research question 1 sought parent and teacher perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling. As noted in Chapter 4, questionnaire responses guided the development of interview questions (see Table 5.1).

**Table 5.1**

*Key Questionnaire Responses Informing the Development of Interview Questions for Research Question 1*

| Parent response                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Teacher response                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1) Do you agree with the view that low oral language skills in children's first year of school are related to low reading and writing achievement in national standardised tests in later years? Why do you think that?              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 14 of 16 parents agreed.                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 3 of 4 teachers agreed.                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Agreement response:</b> "Language plays a vital role in a child's ability to grasp literacy in the early school years. Without it they may not catch up with their peers" (PQR 14).                                               | <b>Agreement response:</b> "Oral language forms the foundation for reading and writing skills" (TQR 2).                                                                                                             |
| <b>Partial agreement response:</b> "There may be other underlying issues" (PQR 11).                                                                                                                                                  | <b>Partial agreement response:</b> "Other factors play a part" (TQR 1).                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Disagreement response:</b> "No, children talk in their own time" (PQR 2).                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 2) Do you agree with the view that low oral language skill development is related to behavioural issues and anxiety in children? Why do you think that?                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| 14 of 16 parents agreed.                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 4 of 4 teachers agreed.                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Agreement response:</b> "Their poor language can still be a source of poor behaviour or, conversely, they can withdraw, leading to isolation as they can't make their needs known, because when they've been frustrated and acted | <b>Agreement response:</b> "Entering school without the ability to comprehend and respond to peers leads to anxiety, aggression or withdrawal as they find it too difficult to cope. Inability to listen and follow |

|                                                                       |                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| out, they've been punished so they stop talking altogether" (PQR 11). | directions leads to avoidance and feelings of inadequacy" (TQR 4). |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Disagreement responses:** "I have dealt with many children that have anxiety or behaviour issues that were very smart and had excellent oral language skills" (PQR 3).

"Poor oral language may be due to both internal and external factors. I do not agree that behavioural issues and anxiety alone lead to poor oral language" (PQR 4).

---

6) Do you believe that play-based learning provides the best opportunities for children's oral language development? Why do you think that?

---

16 of 16 parents agreed.

---

4 of 4 teachers agreed.

**Agreement response:** "Yes, children are starting Prep [Preparatory year in Australia is the first year of formal school] as young as four [years] and this is an extremely young age for any overly formal learning techniques" (PQR 15).

**Agreement response:** "I do, as it provides children the opportunity to learn in the most natural way through a multi-sensory approach" (TQR 2).

---

*Note.* PQR = Parent Questionnaire Respondent, TQR = Teacher Questionnaire Respondent.

Questionnaire data indicated that almost all respondents felt children's low oral language skills in their first year of school are related to low reading and writing achievement in later years (Burgoyne et al., 2019; Hornsby & Wilson, 2014; Language and Reading Research Consortium & Chiu, 2018) and behavioural issues and anxiety (Chow et al., 2018; Chow & Wehby, 2019; Snow, 2014; Yew & O'Kearney, 2017). Agreement was

unanimous on play-based learning providing the best opportunities for children's oral language development (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Colliver, 2014; Edwards, 2021; Pyle et al., 2018). This was unsurprising, as the study school actively advocates the importance of play in children's early years and such an approach, while debated in the literature, is therefore, likely to appear in participant responses. Most parents and teachers agreed that children's oral language development in the first year of school is important for literacy and wellbeing and is enhanced through play-based learning.

Interviewee demographics are shown in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2**

*Interviewee Demographics*

| Participant | Age | Education                  | Child's place<br>in family | Teaching<br>experience | Professional<br>development in oral<br>language |
|-------------|-----|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Parent 1    | 44  | High school<br>certificate | Youngest                   | n/a                    | n/a                                             |
| Parent 2    | 30  | High school<br>certificate | Middle                     | n/a                    | n/a                                             |
| Parent 3    | 37  | Bachelor<br>degree         | Middle                     | 14 years               | Minimal                                         |
| Parent 4    | 44  | Postgraduate               | Youngest                   | n/a                    | n/a                                             |
| Parent 5    | 41  | Postgraduate               | Middle                     | n/a                    | Yes, qualified<br>speech pathologist            |
| Parent 6    | 38  | Diploma                    | Youngest                   | n/a                    | n/a                                             |
| Parent 7    | 42  | High school<br>certificate | Youngest,<br>twins         | n/a                    | n/a                                             |

| Participant | Age | Education          | Child's place<br>in family | Teaching<br>experience        | Professional<br>development in oral<br>language |
|-------------|-----|--------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Parent 8    | 28  | Bachelor<br>degree | Eldest                     | Newly<br>qualified<br>teacher | None                                            |
| Teacher 1   | 43  | Bachelor<br>degree | n/a                        | 15 years                      | Some, but would<br>like more                    |
| Teacher 2   | 41  | Bachelor<br>degree | n/a                        | 14 years                      | Yes, but needs<br>updating                      |
| Teacher 3   | 53  | Postgraduate       | n/a                        | 30 years                      | Some, but not<br>enough for today's<br>needs    |
| Teacher 4   | 50  | Bachelor<br>degree | n/a                        | 27 years                      | None                                            |

Using a socio-cultural framework means that many factors need to be taken into account when examining the behaviours of individuals or groups. In this study the age, highest level of education of the participants, as well as the child's place in the family and teaching experience were all considered to gain insight into the phenomenon of children's low oral language ability in the first year of school.

Participants' age range was 28–53 years, and teachers had 14–30 years' teaching experience. One parent had 14 years' experience teaching kindergarten, and another parent was a newly qualified teacher who had just started contract teaching. Level of education ranged from high school certificate to postgraduate qualification with one parent working

as a speech pathologist. Parent education is often viewed as integral to other components of SES ranking (Buckingham, 2016), and many studies have recorded differences in children's home learning environment in relation to their SES background (Davis-Kean, 2005; Guo & Harris, 2000; Leung et al., 2020). However, Grolig (2020) pointed out that for one main home activity, shared reading (Noble et al., 2019), SES does not moderate the effect on children developing oral language.

In terms of the child's place in the family, at the time of study, four parents' children currently in the first year of school was their youngest child (in one case, this referred to twins), for three parents this was their middle child and for one parent this was their eldest child. Research indicates that children's birth order is significantly related to parenting styles (e.g., Hadjicharalambous & Demetriou, 2021). Other research indicates that parenting styles are crucial for young children's language development at home, with positive, warm and encouraging relationships being most beneficial (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001).

Given that how people talk about a concept is shaped by pre-existing cultural beliefs and practices (Gee, 2015; Kramsch & Widdowson, 1998), an investigation was undertaken into the words used in the discourse to provide a clearer picture of how parents and teachers perceive children's oral language development. An examination of the words used by both sets of respondents revealed that parents and teachers used very similar language when responding to the interview questions (see Table 5.3). The terms "oral", "skills" and "early" were more often used by teachers in expressing their perspectives on children's oral language development than parents. Parents used "read" and "learn" more often than teachers. The terms "parent" and "time" and "speech" were frequently used by parents and teachers. The interview questions are provided in Appendix C. Further examination of frequently used words showed overlaps (see Figure 5.1).

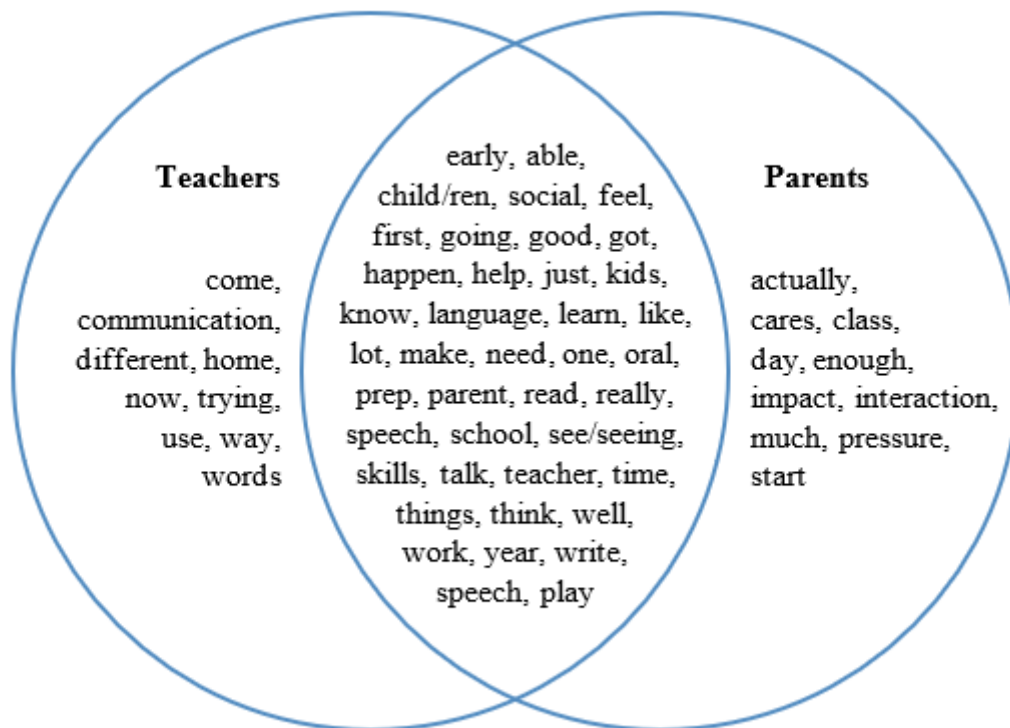
**Table 5.3**

*Most Commonly Used Words by Parents and Teachers in Their Perspectives on Children's Oral Language Development*

| Word   | Interview      |               | Interview      |               | Interview      |               | Interview      |               | Total          |               |
|--------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
|        | question 1     |               | question 2     |               | question 3     |               | question 4     |               |                |               |
|        | <i>Teacher</i> | <i>Parent</i> | <i>Teacher</i> | <i>Parent</i> | <i>Teacher</i> | <i>Parent</i> | <i>Teacher</i> | <i>Parent</i> | <i>Teacher</i> | <i>Parent</i> |
| parent | 1              | 5             | 17             | 12            | 3              | 31            | 16             | 25            | 37             | 73            |
| read   | 2              | 5             | 9              | 17            | 13             | 29            | 5              | 22            | 29             | 73            |
| skills | 11             | 5             | 14             | 2             | 9              | 5             | 11             | 5             | 45             | 17            |
| learn  | 3              | 6             | 7              | 5             | 9              | 22            | 1              | 8             | 20             | 41            |
| time   | 0              | 0             | 7              | 10            | 6              | 7             | 3              | 13            | 16             | 30            |
| talk   | 3              | 2             | 8              | 9             | 4              | 14            | 3              | 2             | 18             | 27            |
| speech | 0              | 1             | 4              | 7             | 7              | 12            | 3              | 7             | 14             | 27            |
| play   | 2              | 1             | 7              | 1             | 8              | 15            | 2              | 2             | 19             | 19            |
| oral   | 3              | 0             | 6              | 1             | 10             | 7             | 8              | 1             | 27             | 9             |
| social | 5              | 11            | 4              | 1             | 1              | 2             | 0              | 1             | 10             | 15            |
| early  | 3              | 2             | 8              | 1             | 2              | 0             | 3              | 4             | 15             | 7             |
| write  | 1              | 4             | 3              | 1             | 0              | 0             | 1              | 4             | 5              | 9             |

**Figure 5.1**

*Overlap of Commonly Used Words by Parents and Teachers*



Language, learning, reading, time, skills, talk, oral, and work were commonly used by parents and teachers, possibly indicating shared understanding of what these words mean in the context of the first year of school. Although teachers talked more about children’s oral skill development in the classroom, they did not use more technical words than parents. Words only used by one set of respondents—such as “communication”, “different” and “home” from teachers and “impact”, “interaction” and “pressure” from parents—may suggest conflicting emphasis on ownership of the phenomenon. For example, teachers talked more about developing children’s communication and parents talked more about pressure to support development. With home/school communication being a key factor in supporting children into and through the first year of school, as indicated by this study’s theoretical framework, it is worth considering that using a shared

language when talking about children's oral language development could contribute to a mutual understanding of what is at stake.

As previously stated, the interview questions were formulated to investigate parent and teacher perspectives on perceived barriers affecting children's oral language development in the first year of school. The theoretical framework of this study, combining Vygotsky's (1978), Bronfenbrenner's (1986) and Bandura's (1997) theories (see Chapter 3), posits the actions of these adults as central to children's oral language development.

### ***5.1.1 Key Findings for Research Question 1***

The four key findings in relation to research question 1 were:

- The connection between oral language and literacy learning is acknowledged but not prioritised.
- Oral language development is considered important for children's social and emotional wellbeing.
- Lack of time to effectively support children's oral language development is seen as a major concern.
- Technology is considered unhelpful for children's developing oral language.

These findings are discussed below.

#### **5.1.1.1 The Connection between Oral Language and Literacy Learning is Acknowledged but Not Prioritised**

Although participants knew this study was primarily about children's oral language development, and there was strong agreement expressed in questionnaire responses about the importance of oral language in the first year of school, most respondents did not name oral language per se as children's most important skill when starting school (see Tables 5.4 and 5.5). However, elements of what could be considered oral language skills were highlighted (e.g., communication, vocabulary and following instructions).

**Table 5.4**

*Parent Perspectives on Children's Most Important Skill at School Entry*

---

Interview question 1: What do you feel are the most important skills children need to have in order to be successful in their first year of school?

---

“Number one would be the social aspect—that they are able to communicate and play well, and you know, [follow] social etiquette” (Parent 1).

“So social skills to do with sharing with other children, to do with making friends” (Parent 2).

“So, they need to be emotionally ready, socially ready” (Parent 3).

“They need to be socially and emotionally ready. They need to be able to understand themselves and self-regulate” (Parent 4).

“Okay, so they need to have strong communication skills, strong social skills” (Parent 5).

“I believe that they need confidence” (Parent 6).

“Writing, being able to do their name and reading” (Parent 7).

“I think social skills” (Parent 8).

---

It is interesting to note from the table above that 6 out of the 8 parents named social skills in their answer. Parents 6 and 7 refer to personal capability and academic capability

respectively. Although only one parent refers to communication skills per se, other comments about making friends, sharing, being emotionally and socially ready all require a certain level of proficiency with oral language.

**Table 5.5**

*Teacher Perspectives on Children’s Most Important Skill at School Entry*

|                                                                                                                                                                            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Interview question 1: What do you feel are the most important skills children need to have in order to be successful in their first year of school?                        |
| “Social interaction, they need to make sure that they can follow instructions, that they are independent and that they have some idea of their letter sounds” (Teacher 1). |
| “They need to be independent. They need to be resilient. They need to be physically capable” (Teacher 2).                                                                  |
| “Okay, apart from the normal organisational skills, it’s really important that they have good vocabulary” (Teacher 3).                                                     |
| “I think there are communication skills and under that, I guess comes their ability to talk, [and] use oral language” (Teacher 4).                                         |

The table above shows that responses from the teachers as to the most important skill children needed when starting school were focused more on children’s ability to cope in the school environment. One teacher notes the importance of organizational skills, another teacher names resilience and physical capabilities, while two teachers name independence. However, three out of the four teachers name specific oral language skills such as the ability to follow instructions, good vocabulary and communication skills.

Although many studies have found strong connections between oral language development and learning to read and write (Chang et al., 2020; Grolig, 2020; Lervåg et al., 2019; Levlin & Waldmann, 2020; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Snow et al., 2020), it was not initially clear in the present study if parents and teachers fully understood this relationship. Therefore, further questioning during interviews asked parents and teachers to identify the type of oral language activities they engaged in with the children (see Tables 5.6 and Table 5.7).

**Table 5.6**

*Parents' Identified Activities for Children's Oral Language Development*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Probing question: What kind of oral language activities do you do with your children at home?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| <p>“We read. She brings home the class ones that she gets to choose herself, but then we’ve got some other ones that have high frequency words in them. So, she’s going to be saying that same word over and over again and then I’ve still got some of the stuff I used with the older kid... we do sight words... we sing the Jolly Phonics as well” (Parent 1).</p> <p>“It’ s mainly you know reading, reading, read to them every day... if you can’t read to them a book, have a chat to them, use different words you know” (Parent 2).</p> <p>“Blow straws and you know blow a bit of paper all screwed up. Have conversations with the children ... There’s reading, there’s getting them to make up stories you know, getting the children to look at a picture and tell a story” (Parent 3).</p> |

“Driving in the car, going to the train station ... ordering take away, you know.

Everything is a learning experience—everything is about helping them make sense of the world and get meaning from it” (Parent 4).

“When they’re driving to school and they’re asking: What can you see? Or let’s play I spy ... asking who, what, where questions” (Parent 5).

“Spending time with their grandparents through the week and going shopping with me, cooking with me and me talking to them most of the day” (Parent 6).

“Reading, we do a lot of reading. The boys practice their letters and copy over letters and numbers... When we drive, they look at stuff and they try to spell the words and signs they can see out the window... We play I spy we do colours” (Parent 7).

“Reading lots of books, you know, when there are words, sound them out together... and we’re talking and she doesn’t think she’s having to do work... we’re just chatting and she loves it” (Parent 8).

---

**Table 5.7**

*Teachers’ Identified Activities for Children’s Oral Language Development*

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Probing question: What kind of oral language activities do you do with your children in class?

---

“Speaking to them, reading lots of stories, looking at the pictures, getting them to talk about the pictures and getting them to make up a story from the picture” (Teacher 1).

“We do a lot of speaking beforehand, we do a lot of paired work, looking at your mouth, how do you form the sounds, how do you make them, what do they look like, can we find them in other words... lots of just reading to, being read to by people, so that they can listen to stories” (Teacher 2).

“Just talk to the children about what they’re interested in and teaching them thinking skills ... asking them to investigate their world and encouraging that curiosity and that awe and wonder about what’s around them in the world” (Teacher 3).

“Reading out loud... children read to each other... lots of role play, dramatic role play, lots and lots of talking the children need to be talking all the time” (Teacher 4).

---

Evident from the responses in the tables above the majority of participants appeared to hold similar views in that both parents and teachers defined oral language activities as mainly (print) literacy related. Activities such as reading, looking at pictures in stories, sounding out words, memorising sight words and practising writing, spelling and phonics were all mentioned. While five parents and three teachers stated reading as an oral language activity, most respondents included talking to children about their everyday experiences as an oral language activity. Further comments from parents and teachers revealed a shared belief in the foundational nature of children’s oral language development for literacy. For example, one parent described their experience of talking with a group of five-year-olds:

“I sat with a group of children and we were looking at a picture of a park and no one could label the swings, slide or a bike, versus scooter or a pond, so they didn’t have that oral language. So, it’s very hard then, to expect those children to pick up

a book and be able to relate to and problem solve their way through reading a book when they don't have that oral vocab to start with" (Parent 5).

Likewise, one teacher stated their belief in a strong connection between children's emerging ability to read and write and their expressive oral language development: "If they can't express themselves just orally, then they're not going to be able to do it through their reading or their writing" (Teacher 1).

These two comments indicate a recognition that oral language development influences a child's readiness for literacy learning, such as reading and writing. This view is supported by decades of research demonstrating the vital role of oral language in homes and other community settings as a foundation for language learning in formal schooling (Bingham et al., 2017; Holt & Asagbra, 2021; Krijnen et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2019; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2014).

A commonly held perspective among both parents and teachers was that parents need to read more often to their children at home. This was clearly indicated in response to the probing question, "What can be done to improve children's oral language development?" For example, Teacher 1 said that an important factor hindering children's oral language development was "Parents not reading to them enough as they're growing because sometimes, parents think that when they're one or two that they don't need to read to their children and that's the best time to start reading to them". Teacher 3 stated that one of the causes of children starting school with low oral language skills was "children are not being read to frequently or discussing pictures in books". Teacher 4 referred to parents as the "primary educators" of their children, and Teacher 2 simply stated, "Read to them, read to them, read to them, and talk to them, parents".

Parents also raised the importance of reading at home. Parent 8 talked about changed times (meaning different expectations from when she was young) and suggested

that parents are “Not having to read to their children like they used to have to do”. Parent 7 talked about the need for parents to read to children before they start school: “Reading books from an early age, lots of reading”.

These comments suggest that both parents and teachers consider parental reading at home to be important for children’s oral language development and something that could be enhanced to address the problem of low oral language development prior to school entry. This is in line with the plethora of research highlighting the importance of shared and dialogic reading for both literacy learning and oral language development (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021; Holt & Asagbra, 2021; Lenhart et al., 2021; Riordan et al., 2021; Seven & Goldstein, 2020; Zucker et al., 2021).

Teacher 2 commented on the noticeable effect of the home learning environment, saying they could:

“Definitely see those children who have got good oral language, who have spent a lot of time being spoken to and who have been read to and who have good vocabularies are definitely far more capable, in terms of their achievement with reading and writing.”

Teacher 1 similarly stated:

“When a child comes to school, when they’ve been able to have that interaction with their parents, then they know how to interact with the teachers, they know how to interact then with the other children that are in their classroom.”

In addition to parental reading at home, many participants valued play-based learning for enhancing children’s oral language development. This was particularly emphasised by the four teachers—not unsurprising, given that the study school advocates a play-based approach to learning in children’s early years. When asked if they felt that a play-based learning environment provided the best opportunities for children’s oral

language development, parents and teachers were unanimous in the pre-interview questionnaire that play-based learning was the best way for children at this stage to learn (see Table 5.1). In their interview, Teacher 4 expanded on the importance of play-based learning for oral language development:

“Play-based learning does provide the best opportunity for children’s oral language development. The environment is the third teacher and the peer group provide opportunities for discovery and enquiry in a way that is meaningful to them. Play promotes discussion, conversation, dramatic role-play and the opportunity to use spoken language for a purpose.”

Again, there is much research on the positive effects of play-based learning for many areas of children’s development, particularly oral language (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Barblett et al., 2016; Bodrova et al., 2013; Flear, 2021; O’Connor, 2017; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Vygotsky, 1933, 1934/1962, 1978).

There are many definitions of play and often descriptions of what constitutes play can be controversial (Burghardt, 2010). The present study adopted a sociocultural conception of play (in line with the framework detailed in Chapter 3), per Vygotsky (1967):

“The route from play to internal processes during the school years – internal speech, internalisation, logical memory, abstract thinking (without things but with concepts) – this is the main developmental route. Whoever understands this connection, understands the main thing in the progress from the preschool to the school years.” (p. 95)

In interviews, two teachers remarked on the difficulty of balancing a play-based approach with curriculum demands and pressures. Teacher 3 stated:

“I think some of the targets are unrealistic and I think they put undue pressure on little kids who aren’t ready and pressure on the teachers to push kids who aren’t ready which just leads to them not liking learning. Because it’s not fun if you have to be pushed, but if it was more play-based, which is the way it should be, then a lot more of that speech and language can come through their play.”

Later in the interview, they added, “Prescribed activities are taking priority over play-based learning”. The sense of prescribed curriculum activities taking over play-based learning was associated by Teacher 3 with reduced opportunities for generation and participation in meaningful oral language experiences. Simultaneously, pressure to meet targets or address perceived deficits in oral language development meant classroom focus and approaches became less play based and more academic. Teacher 1 also noted the distribution of funding to support play-based learning:

“Budget is another big thing, if you don’t have the resources that can be a big impact on the way that you may want to do things with the oral language.

Especially when it comes to any roleplay or play-based activities, if you don’t have those resources then it really impacts on what you can and can’t do.”

For parents, the role of play-based learning was more nuanced. Parent 1 reflected on a disruption in their child’s classroom, feeling this had affected opportunities for learning:

“There’s been so much disruption with her class, I know that I did speak to my little network of mum friends to share “this is what I’m doing with my child”, to try to bridge that gap that we felt that in the first six months we had, in the classroom. “This is what I’m doing, here’s some ideas” and then others would come back to me with “this is what I was doing, this is what I’ve been doing””.

Parent 1 was referring to the classroom teacher being replaced after the year had started. She referred to a “gap” she perceived as needing to be filled collaboratively by parents (i.e., her network of mum friends). This parent also commented on their child’s play-based learning experiences while at day care. Their choice of words indicated that they felt the kindergarten focused more on learning rather than playing:

“The day care was just playing. I didn’t feel that there was any focus on any of the language skills at all when she was there. So, it was really important to me that she went to a kindy where she was learning, “this is how I do my name, this is how I start a letter, this is what letters are”. You know, getting some form around it before she came to big school” (Parent 1.)

Fleer (2021) referred to this as “institutional valuing of role-play” (p. 154). It reflects how the conceptualisation of play in institutions is not static but a result of community wants and expectations for their children. It would seem that although all parents and teachers agreed in the questionnaire that play-based learning was the best way to develop children’s oral language development in the first year of school, this does not appear to be prioritised or valued in practice. Dyer et al.’s (2016) research indicated that people tend to be more positive in surveys than they actually feel. In the present study, from the parents’ perspectives, play-based learning was not sufficiently explicit for pre-literacy. From the teachers’ perspectives, play-based learning was difficult to accommodate amid current curriculum demands and expectations. Per Teacher 2:

“We might do play-based activities but there are still time constraints within that, so even though you would like to do more of that, and know they need more of it, you also have this awareness, in the back of your mind, there are expectations for other parts of the curriculum that have to be met.”

### **5.1.1.2 Oral Language Development is Considered Important for Children's Social and Emotional Wellbeing**

There was a strong sense among parents that children's oral language development was related to their behaviour, including their social wellbeing. For example, Parent 1 suggested:

"This is obvious from pre-verbal toddlers who get frustrated when they can't get their message across and express this in anger, crying, tantrums. I think this would be even greater once they are of school age and can't express themselves verbally when others around them might be able to. They may withdraw and give up trying or lash out with their peers."

Parent 2 talked about the change in environment from home to school, and Parent 3 stated the need for children to know how to behave and cope:

"How to behave in a social environment that's my feel on that, because at home they might not have other siblings that they learn necessarily how to share and how to deal with a lot of different voices, and make themselves heard without screaming and having tantrums and things and also just having a bit of self-awareness and understanding" (Parent 2).

"They've got to have strategies to deal with, you know when things are happening for them, and that goes back to emotional development. So, I guess they should at least be able to cope with the change and cope with the different things that are happening for them" (Parent 3).

Parent 4 talked about the importance of communication for resilience:

"They need to be able to read another person and respond, they need to be able to take risks and accept that they won't be the best at everything that they do, they need to be able to have a go without fear of failure, they need to understand that the

purpose of school is to learn, they need to be ready to face new challenges and not be afraid.”

Parent 5 felt both communication and social skills are declining: ‘I definitely do think the numbers are increasing every year in terms of the children who just don’t have fundamental communication skills and social pragmatic skills full stop’. Parent 6 expressed concern about the immaturity of children starting school and the importance of having strong relationships to build on: “My personal opinion is they’re still quite young and I think as much interaction with the parents, with the family as possible, I believe is important”. While Parent 7 commented in the questionnaire that tantrums and anxiety come from children’s inability to express themselves, in the interview they did not mention the effect on social skills for their twin boys.

Parent 8 talked about their view that oral language and social skills are important for children to progress at school but felt other parents were not aware of this: “Parents don’t have an understanding of how oral language is and social skills and everything that goes on to impact the education system and impact how kids go at school”.

The four teachers also identified oral language skills as related to children’s social skills, especially being able to express themselves in the classroom. For example, Teacher 2 stated, “There’s all the behavioural issues that they exhibit, because they cannot make themselves understood and they are then frustrated and annoyed and disruptive and sometimes aggressive”. Teacher 4 understood that oral language frustrations were linked to social development, with this affecting learning in general: “It [oral language difficulties] hinders their social development, their ability to play with other children. It hinders their ability to learn”.

The above parent and teacher perspectives align with longitudinal studies highlighting the importance of oral language development for social relationships and

learning at school (Ashman & Snow, 2019; Chow et al., 2018; Chow & Wehby, 2019; Clegg et al., 2015).

Teacher 3 considered that oral language development may also be connected with children's feelings of anxiety, noting, an "Increased number of young children being treated for anxiety", and went on to say, "a paediatrician, asked me about what was happening in schools because of the high number of children he is now seeing for school-related anxiety". Research examining children's cortisol response when transitioning to a new setting indicated overall increases when children are at the new setting and overall decreases when children are at home (Bernard et al., 2015; Watamura et al., 2009). Further, Wagner et al. (2016) found that children three to five years of age in Canada with higher levels of cortisol also had parents who reported higher levels of stress. Cortisol is a hormone sensitive to stress and often used in psychological research as a biomarker because "chronic elevation or depression of cortisol in children is thought to influence long term developmental outcomes" (Sims et al., 2006, p.453). Studies in countries with school-starting ages similar to the present study, such as the UK (Hall & Lindorff, 2017; Yang et al., 2017), found elevated levels of cortisol production not only as children transition into school but also three months after commencement. This concern was echoed in a comment from Teacher 1, who made a connection between poor oral language skills and anxiety:

"I find that a lot of children, when they start school, they don't have the words to be able to express how they're feeling or what's going on for them, they don't know how to get that across... that's where they become anxious, they become nervous, that's where you start getting the problems of when they don't want to come to school."

Alexander et al. (1993) referred to the first school experience as a "window of opportunity" (p. 813), where positive classroom adjustments can affect early behaviour

patterns. With cortisol known to affect executive function skills needed for school success (such as inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility; Wagner et al., 2016), designing supportive transition practices into and through the first year of school would appear to be crucial.

For most parents, oral language experiences at home were mainly indicative of print literacy activities. This may suggest limited insight into how to use oral language activities to build children's social and emotional skills. Studies have shown that the quality of the home learning environment involves both sensitivity and stimulation (Vallotton et al., 2017; Wade et al., 2018). The two parents who did indicate this awareness were both professionals (a high school teacher and a speech pathologist). Parent 4 (high school teacher) explained:

“We’ve got friends with a child in prep as well, and they talk at their children, they don’t talk with their children, and I think that’s the difference. So, they’re too busy parenting to actually be walking alongside their child on the learning and they don’t see that everything is a learning experience.”

Parent 4 clarified their viewpoint by comparing themselves to friends who also have a child in Prep. They referred to their friends being “too busy parenting” without elaborating on what this meant, though it could suggest that developing children's oral language skills is not recognised as an important part of their friends' parenting. This parent, with expertise in speech development, sees being part of the child's oral language journey as a critical aspect of learning. Parent 5 (speech pathologist) likewise spoke of the importance of engaging with children through language:

“When I say “communication”, I mean like oral communication, so that ability not just to ask questions and seek help and engage but also, a part of that being the ability to share conversation, to take turns, all of that that goes in with the non-

verbal understanding, “okay, what does that language tell me versus the verbal language?” So, I think if you’ve got a strong capability across those domains then you’ll have greater access to school, greater success, I think.”

Disorganisation in the home is known to affect children’s language development and behaviour control, both noted as important school readiness skills (Berger et al., 2019; Lecheile et al., 2020). Responses from parents in the present study aligned with recent research highlighting how parents struggle to engage in sustained, positive interactions with their children if they themselves are mentally and physically fatigued (Garrett-Peters et al., 2019). In their additional member checking response, Parent 7 stated:

“Being a single mum with four kids, it’s very hard to spend enough time with each child, each with different learning levels. My girls help the boys when I’m busy, so I miss out on current learning ways, they keep me up to date but it’s hard on your own.”

Parent 5 noted:

“I think that as a community we’ve moved away from communication, I think we’ve moved away from taking time and breathing a bit and life is so busy, and people are doing the best that they can, but between what home life looks like, what that environment of those first five years look like, that’s so different.”

The four teachers articulated the connection between oral language development, learning and behavioural issues affecting budding social relationships at school. Teacher 4 explained:

“If communication is inhibited due to speech and language difficulties a child may begin to avoid more challenging tasks. Anxiety occurs when a level of frustration is reached. The child may not want to become involved in activity due to poor communication and fear of being ‘different’ or ‘rejected’ by peers.”

Teacher 4 used specific language to state assumptions they have about the relationship between low oral language skills and anxiety. For example, they described children's speech and language as inhibiting their communication with others and perceived children to be actively avoiding challenging tasks. They used words such as "different" and "rejected" to describe their perception of children's feelings when their involvement in learning activities is affected by frustration, induced by low oral language development. Teacher 3 commented on the effect of the home environment on preparing children for the social demands of school: "They're not learning the social skills like communicating and taking turns because it's always, 'I get what I want, I just go to my room and have it', so they're not learning those important skills either". Teacher 1 also pointed to the importance of positive interactions at home:

"When they've been able to have that interaction with their parents, then they know how to interact with the teachers, they know how to interact then with the other children that are in their classroom, instead of shying away from speaking to other people that are around them and being able to express what they're feeling."

Teacher 2 stated, "There's all the behavioural issues that they exhibit, because they cannot make themselves understood and they are then frustrated and annoyed and disruptive and sometimes aggressive."

It is worth noting that classroom disorganisation can also affect children's language and behaviour development (Valiente et al., 2020). In the first year of school, children need to be able to emotionally regulate interactions with teachers, other adults, peers and older children for six to seven hours a day (Rowland, 2014). During this time, children and teachers experience a range of different emotions. Valiente et al. (2020) posited that "Facets of teachers' social-emotional functioning (e.g., stress, emotion, self-regulation, mental health) and emotion-related interactions (e.g., teachers' reactions to students'

emotional displays, student–teacher relationships) are teacher-related socializing variables” (p. 578). That is to say that teachers both directly and indirectly instruct students in social-emotional competence and how to communicate with each other. All four teachers in the present study commented on increased pressure to meet targets and a need for more support. One teacher said:

“I think with the increase of behaviours and a lack of the oral language coming through, that maybe there needs to be extra funding that goes towards Prep, that can go towards bringing in extra resources or bringing in extra help yeah, the extra help definitely” (Teacher 1).

Thus, the emerging picture suggests that parents and teachers consider the role of oral language development for children’s general wellbeing to be important, although they differed in their articulation of how children’s oral language should be supported to achieve this.

In line with the theoretical framework for this study, Bronfenbrenner’s (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model clearly indicates that parents’ and teachers’ relative control over emotional and physical factors in both the home and school environments affect children’s behaviour, which in turn influences their development (Evans, 2021). With both parents and teachers aiming to operate effectively within children’s ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), with consideration of their perceived self-efficacy to do this (Bandura, 1997), there is a clear need to address these issues.

#### **5.1.1.3 Lack of Time to Effectively Support Children’s Oral Language**

##### **Development is Seen as a Major Concern**

Parents and teachers perceived a lack of time as a major barrier to their ability to support children’s oral language development, despite acknowledging oral language as a

critical component of literacy and wellbeing at school. Parent 1 said they felt that by the time their child entered school the expectations were too high:

“By the time they’re here, you know, it’s game on by the time they’re here now.

The expectations seem to be a lot higher for prep, whereas I think people may be still in the mentality that that’s the learning year.”

For Parents 1 and 8, time was a known factor in their interactions with their children. Parent 8 noted that their second child had not benefited as much in oral language development at home through adult–child interactions due to a reduction in the available time for parenting: “Oh, I spent so much more time with [eldest child’s name], reading a lot more. We drew, we coloured, we chatted. [Second child’s name] doesn’t get as much of that, so for me that’s a big factor as well” (Parent 8). Parent 1 similarly said:

“I don’t spend as much time with my number two as I did with my number one, because I only had one that I could solely focus on. Now I have to split my time between one that’s getting jealous, that I’m trying to spend time with the other one. So, that was really challenging, and I think, to the detriment of the younger one.”

Parent 7 clearly expressed that time availability affected their capacity to engage with their children:

“Sitting down with your kids and spending time. Like, just talking, conversations, they’ll learn stuff. Adventures on weekends, going out and showing them the world so they learn more. Practising their name and their letters, holding a pen at home but, having four, it’s hard finding the one-on-one time to do that.”

It was interesting to note Parent 7’s awareness of the importance of spending time in interactions for oral language development while acknowledging that her sole parenting four children stretched her capacity to do this. Eight parents commented on the effects of time pressures associated with working and/or managing the household (see Table 5.8).

**Table 5.8**

*Parent Perspectives on Lack of Time to Support Children's Oral Language Development at Home*

| Parent   | Comment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parent 1 | "I have to do my washing, or I have to do lunches and I haven't got time to sit with you right now."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Parent 2 | "If you're working all the time and you need things to get done; obviously for the children to go to bed at a decent time, to do dinner, to do homework and things like that, there becomes very little time to have a conversation with a child and have them talk back to you. Also, correction of when they're saying the wrong word can be quite adorable, and then when they go to school it becomes more of an issue than not." |
| Parent 3 | "Especially when you both work full time and you both get in late, so you know, that impacts their reading and things like that."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Parent 4 | "I think parents are busy and they are tired and they don't have a lot of patience."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Parent 5 | "Not everybody has the luxury of working part time or having, you know one child or whatever. It's trying to manage lots of little people when working and life and all of that, and still give them the opportunities to learn how to communicate effectively."                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Parent 6 | "I just think pressures of work and cost of living is so high. I find that a lot of parents are struggling to make ends meet, and having to work most of the time. Then you are just too exhausted by the time they get home."                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

| Parent   | Comment                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parent 7 | “When I think to myself, “oh gosh, I haven’t read a book to them in two days”, or, you know, like their school books, I’ll sit down and read to all three of them when I have a minute you know?”                                                                      |
| Parent 8 | “I definitely think that’s the case in my house, there’s not as much quality time. We try and use the weekends for that, just using that time that you’ve got, to have conversations with your child. They have good speech and they can verbally express themselves.” |

There is a clear emphasis on the felt impact of not having enough time in the parent responses in the table above. Comments such as: “not much quality time”, “when I have a minute”, “by the time they get home”, “the luxury of working part-time”, “when you both work full time”, “very little time to have a conversation” and “haven’t got time to sit with you”, were expressed with such emotion that sounded either apologetic or defensive depending on their tone.

With considerable research consistently reporting the benefits of regular parent–child book reading for children’s language development and lifelong learning (Gilkerson et al., 2017; Krcmar & Cingel, 2014; Parish-Morris et al., 2013), it was concerning that so many parent respondents stated a lack of time to do this. Parent 8 added that a lack of time increases parental stress and affects their ability to support children’s oral language development at home:

“I guess stressed parents these days as well, because they work full time, so most of the time it’s in the morning they’re yelling at their kids to get ready and at night they’re yelling at their kids too. They’re yelling at their kids to have a shower and

get their jammies on and get ready for dinner and you know, and there's not quality time as much as there used to be".

This sentiment was echoed by Parent 7:

[Sigh]. "You just get so busy in life, that it's just come home, bath, showers, do a little bit, you know, get that quality time because life's busy and at school they have so much homework and so much stuff to do".

Recent research from China with parents of children three to five years old found that higher levels of parenting stress were strongly related to child behaviour problems (Mak et al., 2020). This is extremely important, as Bronfenbrenner (1971) emphasised the effects of familiar adults' behaviour and actions on children's development. He stated, "Any appreciable, enduring improvement in the child's development can be effected only through appropriate behaviour on the part of persons intimately associated with the child on a day-to-day basis" (Bronfenbrenner, 1971, p. 91). The actions and behaviour of time-poor and stressed parents and teachers can thus have consequences for children's oral language development.

The four teachers cited time pressures as associated with class sizes, school leadership's demand for data collection, an increasing number of children with diverse needs and an overcrowded curriculum—all these, they felt, diminished the time that could be spent on developing children's oral language skills at school. These feelings are echoed in studies investigating teacher burnout (Croft et al., 2016; Herman et al., 2018; Hoglund et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015). Teacher 1 stated that if children were not well enough prepared for school, "It makes it difficult to move along quickly. You're stuck having to, you know, go slow in baby steps instead of moving along as fast as you'd like." Teacher 2 bemoaned the lack of time to develop children's oral language by talking about their interests: "It's about being able to explore a little bit and having the time. That's what there

isn't at the moment within the curriculum, we might do play-based activities but there are still time constraints within that." Teacher 3 explained:

"The pressure of having to have "here's a book, you've got three weeks and you've got to do these activities", and that kid's not ready for those activities. Like, and that other child, that's too easy for that other child. If it was more play-based again, then you can cater more for individual children and its fun, learning should be fun, and speech and language should be fun for kids to do."

This refers to the study school's mandated three-week literacy cycle, in which teachers must meet with school leadership every three weeks to plan, assess and review children's reading progress. Teacher 4 commented on the effect of having to take time to cater for increasing numbers of children with oral language difficulties, with this decreasing the time available to support oral language development for all children in the first instance:

"It makes it difficult to move along quickly. You're stuck with having to... having to really you know, go slow and baby steps instead of moving along as fast as you'd like to. You know, if you've got children that have got speech problems, then you've got to do extra activities with them but then you've got children that have got other difficulties and it creates a whole lot of work."

Teacher 3 agreed, adding that this additional workload reduces the time available for supporting curriculum learning with the rest of the class:

"Instead of being able to get on with a lot of the curriculum demands, and there's heavy pressure now, you're having to go right back and do stuff like basic pronoun work like "he, she" and you have to be modelling it all the time. You have to set aside specific activities to help those children, children with articulation difficulties. They can't communicate with anyone because you can't understand a word they're

saying. So, you have to go back and do things, so instead of being able to move on the work or say, comprehension activities around the book or something, you're having to sit there and model to them. There's a lot of individualised work needed when you target specific language skills for different children. So, it can take a huge chunk out of your day."

Vygotsky (1978) considered that critical periods in children's development, such as starting school, involve rapid transformations in mental and social functioning, during which children are greatly influenced by the interactions of the adults closest to them. Bandura (1982) states, 'perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations' (p. 122). Therefore, the perceived stress and pressures related to a lack of time expressed by parents and teachers in the present study are of great importance in terms of how this affects the action required to support children's oral language development in the first year of school.

Another sentiment expressed by all four teachers was that psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and specialist teachers can be instrumental in helping children develop oral language. They felt that such support could alleviate time pressures. Teacher 4 stated, "Early intervention with specialist teachers needs to happen in Prep, where they can come in and spend time in small groups, intensive, explicit instruction communication". Teacher 1 likewise believed that ancillary professional support was important:

"There are children in there that I would have thought would have been seeing maybe a specialist outside of school for their oral language, but that hasn't been occurring as yet, and I think that's a big impact as well."

Hancock's (2019) review of the Bercow report (Bercow, 2008), which assessed services for children with speech, language and communications needs in England,

highlighted renewed concern about the difficulties of realising the report's recommendations when many stakeholders are involved. Recognising the importance of early detection of speech, language and communication needs, the report's proposed practical, achievable and affordable recommendations were accompanied by an expressed urgency for change. Yet, at the time of writing (14 years later), there is still no assessment in England for children's oral language in school after the age of five years. Parents and teachers in the present study expressed concern about decisions they have no control over, including accessing outside help. In member checking, Teacher 3 added that decisions made at the school leadership level also affect the time teachers had to develop children's oral language in the classroom:

“Aide time withdrawn from other activities to assist individuals and groups of children with specific needs, extra work in planning, doing activities that will assist these basic skills which are usually assumed as prerequisite to Prep, then extra stress on teachers who are trying to teach children, not just outcomes. All these take extra time and planning on top of regular class curriculum activities and are frequently not fully understood by admin as necessary for children to achieve success, so are not given priority or consideration at planning meetings which focus purely on curriculum outcomes.”

These findings suggest that parents and teachers perceive a lack of time as a major factor in adults' promotion of children's oral language development. Pressures on adults in terms of work (parents), household duties (parents), managing curriculum expectations (teachers) and children's individual learning trajectories (teachers) affected perceived capacity for adult interactions associated with promotion of oral language.

#### **5.1.1.4 Technology is Considered Unhelpful for Children's Developing Oral Language**

Most parents and teachers negatively described the effects of technology use for young children in terms of oral language development. One exception, Parent 4, stated:

“Digital literacy is very important. He [their child] needs to develop as a creative, collaborative critical contributor when using technology. He needs to be able to share and reflect on his learning orally using technology to support this.”

This parent stated a belief in the importance of digital literacy, adding that their son needs to be able to use oral language skills to reflect and share his learning. Noting that Parent 4 is also a high school teacher of English and Information Technology, their comments could reflect their feelings as a parent and their knowledge in their professional subject areas.

Studies on the prominence of digital devices in children's early experiences of literacy cover the home and school (Chen et al., 2020; Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Edwards et al., 2017). All four teachers in the present study commented on the increased use of devices at home. For example, Teacher 1 said, “I find a lot of the time; children are stuck in front of the TV or the computer playing video games and their imaginations are very limited these days to what they're seeing on a TV”. Teacher 2 also commented on children using technology to be kept quiet at home: “I think with all of the technology that we have, I think we're going back to that “seen and not heard” a little bit, where you're seeing more and more children are given things to keep them quiet.”

The idea of using technology to keep children quiet was also raised by Teacher 3, who considered children as passively accepting technologies, rather than actively engaging in conversations for developing oral language: “A lot of the stuff kids do isn't interactive. They're just passive receptors of technology with no thinking.” Parent 4 also highlighted this sense of not interacting with other people for the purpose of developing oral language

skills: “Parents aren’t communicating with their children early on, for example, they give them a phone, an iPad, stick them in front of the TV. They are not interacting with people.”

While technology is an important part of the Australian National Curriculum, and increasingly more reporting and assessing is recorded digitally, surprisingly, none of the teachers commented on this in relation to children’s oral language development in the classroom specifically. When asked what activities they used to promote oral language development, none of the teachers mentioned digital classroom devices. This is particularly notable, as the study school had invested heavily in classroom technology; each first-year classroom had an interactive television, six iPads, 10 computers, a digital camera, a microphone and a programmable robot. The four teachers did comment on the increase in digital system requirements for the “datafication” of children (Bradbury, 2019), a lack of professional development and teacher training in general terms. Teacher 1, when talking about the need for extra funding said, “we need it for the data in the school, because data drives the school as much as we wouldn’t want it to, that is something that happens”. Although Digital Technology is a mandatory Australian National Curriculum subject area taught from the first year of school, Teacher 2 felt that detracted from too many areas, including from what she felt were key focus areas:

“I suppose you do feel constantly under pressure, you’re also trying to work out how, and whether or not, the curriculum works well enough to be integrated. I still think in Prep, where we are now, we should be having a focus on literacy. There should be a focus on maths, social skills and the health and wellbeing that goes into that, and then we should be able to have that within a wider concept, so that it’s more flexible, and you can bring in the science and you can bring in the geography and all these things, but so that there’s not particularly, necessarily a focus on all these other subjects yet.”

Teacher 2 did not see the need to focus on Digital Technology as a further subject area and had doubts about the curriculum in terms of integrating subjects effectively. This reinforces considerable recent research demonstrating that to ensure effective use of technology in the classroom, teachers need curriculum guidance, training and time to develop confidence, build expertise and change their practice (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Petko et al., 2018; Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Ryan & O'Toole, 2014; Voogt & McKenney, 2017). Noting that the teacher respondents in the present study were all experienced teachers, it is worth mentioning the OECD's Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) finding that supporting student's digital learning was the only area where novice teachers reported higher levels of self-efficacy than experienced teachers (Thomson & Hillman, 2019). The theoretical framework (see Chapter 3) would indicate that teachers' sense of mastery could increase their self-efficacy to use technologies, thereby making them more effective in supporting children's oral language development in the classroom environment.

Parents also attested to the increased use of electronic devices in children's everyday lives. Many studies have highlighted the pros and cons of increased technology use for children's development, from television viewing (Lin et al., 2015) to smart phones, iPads, computers and other mobile devices (Livingstone et al., 2015; Marsh et al., 2017), up to and including alternative digital learning processes implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pavlenko & Pavlenko, 2020). The emerging picture is that increased quantity of screen time negatively affects children's oral language development but increased quality of screen time, where co-viewing is prioritised, can improve children's development of oral language skills (Madigan et al., 2019). Studies indicate that technology use in the home is greatly affected by parental practices (Clarke et al., 2016;

Griffith & Arnold, 2019); therefore, there is a need for clarification by health and educational services of information about children's digital use (Straker et al., 2018).

Parents in this study referred to the intrusive nature of technologies and a sense of reliance on technologies to provide a distraction for children. For example, Parent 6 suggested parents did not engage with their children due to technological distraction:

"Parents are getting distracted with mobile phone calls and Facebook, social media and so forth". Parent 8 identified technology as a management strategy for parents:

"Parents aren't having to talk to their children as much, they're not having to read to their children like they used to have to do. Now it's like, "oh here, we'll put a movie on for you" or "here, watch my iPad" or "watch your iPad."

Parent 4 felt some parents viewed digital technologies as a substitute for parenting: "I think parents are busy and they are tired and they don't have a lot of patience, and they think that screens are going to do the job for them, so they're off the hook." Parent 3 suggested that technology displaced opportunities for parent-child interactions: "It could be that we don't talk to them, because we place them in front of the TV."

Recent research from Japan investigating the association between mobile technology and children's adjustment in the first year of school found a strong link with behaviour problems. That research suggested that the role of media devices in young children's lives is expected to increase (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2018). Teacher 2 noted such proliferation when commenting on seeing parents shopping with young children: "You see a lot of kids being pushed around in the trolleys that have got a device or they're on a device."

The reality is that children are accessing digital media activities at an increasingly younger age in many countries, with evidence from Australia reported in the Statement on young children and digital technologies (Early Childhood Australia, 2018). While research

reviews have focused on the importance of the domestic environment for children's early language development (Schmerse et al., 2018), more research is required on parental mediation of digital use both by their children and by themselves in terms of effects on young children's development (Edwards et al., 2018; Zaman & Mifsud, 2017).

Parents and teachers referred to adults using technology as a 'babysitter'. For example, Teacher 3 stated:

"Technology is being used as a babysitter with little consideration for the quality of language they are viewing ... my grandson aged 3 is allowed to go on YouTube Kids independently where he can easily spend upwards of an hour watching silly clips of other kids doing ridiculous things at home. During this viewing time, he resists any social contact or interactions with people."

Teacher 1 also used the "babysitter" analogy when discussing their feelings about technology use at home and its effect of minimising adult-child interactions:

"Also, I think a lot of parents are so busy, they put their child in front of the TV or a computer or iPad and that becomes the babysitter instead of talking to their children. I feel that they don't talk to their kids enough and they don't have that communication and ask them things enough these days."

Teacher 1 further stated that the increased use of technologies was, in their opinion, responsible for a reduction in parent-child communication at home:

"I don't think parents are communicating anywhere near as much as they used to ... I think that children are being put in front of the TV much more, or in front of iPads and screens much more than they used to."

Beyens and Eggermont (2014) found that, contrary to popular belief, the use of television as a babysitter was not related to parental education. However, in line with social

learning theory (Bandura, 1997), they found that parents' viewing behaviours were reliable predictors of children's television viewing.

It is clear that meaning can now be expressed through a variety of modes of symbolic representation presented in digital form. Vygotsky (1978) regarded literacy learning as a social act mediated through interaction with cultural artefacts. Learning to read, write and design texts in today's context is much more than decoding words on a paper-based medium (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Neumann & Neumann, 2017; Stephen & Edwards, 2017). Therefore, parents' perspectives are crucial components of their decisions around digital technology use in the home and determine its place in supporting or hindering children's oral language development.

Kirwil (2009) found that mothers in heterosexual partnerships played a more active role in different forms of mediation and setting technical and social restrictions on internet use than fathers. This is relevant, as all of the parent respondents in the present study were mothers. There is the possibility that they did not want to admit the extent to which they utilise technology, in case this is interpreted as being in place of spending time talking to their children and judged by the moral evaluative standards of others (Bandura, 2014). Judgements were present in interviewees' comments, for example: "There's not as much social interaction in the family, if kids have their own computer in their room, they go off and then they're isolated so they're not learning the social interactions and those important language skills" (Teacher 3). Parent 1 expressed what they believed to be a commonly held view: "I do think that you know, there is a culture of sticking your kid in front of the iPad and then using it as a learning tool."

Research conducted in seven European countries with 70 families with children under eight years of age found that parents treated digital media in a way that was in keeping with their particular parenting style (Chaudron et al., 2015). Konok et al. (2019)

found that children spent more time on electronic devices if parents were more permissive, less authoritarian and attributed less harm towards children using such devices. Recent research by Benedetto and Ingrassia (2020) noted a change in parenting behaviours away from traditional parenting styles to “parental mediation” as parents try to regulate children’s engagement with digital media. The way in which parents facilitate children’s interactions with digital media within this ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) could be as supporting the child until they become independent, or sometimes the child’s knowledge and competence can quickly surpass that of their parents. This “reverse socialisation” (Grossbart et al., 2002) can then create new challenges for parents.

It is worth noting the significant range in the age and technological familiarity of parent participants. More knowledge of technology would appear to build self-efficacy to use and control technology access at home, in a way that aids rather than hinders children’s oral language development. Parent 1, for example, admitting to having limited technological expertise and so focused on content viewed rather than how they use devices, stating, “I try to choose educational things; they’re still watching rubbish as well”. Another point worth noting is that research differentiates between different types of screens. For example, passive television viewing versus an interactive educational game, and whether an adult is engaging with the child(ren) during screen time (Edwards et al., 2018; Ihmeideh & Alkhawaldeh, 2017; Livingstone et al., 2015; Marsh et al., 2017; Pavlenko & Pavlenko, 2020; Van Laar et al., 2017). Parent 4, an Information Technology teacher (i.e., proficient in education technologies), reflected on using technology as an opportunity for conversation:

“Because I work with technology, we have a lot of technology in our house. So, when [child’s name] plays an iPad, it is a balance between playing independently but also playing with me. So, we’ll play games together, so we’ll talk about

strategies we use, we talk about what's happening on the iPad, we talk about what we're actually pressing, so in terms of screens, I don't think they're detrimental to oral language development but it's what the parent does with it that makes the difference, absolutely."

Gee (2015) noted that people relate information in such a way that suits their perspective on the information and interaction. In the above comment, Parent 4 established their position ("because I work with technology, we have a lot of technology in our house") and went on to support their stance by describing their personal experience of sharing technology with their son. Their choice of words indicated a belief that they have attained a balance and that, in this manner, technology use is not necessarily detrimental to oral language development ("It's what the parent does with it that makes the difference"). Parent 4 also suggested that technology could be a useful aid for parent-teacher communication. When asked what could be done to improve children's developing oral language skills, they stated, "I think there needs to be videos, whatever is presented in the school needs to be videoed and put into a location where parents can access it". Parent 4 was alert to the possibilities of using technologies that could support parents in their interactions with children.

### ***5.1.2 Summary of Key Findings for Research Question 1***

The parents and teachers in this study held somewhat similar perspectives on oral language development, including that oral language development is important for children's literacy learning and social wellbeing. Parents' views on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning demonstrated an awareness of the need for children to have sound oral language skills to enable them to read and write. Most parents agreed that reading and writing has long-term effects on academic success, and all parents held the expectation that teachers should be well informed and capable of supporting

children's oral language development. All four teachers commented on the expressive and receptive elements of oral language development as foundational to literacy learning. They talked about the necessity for children to be able to understand and follow instructions. This is in line with research that shows teachers value social skill development over academic skills and consider children being able to communicate effectively and follow simple routines as critical for the first year of school (Takriti, 2019). All teachers felt that parents needed to spend more time reading to their children to improve oral language capability.

Regarding the connection between children's oral language development and their wellbeing in the first year of school, all parents believed there was a link between low oral language skills and developing social and emotional issues. Parents' most cited reason was children's frustrations if their needs are not met. Most parents also believed that difficulty with oral language could cause children to misbehave or withdraw from others. When asked what the most important skill for children in the first year of school is, most parents stated social and/or emotional skills.

Regarding teachers' perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for wellbeing, all four teachers interviewed believed there was a link between low oral language skills and behaviour issues. The teachers also felt that parents needed to spend more time communicating with their children to improve children's ability to interact appropriately in the first year of school. When asked about children transitioning into the first year of school, Teacher 4 said, "They need to be able to develop an ability to play with other children and solve problems in the social situation, and I think the ability to follow instructions, really that's a big one at school because that's following routines and transition."

The findings reported in this study, echo other research that indicates an increasing concern among early years teachers that there is an over- emphasis on academic skill acquisition by parents and school systems without a sustained focus on parent-child communication in the home (Barblett et al., 2016). Likewise, there is much ambiguity surrounding the definition of play-based learning in the classroom, that impacts pedagogical approaches (Edwards, 2021).

Despite acknowledging the importance of play-based learning for developing children's oral language for literacy and wellbeing, the raised issues of perceived lack of training, minimal professional development, lack of support and curriculum restrictions both reflected and affected the four teachers' sense of efficacy to deliver play-based learning in the first year of school.

## **5.2 Research Question 2: Parent and Teacher Self-Efficacy to Support Children's Oral Language Development**

Research question 2 inquired about parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to influence young children's oral language development.

### ***5.2.1 Key Findings for Research Question 2***

The two key findings in relation to research question 2 were:

- Parents and teachers consider parents to have the most influence on children's oral language development.
- Parent and teacher self-efficacy is mitigated by a sense of constraints to implementing effective oral language strategies.

Both findings are discussed below.

### 5.2.1.1 Parents and Teachers Consider Parents to have the Most Influence on Children's Oral Language Development

All eight parents and all four teachers expressed the view that parents have the most influence on children's oral language development. This was preceded by the sense that both parents and teachers need to have some understanding of children's oral language development to support children and that it is important for teachers to have a sound understanding of oral language development. The teachers' reasons for this sound knowledge centred on understanding how oral language develops to achieve the most progress in children's literacy learning. The parents' reasons for sound teacher knowledge about oral language development concerned teachers knowing how oral language develops for early identification of language difficulties in children. The least agreement between parents and teachers was on the connection between children's oral language development and behaviour. Also, parents did not unanimously agree that it was essential for parents to have knowledge of oral language development to support their children (see Table 5.9).

**Table 5.9**

*Key Questionnaire Responses Informing the Development of Interview Questions for Research Question 2*

| Parents                                                                                                                                                                                         | Teachers                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3) Do you think that it is essential for teachers to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?                                                 |                                                                                                               |
| 16 of 16 parents agreed.                                                                                                                                                                        | 4 of 4 teachers agreed.                                                                                       |
| <b>Agreement response:</b> "Yes, they are the ones who will be teaching children to read and write and the ones identifying learning problems in children. If they don't have an understanding, | <b>Agreement response:</b> "By having a good understanding of children's oral language development helps them |

|                                                                                                             |                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| they will not be able to implement the best methods that suit that particular child at that level” (PQR 7). | develop in all other aspects of their learning” (TQR 3). |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|

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4) Do you think that it is essential for parents to have a good understanding of how children’s oral language develops? Why do you think that?

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14 of 16 parents agreed.

4 of 4 teachers agreed.

**Agreement response:** “Yes, they need to understand how to promote this at home, i.e., talking to them, using a wide vocabulary, reading to them, limited TV and screen time. They should also know when to be concerned and seek help if certain milestones aren’t achieved” (PQR 12).

**Agreement response:** “If parents can give their child the best support in the early years through oral language, it will benefit the child greatly when they start school” (TQR 1).

**Partial agreement response:** “Parents do not need a detailed understanding of oral development but need to know what they can do to develop their child’s oral language so they can make more informed decisions for their home environment” (PQR 3).

**Disagreement response:** “All children develop at different rates” (PQR 7).

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5) To what extent do you feel confident in your ability to help your child/children develop their oral language skills successfully? Why do you think that?

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4 were fairly confident.

2 were fairly confident.

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|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Response:</b> “Moderately confident (but)more education for parents on this space can only be a good thing” (PQR 5).</p> <p>8 were confident.</p> <p><b>Response:</b> “I am confident with helping my child mainly because I had good oral language skills when I was younger” (PQR 3).</p> <p>4 were highly confident.</p> <p><b>Response:</b> “Highly confident. He is the youngest so I have done this before with success” (PQR 4).</p> | <p><b>Response:</b> “I feel fairly confident because of teacher training and through taking my son to speech pathology” (TQR 2).</p> <p>2 were confident.</p> <p><b>Response:</b> “I’m confident as I have a pretty good idea of the oral language development and strategies/activities that can help these skills” (TQR 1).</p> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

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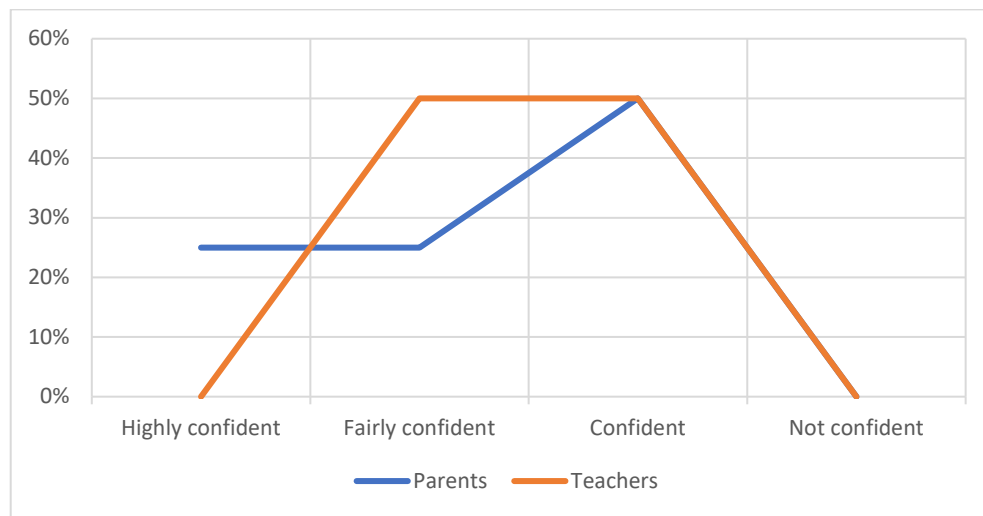
*Note.* PQR = Parent Questionnaire Respondent, TQR = Teacher Questionnaire Respondent.

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It is clear from the responses in the table above that although two parents didn’t fully agree that parents needed to have a good understanding of how children’s oral language develops, there was an overwhelming sense that both sets of participants understood the need for teachers and parents to be able to support childrens’ oral language development. The responses related to how capable they felt to do this, highlighted issues of efficacy that will be discussed later.

**Figure 5.2**

*Parent and Teacher Confidence to Support Children's Oral Language Development*



In response to their perceived capacity to support children's oral language development, parents' responses ranged from fairly confident (25%) to highly confident (25%). None of the parents said they did not feel confident. While all four teachers expressed confidence, none stated that they were very confident (see Figure 5.2). Interestingly, according to the 2018 OECD TALIS, "The proportion of Australian teachers reporting high self-efficacy in controlling disruptive behaviour in the classroom had declined by more than four percentage points since TALIS 2013" (Thomson & Hillman, 2019, p. 17).

Parent 2 commented, "We all need good oral language skills, communication's key to everything in life isn't it really? I mean with my job, with your job, it's very important. If you don't have that communication, it all breaks down".

Parent 2's perspective on the importance of oral language is linked to their belief that communication is "key to everything in life". With this value attached to language, their own role in supporting their child's oral language development is a confident one. However, Parent 1 commented on how school processes were, over time, affecting their self-efficacy to support their child:

“I don’t understand why, when my first child was so successful at getting through the year and coming out a very successful reader, very successful with numbers, very successful, to an extent, socially. Why, two years later, three years later, it’s changed. This is part of how they taught it, then it’s no longer considered suitable.”

Parent 1 appeared to have experienced a certain level of confidence in supporting their older child in the first year of school. However, they described feeling less confident with their current child in Prep due to observed changes in teaching. She did not elaborate on who considers the previous teaching approach as no longer suitable.

There is a large body of evidence linking sound oral language skill development with children’s successful transition to school (Christensen et al., 2020; Leech et al., 2018; OECD, 2017; Quirk et al., 2017; Ring et al., 2016; Snow, 2014). Parents, within children’s developmental microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) from a socio-ecological perspective, are affected by their perception of their abilities to supporting their children’s oral language development and knowing when and how to support this development. To ascertain participants’ perspectives on where responsibility for children’s oral language development is apportioned, parents and teachers were asked why they think children are starting school with low oral language skills (see Tables 5.10 and 5.11).

**Table 5.10**

*Parent Views of Main Reasons for Children’s Low Oral Language Skills*

---

Interview question 2: My studies so far have shown that lots of children are starting school with very low oral language skills, what do you think might be causing this?

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“GP intervention, like not picking up that there’s something that may be hindering children in the first place” (Parent 1).

“I believe it’s simply the fact that so many parents have to both (go to) work” (Parent 2).

“Well, it could be prolonged use of technology. So not having that conversation one on one with people because they’re too busy on their phones” (Parent 3).

“I think parents have different priorities. Unless you deliberately make the effort to talk to your child about what’s happening around you in real life, then it’s very easy to have a disconnection between you and your child” (Parent 4).

“I think it’s probably a combination of different things... depending on your experience to date before you come to school” (Parent 5).

“Technology is definitely to blame for that because parents are getting distracted with mobile phone calls and Facebook, social media and so forth” (Parent 6).

“Not enough at home... doing stuff with your children, sitting down reading, writing, practising their names, and letters before they go to school, I reckon” (Parent 7).

“I think maybe technology has a little bit to do with it. iPads, phones, Netflix, television. Parents aren’t having to talk to their children as much” (Parent 8).

---

The table above indicates that six parents pointed directly to the actions of parents at home, one parent saw the doctor/general practitioner (GP) as at fault for not informing parents and one parent felt it could be a combination of many factors before school starts.

**Table 5.11**

*Teacher Views of Main Reasons for Children's Low Oral Language Skills*

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Interview question 2: My studies so far have shown that lots of children are starting school with very low oral language skills, what do you think might be causing this?

---

“The age that they come into school, sometimes parents think that when they’re one or two that they don’t need to read to their children” (Teacher 1).

‘I think there are a lot of parents who are working long hours so they’re not actually, necessarily the primary carers of their child’ (Teacher 2).

“Parents first and foremost (are the reason) because if they’re not speaking to their kids as much, they’re not communicating effectively with them” (Teacher 3).

“Parents are not as educated in raising children, they don’t have the time to spend with the children ... most children, go to childcare centres these days, so children raised by, I guess young people in child care centres who are not adequately trained” (Teacher 4).

---

All four teachers indicated parents as responsible for children’s oral language development, with two teachers acknowledging the effect of children spending time in day-care centres. Therefore, the data suggest both parents and teachers think parents are the most influential in children’s oral language development.

Frequently identified reasons for the problem of low oral language skills in the first year of school, by both parents and teachers, were clearly directed towards parents. However, Parent 1 felt responsibility lay with the doctor who, she felt, did not make her aware of her child’s needs early enough:

“That intervention didn’t happen early enough for us, because I think then, all the stuff that I was doing with her: reading to her, hearing the sounds of, you know, what the letters make, like L and T —she couldn’t hear that.”

There was considerable consensus around the effect of the home environment and what parents did or did not do with their children. Teacher 3 commented, “Sometimes parents are only speaking at their children, they don’t discuss anything, it’s just “get your pyjamas on, do this, do that”, there’s no higher-level discussion or encouraging thinking skills at all with kids.” This was a theme also noted by Parent 8: “I do think parents have to play a big role in it because if they’re not interested you know, the kids will have no interest.” This parent also stated their view that parents may not even be aware of the need to support their children’s oral language development: “I guess it depends on what’s important to the parents as well, some parents might not consider, they probably don’t even think about oral language, they just think that it’s a natural adaption.”

Teacher 1 felt parents viewed children as not needing to be taught until they started school. She saw parents’ role as that of the first teacher, with the formal school teacher themselves being a secondary influence:

“They [parents] are the first person that should be teaching their child and we [teachers] are the second person. So, it’s got to be up to the parents to make sure that they have their child ready for school, not for the teacher to make sure that the child is ready by the end of the first year of school.”

However, Teacher 3 felt that teachers were key to developing children’s oral language skills in school and life: “I really think teachers need a lot more help, they really need to target oral language in the littlies because the impact it has on their schooling and their life.” Interestingly, Parent 2 also raised the detrimental effects of insufficiently supported teachers:

“There are lots of children that are on the [autism] spectrum and they need a little bit of extra assistance which you guys have to deal with as well, and you know, you have to have that dynamic in the classroom, it’s really tough.”

#### **5.2.1.2 Parent and Teacher Self-Efficacy is Mitigated by a Sense of Constraints to Implementing Effective Oral Language Strategies**

All parents and all teachers referred to several constraints that they felt hampered each other’s ability to effectively support children’s oral language development. Parents and teachers felt that professional support to aid children and families with oral language development was not widely available. Parent 1 explained how they had taken their concerns about their child’s language development to a GP: “I did constantly hound about it, but it was just, “no, no, you’re just the anxious mother””. For Parent 3, the cost of specialist help following a lengthy wait for service was a significant issue:

“I think it comes down to affordability as well, if there are things like speech therapy that’s needed you know, if you’ve got to go through the state system, like through the public system, it’s like you could be waiting for up to a year for your child to be seen, so it’s not great.”

This touches on wider system costs and requirements making it difficult for parents to support their children’s oral language development in a timely manner, as well as the frustration this causes for parents. Teachers generally felt there was insufficient professional support for them in the form of targeted training about oral language development before becoming a teacher and in-service professional development to update and embed oral language development in the first year of school. Teacher 3 explained:

“In your basic teacher training you don’t do much work on language development at all. The only work I did on language development was in my further study, there wasn’t anything much done at all in basic teacher training skills.”

Teacher 4 commented, “I think teachers need to be adequately equipped with the skills to support children with poor oral language skills”. Teacher 2 referred to the negative consequences of stress related to not being adequately equipped: “We’ve seen the pressure and the stress that some new teachers have been in and I’ve seen somebody who’s actually left as a result of it all being just too much.”

Teachers also expressed a hope that parents would access specialist services for their children. Alternatively, Teacher 3 stated, “Every school cluster should have a speech therapist/pathologist and an OT [occupational therapist], not just available to consult with busy teachers but also to come in and do hands-on activities with the children.” Teacher 4 added, “It all comes down to classroom support, and because of the range, I think that early intervention needs to happen.” Teacher 3 talked about how comorbid conditions in children added to classroom pressure to support children’s oral language development: “Constantly monitoring certain children’s understanding of tasks throughout the day and having to remember to check those children regularly especially if they have other problems as well, e.g., ASD [autism spectrum disorder], ADHD [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], behavioural complications.”

The 2018 OECD TALIS survey highlighted a significant increase (around 13 percentage points) of Australian teachers working in schools with more than 10% of students with special needs (Thomson & Hillman, 2019). In an attempt to mediate the lack of professional expertise, some parents and teachers spoke of placing more emphasis on explicit literacy instruction, with this somewhat misaligned with the school perspective on play-based learning. For example, Parent 2 said, “I should go and have that chat with that teacher and see how she’s going because she can’t even read these sight words to me and maybe she’s struggling and what can I do to help”. Teacher 1 thought it was important before children start school to “Make sure that they even know the letters of their own

name and can write their own name”. Alternatively, Parent 5 explicitly stated they did not feel a need for a focus on explicit literacy, instead suggesting greater emphasis be placed on the first year of school as a year of social participation:

“We aren’t obsessed with sight words and home readers or anything, we just wanted to see Prep as an opportunity for him to learn how to learn, and he has some issues around anxiety because of his speech, so trying to make sure he was confident enough to have positive interactions with his peers, and he has blossomed, he has friendships.” (Parent 5)

Teacher 3 considered the effects of parents on children’s oral language development as pivotal: “I think parents could have huge impacts, but it needs to start at birth and I think, to really improve the situation, there really needs to be a lot more parent education from the time the babies are born”. Parent 1 agreed to some extent, acknowledging their own perceived lack of understanding about children’s oral language development:

“I don’t feel like I have a comprehensive enough understanding of how a child’s language skills develop. Having this knowledge would be vastly beneficial for all parties—the teacher in planning for a low oral language student, the student would receive scaffolded instruction catered to improve their oral language and overall results and the parent seeing their child potentially excel in a classroom and social capacity.”

Parent 1 also presented her view of teacher’s knowledge as quite dynamic, in that it can improve students *results*, while parents increased knowledge would mean they can *see* their child(ren) excel at school.

Other participants’ perspectives on oral language development for children also included an awareness of their own and others’ lack of knowledge and access to specialist

support to assist children's developing oral language skills. Teacher 3 provided an example of this, explaining how they had visited a preschool and noticed the educators using mainly directive language with the children. They felt the need to demonstrate good practice for the educators:

"I said, "Oh, look at this, this is amazing, the vine is twisting through the trellis and, what's that up there? Is that a fruit?", and then all these other kids started coming over because the kids crave the language and the interaction and then we started talking about "that's a passionfruit, this must be a passionfruit vine", "what's a passionfruit?"."

This teacher has experience of modelling practice for other teachers, as part of their role at their previous school. They indicated their belief about a need not being met for children in terms of interactions, rather than directives, that support oral language ("the kids crave the language and interaction"). Their insistence on speaking to children in interactional terms in the presence of educators inferred their belief that educators may not appreciate the significance of interacting with children as a basis for supporting oral language development. Teacher 4 spoke of the need for teachers to have more training in early childhood education, specifically, oral language development, in the context of class sizes and meeting the learning requirements of children with additional needs:

"I guess bigger classes, high needs, I think that it takes a bit of experience to manage all that, so I think too, Prep teachers need to be either trained or aware of, or have some professional development in early learning as a specialty, and to see basically where they've come from."

Another area perceived by teachers to affect their ability to adequately develop children's oral language in the first year of school was children's preschool experiences. Teacher 2 questioned the quality of the preschool environment, particularly long day-care

centres, which they felt was contributing to the problem of low oral language development in the first year of school:

“I sometimes question the quality of preschool input that children are receiving prior to school, especially from what we’ve seen, this is just in my experience.

Some of the kids that are coming from long day-care centres, they seem to be far less skilled orally and across the board with a lot of other things.”

Teacher 3 concurred with this view, in that she felt that early childhood services considered oral language development a task for the school: “There’s too much of the “oh, we’ll just leave that until we get to school, that’ll be the teacher’s responsibility.””

A recent review of pre-service course content for Australian early childhood teachers found substantial variation in teaching knowledge and practice, and warned that “the implications for graduating ECTs [early childhood teachers] to be able to provide high quality, targeted oral language and emergent literacy activities are of concern” (Weadman et al., 2021, p. 43). This is important, as studies in both Australia and internationally have demonstrated that high-quality preschool programs can positively influence children’s oral language development (Meloy et al., 2019; Piasta et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2016).

Another constraint expressed by the teachers was an overcrowded curriculum in terms of expected content knowledge required to be covered in the first year. They felt that oral language development was impeded by the need to teach a range of subjects:

“It’s such a heavy, full curriculum and fitting everything in is a bit of a problem.”

(Teacher 4)

“I do feel that we are hindered a lot on the way the school may want to do things and not allowing you to, I guess go out of those boundaries.” (Teacher 1).

“There is no flexibility to be able to really go into the interests of some of the children, so it sometimes feels far too prescriptive. ... My personal opinion, I think

we should be doing what we're doing in Prep now, a whole year older, because if you think that developmentally children at the age of six, are only really expected to form some of their sounds, but we're teaching them to read and write them a whole year, sometimes a year and a half, before they're even supposed to be able to form the sounds." (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 had previously stated that they did not have enough training in children's oral language development. It was not clear where they had acquired their expectations of children's development, but they clearly felt there was a mismatch with the Australian Curriculum expectations. While three teachers stated they had some training in oral language, all felt they needed more. Teacher 3 felt there was also a lack of respect for teacher judgement and professionalism:

"Far too much pressure on teachers to be conforming to particular curriculum activities and the learning's going down. It's dropping—it's not getting better, whereas when they back off, and let teachers just be, and let you run your class according to the needs of the children, the children have so much more learning from it, and so much more fun and enjoyment. They go so much further. They do so much better."

Another constraint perceived by teachers was school access to professional expertise in oral language for children. For example:

"We're actually seeing a lot of children with really, really poor speech, so it's not just not having a wide vocabulary, their actual pronunciation and their formation of speech, is extremely poor and sometimes the parents don't recognise. If there was a preschool screening, so that children who had difficulties with some of the speech issues, could be receiving some early input. In Prep now, we're teaching children to

read and write sounds, and if you're not being able to hear and to form those sounds yourself, how on earth can you read and write them.” (Teacher 2)

Teacher 2 added that parents needed to talk with their children to have a sense of the estimated level of language development necessary for starting school:

“Talk to them, explain what’s going on and why it’s happening, absolutely, the more stories you can have during your day the better, the more experience they’ve got. I think it’s about resilience, it’s about being ready, it’s about parents who have high expectations, that’s what it comes down to, that they’re not babied beyond their time.”

Teacher 3 felt parental misinformation about children’s oral language development, from sources that are not formally-based or qualified, added to constraints: “some parents rely on friends” opinions on social media rather than seeking professional advice, e.g., “my friends on Facebook say not to worry”. Parents acknowledged an interest in furthering their knowledge about children’s oral language development. Parent 5 considered that parents might want to support oral language but not necessarily know how best to approach the task: “A lot of parents want to engage with their children and use that book or use you know, other opportunities to engage with their children, but they don’t know the types of questions or how do I ask questions”. Likewise, Parent 1 indicated that further knowledge would have helped them identify their child’s oral language learning needs earlier: “We didn’t realise that our number two had problems with hearing the sounds. It started back at the GP when they didn’t pick any of that up, she wasn’t communicating at three.”

All eight parents and the four teachers consistently referred to constraints to implementing effective oral language strategies with children. Teacher 2 stated that they could do so much more if they had time to just talk to children: “Talking to them [children] when they express an interest. It’s about being able to explore that a little bit and having

the time, and that's what there isn't at the moment within the curriculum". Teacher 2 added:

"You're also under pressure because you have parents that have expectations and it comes back to, what more can you do? But, within a class of 26 children, what is reasonable and feasible, along with the constraints and expectations that come from leadership, that come from Brisbane Catholic Education, that come from all your external Australian Curriculum expectations, how does that actually then equate?"

Teacher 3 was very clear about the nature of these demands and how they constrained possibilities for supporting oral language development. They explained the tension between supporting children with oral language development in the classroom versus the need to meet curriculum requirements:

"With the increase demand and pressure, the wide diversity of children, like, there was that class I had where I had nine children who were getting speech therapy to understand. You know, that's a third of the class needed really targeted speech language skills. I don't have time in a day to be teaching a third of the class how to articulate basic sounds. I'm supposed to be teaching them what those sounds can look like when they're represented in symbolic form but if the kids can't actually pronounce those sounds, what's the point in doing that? If they can't actually say the sound, how's it going to mean anything to them when it's written?"

Teacher 3 felt they had the knowledge necessary to help children but not necessarily the practical means to sufficiently implement this knowledge:

"I know how to help most of the children in my care, but it requires much one-on-one support, which I cannot give with 30 children in the class, and with some of the extreme behaviours that I need to keep under control as well. And that isn't even mentioning the number of children with severe OT [occupational therapy] issues

that are also coming more frequently—children who have never played with playdough or held a pencil or a pair of scissors.”

This highlights the notion of the implicit (being able to use) and explicit (being able to teach) knowledge of teachers and how this can affect their self-efficacy to support children’s oral language development. Washburn et al., (2011) discuss this in relation to pre-service teachers’ preparedness to teach struggling readers, concluding that both perceptions and knowledge need to be targeted in pre-service teaching programs to support teachers with the implementation of the curriculum and assessments.

One potential means of dealing with constraints, parents and teachers identified was that the level of education provided in early childhood is important and considered whether the school starting age should be later. Teacher 3 considered that childcare was more focused on keeping parents as clients happy than on fostering interactions between children and staff for enhanced oral language: “They don’t have to interact with anyone if they don’t want to because day cares are all about keeping the clients happy not teaching children”. Teacher 2 suggested that children might be better staying in early childhood settings a little longer: “Are we just taking children in, and if they are that little bit younger isn’t it better to keep them at kindy where they can learn for that extra year instead of taking them in?” Parent 1 expressed a similar view in the idea that school start could be delayed: “Maybe you shouldn’t put your child in at four and a half if there’s an opportunity that they cannot start until they’re five and a half then maybe they can do that”. These comments indicate that respondents felt children’s age is an important factor and their oral language would be better developed if they started school later, regardless of previously indicated reservations about the quality of the preschool environment.

### ***5.2.2 Summary of Key Findings for Research Question 2***

Parent participants indicated they felt confident in their ability to support their children's oral language development. However, many parents also expressed a need for more information, time and specialist intervention to improve their capacity to support their children's oral language development. All parents interviewed felt that parents had the greatest influence on children developing oral language.

Research into parents feeling confident about teaching basic skills at home, has shown that it does affect the children's achievement in this area (Blevins-Knabe et al., 2000; Cannon & Ginsburg, 2008). Research has also identified the link between parent's feelings of self-efficacy and children's well-being (Ahun et al., 2017; Chau & Giallo, 2015; Giallo et al., 2014; Heerman et al., 2017; Jusiene et al., 2015; Mouton & Roskam, 2018). However, it would appear that, while parents may feel confident in supporting oral language development, access to specialised information and services would still be considered a benefit to children and families.

The four teachers interviewed did not appear to be highly confident in their ability to support children's oral language development. All expressed a need for more professional development, time and specialist support and a decrease in classroom and curriculum demands to improve their efficacy to support children's oral language development. All four teachers felt that parents had the greatest influence on children developing oral language, and some indicated that a later start to school could provide more time for children's early learning. Concerns voiced by teachers also related to other aspects of their work, such as the ability to establish and enforce classroom rules, disciplinary efficacy and beliefs about their ability to manage challenging behaviours, and how this constrained their capacity to support children's oral language development.

Parent and teacher self-efficacy is important for children's oral language development and many studies have found that parents and teachers with high levels of self-efficacy, set higher goals for themselves and have a higher level of commitment to these goals (Dicke et al., 2014; Jones & Prinz, 2005; Lin et al., 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014; Wang, 2015; Wittkowski et al., 2017). Confident individuals believe in an internal locus of control; in that they are capable of utilising the affective and cognitive processes necessary to carry out a desired action. A low sense of self-efficacy can hamper motivation and lead to stress and feelings of helplessness. Therefore, as social experiences precede both self-efficacy and language development, parent programs and teacher training to improve how parents and teachers support children developing oral language in the first year of school, need to focus on all four sources of information: "performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological cues" (Bandura et al., 1977, p.191). Particularly if parents and teachers are unaware of children's developmental language difficulties (Hendricks et al., 2019).

### **5.3 Conclusion**

This study's findings detail the perspectives on children's oral language development held by parents and teachers as adult stakeholders in the lives of children in the first year of school. The four teachers and eight parents interviewed cited similar perceived barriers affecting their capacity and efficacy to support children's oral language development in the first year of school: insufficient knowledge and support, work and family pressures at home, and curriculum and system pressures at school. While both sets of participants agreed that teachers and parents have an important role to play, all agreed that parents have the most influence on children's oral language development, particularly in terms of children's preparedness for transition into and through the first year of school.

It was interesting to note that many parent comments referenced what other parents did, and the four teachers appeared to attribute considerable responsibility to parents for problems with children's oral language development in the first year of school. Bandura (1982) might consider this as an attempt to undermine the collective efficacy, as the issue is considered to be beyond their control: "As the need for efficacious group action grows, so does the sense of collective powerlessness" (p. 143).

It is important to examine parents' and teachers' perspectives, as they are the primary adults influencing children's lives at this critical time. To combat detrimental teaching and home learning practices on a wider scale, teachers and parents need to have the confidence to influence others as

"People who have a sense of collective efficacy will mobilise their efforts and resources to cope with external obstacles to the changes they seek. But those convinced of their inefficacy will cease trying even though changes are attainable through concerted effort" (Bandura, 1982, p.144).

Efficacious people have a strong belief in their ability to influence events in their lives. Participants' stated desire for improved knowledge, specialist support and training indicate their awareness of their shortfalls in effectively supporting children's oral language. Building parents' and teachers' self-efficacy to affect their actions and encourage perseverance, can positively affect children's oral language development, even without changing wider environmental constraints as: "Efficacious persons who cannot achieve positive outcomes by their actions will not necessarily cease behaving" (Bandura, 1982, p. 141). The next chapter discusses the research findings in detail.

## **Chapter 6: Discussion**

This chapter discusses the research findings on the significance of teacher and parent perspectives on children's oral language in the first year of school and parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to support children's oral language development. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the findings (Section 6.1), followed by an interpretation of each finding (Section 6.2). The chapter then discusses the importance of the findings (Section 6.3) and the new and interesting contributions made by this research (Section 6.4).

### **6.1 Overview of the Findings**

All four teachers and the majority of parents interviewed believed children's low oral language skills in their first year of school to be related to low reading and writing achievement in later years, behavioural issues and anxiety. All respondents agreed that parents and teachers need to have some understanding of children's oral language development. All teachers and the majority of parents agreed that play-based learning provides the best opportunities for children's oral language development. Parents' responses to their perceived ability to support their children's oral language development ranged from fairly confident (25%) to highly confident (22%). While all four teachers expressed confidence in their ability to support children's oral language development, none stated that they were very confident. Teachers and parents cited similar perceived barriers affecting their ability to support children's oral language development at this critical period. Both sets of participants agreed that teachers and parents have an important role to play, though all respondents expressed the view that parents have the most influence at this time. Four major themes emerged:

- the connection between oral language and literacy learning is acknowledged but not prioritised
- oral language development is considered important for children's social and emotional wellbeing
- lack of time to effectively support children's oral language development is seen as a major concern
- technology is considered unhelpful to children's oral language development in the first year of school.

## **6.2 Interpretation of the Findings**

The results of this study, coupled with available research on the critical role played by parents and teachers in the first year of school (Christensen et al., 2020; Cole, 2020; Hornby & Blackwell, 2018; Oke et al., 2020), have implications for supporting children's oral language development in the first year of school. As evident from the literature review (see Chapter 2), without early identification and support from key stakeholders, children's low oral language skills at school entry can lead to negative trajectories throughout their school years and adult life (Bercow, 2008; Burgoyne et al., 2019; Hart & Risely, 1995; Norbury et al., 2016; Pfof et al., 2014; Skeat et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2013). The first year of school is considered a critical period in children's lives, mainly due to the acceleration of children's mental and physical growth at this time and the demands of increased social engagement and emotional regulation associated with the start of formal schooling (Altun, 2018; Asmussen et al., 2018; Schmerse, 2020; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Although there were a few areas in which parents' and teachers' perspectives differed slightly, overall, there was significant alignment under the four aforementioned themes.

The most striking congruence was regarding who as adult stakeholders (i.e., parents or teachers) has the most influence and, therefore, can make the most difference concerning children's oral language development. Responses from parent and teacher participants clearly indicated the belief among both stakeholder groups that parents have the most influence. The literature review, reflecting the ecological aspect of the chosen theoretical framework (see Chapter 3), showed how the whole community may be affected by children's poor oral language development and subsequent low school achievement, leading to long-term mental and behavioural difficulties that impose indirect and direct costs on industry, governments and communities (Burns et al., 2020; Richter et al., 2017; Robinson et al., 2019; Skeat et al., 2011; Snow, 2019; Snow & Sanger, 2015; Winstanley et al., 2018).

Many governments have been increasing funding and support for early childhood and education in attempts to improve school achievement (OECD, 2020). In 2018, the Department for Education and Skills in the UK reported that 29% of children were not developmentally ready for school (Davies et al., 2020). In the same year, the AEDC reported that 21.7% of children in Australia were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge) in the first year of school. The literature review demonstrated that oral language development is important for wellbeing, social and emotional competence, language, cognitive skills and communication skills (Chow & Wehby, 2019; Costantino-Lane 2019; Mashburn et al, 2018). Traversing so many early childhood domains indicates that oral language development is foundational to a successful transition to school (Dicataldo et al., 2020).

Levels of vulnerability for the children of parents participating in this study were better than the national average but still quite concerning, with 17.57% of children entering

school not developmentally ready in communication skills and general knowledge, and 11.86% entering school not developmentally ready in language and cognitive skills. Considering that the parents and teachers of the school participating in this study were (at the time of writing) not aware of any children in this cohort having a diagnosis of any language difficulty, teacher and parent perspectives are paramount, as these affect the choices they make regarding their continued support for children's oral language development.

In Australia, the Mparntwe Education Declaration that underpins the Australian Curriculum has prioritised the significant period of the early years of school by stressing the necessity of a positive and successful start to school (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2019). It states that effective early intervention and support strategies need to be in place so that each child has the skills, knowledge and confidence to move through the school years. The findings from the present study add to the literature indicating that this continues to be an area of concern (Purtell et al., 2020; Stormshak et al., 2021).

Despite the critical importance of successfully transitioning to school, transition practices have changed little over time, with some relationship-building practices such as children visiting school classes actually decreasing (Little et al., 2016). Comments from both sets of respondents expressed their perceived need for early identification of oral language developmental issues and the feeling that they did not have enough knowledge or support to adequately address this need. For example, one parent explained that a lack of early intervention meant their daughter was disadvantaged (Parent 1), and one teacher stated that specialist support was necessary for early intervention in Prep (Teacher 4).

There is a definite need for the insight provided by this study's findings into parent and teacher perspectives on children's oral language development, as the problem of low

oral language development at school entry is so significant that there have been calls in the UK for early language delay to be categorised as a public health concern (Law & Levickis, 2018). This is partially driven by the much-publicised Bercow report in 2008 and the follow-up review in 2018 (Hancock, 2019) that found little evidence of change or improvement. Over 1.4 million children (10%) in the UK have language disorders, and many have not had access to the right support or not had their language issues identified early enough.

Tools to monitor children's oral language progress are available but not being used (e.g., the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme, West et al., 2021). At the time of writing, there was still no mandated assessment of children's oral language development in the first year of school in the UK. In Australia, while there is also no mandated, specific oral language assessment process when starting school in Queensland, the National Australian Curriculum states that the learning sequence for elements of both comprehending and composing texts has been "extended by four extra levels (Levels 1a to 1d) to describe in particular the early development of communication skills". Further to this the Victorian government has recently (2022) introduced a mandatory online English assessment interview for children starting school. Interestingly, the review of this tool by the University of Melbourne, recommended strengthening the speaking and listening tasks to better assess children's oral language capabilities (Victorian State Government, p.4). Difficulties in a range of oral language skills, such as weak vocabulary, poor grammatical skills and problems with comprehension, lead to reading impairments that can have long-term effects (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Sedgwick and Stothard (2018) stated that up to 50% of children are starting school with speech, language and communication needs.

Studies such as Kabasakal et al. (2020) also indicate that language delay often referred to as developmental language disorder (DLD), is not only common in young

children but that there is also an increased risk of co-occurring social and behavioural problems. They argued that primary schools are not adequately prepared to deal with these issues. Comments from both sets of respondents in the current study attested to this view. For example, Parent 2 referred to large numbers of children requiring extra support, and Teacher 3 called for more support to target oral language in the early years because “All these take extra time and planning on top of regular class curriculum activities”.

Responses indicated that parents and teachers are aware of the widespread difficulties related to low oral language development in the first year of school, so why is the research not translating into practice? Why is the oral language development of children not being prioritised at this important time? The literature review noted the huge effect that parents (Heidlage et al., 2020; Knauer et al., 2019; Logan et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2019a; Su et al., 2020) and teachers (Alatalo & Westlund, 2019; Hoglund et al., 2015; Paatsch et al., 2019; Rhoad-Drogalis et al., 2018) can have on children’s oral language development. The present study thus focused on parent and teacher perspectives, given their crucial influence and effect on children’s development as children start school (Azad et al., 2020).

Could the views of those closest to children at this time be a mitigating cause? Their perspectives could be extremely important in relation to the effectiveness of ongoing and new attempts to rectify the situation. Teacher and parent values and expectations of child development are informed by social networks, social media, cultural and personal experiences (Akhtar & Bilal, 2018). One teacher commented, “some parents rely on friends’ opinions on social media rather than seeking professional advice for example, my friends on Facebook say not to worry” (Teacher 3).

Decades of research has shown that a key element for children to develop optimal oral language skills is a knowledgeable other talking and responding to them frequently as

they engage with the world around them (Barrs, 2017; Levinson, 2016; Romeo et al., 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Accordingly, the present study used a sociocultural theoretical basis, utilising both Vygotsky (1978) and Bronfenbrenner (1986) (see Chapter 3).

Where a problem with language exists at the individual level for increasingly higher numbers of children, it would appear to be of critical educational importance, given its effects on numerous levels of society (reduced educational achievement, youth justice involvement, unemployment, unstable housing, etc.; Snow, 2019). Responses indicated that parents and teachers, as key stakeholders, felt they needed help to recognise oral language problems, and while they were all willing to support oral language development, perceived time constraints imposed by pressure from school systems, work or family commitments hindered their capability in this regard. For example, “Being a single mum with four kids, it’s very hard to spend enough time with each child” (Parent 7).

It follows then, that there needs to be support available to families and schools. Equally important, parents and teachers must see the remedying of what may appear to be a minor language problem as a priority issue and develop confidence in their own efficacy to address it. Studies have shown that higher levels of parental self-efficacy are correlated with a wider range of positive child developmental outcomes, while influencing parental wellbeing leads to better parent–child interactions (Trivette et al., 2010; Wittkowski et al., 2017). Therefore, the present study used Bandura’s (1997) theories about self-efficacy, as “Belief’s in one’s capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (p. 3). Parents’ and teachers’ beliefs are formed by how they perceive information from four main sources: vicarious experiences, mastery experiences, social persuasions and emotional states (Bandura, 1997). Considering issues of parent and teacher self-efficacy to support children developing oral language in the first year of school

provides additional insights into the effect of key stakeholders' perspectives on children's oral language development at this critical life stage.

Another important aspect of this study was that the children had all started their first year of school without any reported sign of disadvantage by parents or teachers. Numerous studies have focused on children from families with major risk factors to their development (Greenwood et al., 2017; Hagen, 2018), with the aim of highlighting and addressing issues of equity. Ethnic minority status, low SES, low parental education and elevated levels of family adversity, to name a few across the ecological model, can all be predictors of poorer language skills as children start school (Dockrell & Hurry, 2018; Lervåg et al., 2019; Wallace et al., 2015).

Because this study demonstrates an ongoing problem among children without discernible disadvantage, there is a case to be made that the perspectives of parents and teachers are worth investigating as a pivotal influence on children's oral language development. This is even more imperative for children who have additional mental and physical conditions to contend with during this critical period of change. One participant's response indicated that teachers already felt they were required to constantly monitor children's understanding of tasks, with this requirement increasing when more children have other needs that should be monitored as well (Teacher 3).

The research reported in this thesis differs from previous studies in that it combines elements of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD and Bandura's (1997) efficacy theories to acknowledge and prioritise the perspectives of key stakeholders in children's lives as pivotal to effective and sustainable change. While parents and teachers have alternative roles in relation to children, each of the four themes were prominent factors in the degree to which respondents felt able to support children's oral language development at this time. By

understanding key stakeholders' perspectives, a clear picture of perceived barriers emerged, and future research and policy can be directed accordingly to address the phenomenon of children's poor oral language skills in the first year of school. Each theme is described in detail in the following sections.

### ***6.2.1 Literacy***

There is consensus among scholars around the world that oral language development is essential for literacy learning, as children communicate their needs and wants to others and make sense of the world around them through ever more sophisticated means (Bornstein et al., 2016; Corballis, 2014; Department for Education, 2017; Metsala et al., 2021; Romeo et al., 2021; Snow, 2016, 2020; Snowling et al., 2015). Norton and Wolf (2012) state that, "The field of reading research has come a long way toward understanding the complex set of skills that allow fluent comprehension of text" (p447).

All four teachers in this study felt that parents' lack of knowledge about the importance of children's oral language development leads to their children not being sufficiently prepared for school. Teacher 2 urged parents not to "baby" their children but to read and talk to them every day.

Literacy, particularly learning to read, is a key component of the first year of school (Chang et al., 2020; Jin et al., 2020). Reading is a critical skill, particularly in a high-stakes' context (Croft et al., 2016), so it is not surprising that feelings are very strong about ensuring children develop this skill. The ability to read is certainly a foundational skill, and many longitudinal studies confirm the detrimental lifelong effects of poor reading ability (Cebolla-Boado et al., 2017; Snow & Matthews, 2016; Snow & Sanger, 2015). However, there remains disagreement around how best to teach young children to read. Some scholars advocate a contextual approach, with the primary focus on comprehension and meaning-making (Ewing, 2018; Hornsby & Wilson, 2014; Kim, 2008; Machin et al.,

2016). Although no one disputes that oral language development is a necessary element of learning to read, recent developments in the UK, the US and Australia have seen a focus on the primacy of explicit phonics teaching in the early years (Bowers, 2020; Buckingham, 2016, 2020; Moats, 2019; Snow, 2020). Media attention on the implementation of a Year 1 phonics check in all Australian states and territories appears to have added considerable confusion for parents and teachers about best practice when teaching young children to read (Gilchrist & Snowling, 2018).

Parents and teachers in the current study reflected this confusion. While both groups advocated talking with and reading to children at home as the main way to support learning to read in school, there was little evidence of clear understanding among both parents and teachers about how oral language strategies aid the acquisition of reading skills. One parent expressed great concerns from themselves and their friends with children in the same year that their children would “fall behind” when there was a change of teacher, saying they practised sight words to “bridge the gap”. This parent expressed confusion at what they felt was a changed approach to the way children are taught, with which they were unfamiliar. As it is clearly in the interests of all stakeholders for children to learn to read, consistency in approach to build confidence and efficacy seems paramount, given that a huge gap exists between public understanding about learning to read and research knowledge (Castles et al., 2018).

Research from other disciplines agrees that reading is a complex cognitive process, a form of language processing that relies on functional connectivity between language networks and other areas of a child’s developing brain architecture (Cao et al., 2016; Hagoort, 2014; Hutton et al., 2015; Romeo et al., 2018b). Areas of the developing brain that are concerned with language development appear to conform to a certain degree on critical periods of growth, such as starting school (Asaridou et al., 2017). Understanding

how children's brains process language has many implications for early intervention programs for parents, for example, encouraging parents to engage in more interactive conversation, rather than just increasing the amount of language they address to their children (Leech et al., 2018). There may be an argument for parents sharing knowledge with each other, because in the present study there was a range of knowledge and related confidence among some parents, alongside confusion and frustration from others. One parent demonstrated a good understanding of developing children's oral language with their comment about talking with, not at, your child, while another parent said they did not know how to support their child's oral language development.

All four teachers and all eight parents in this study acknowledged a connection between oral language skills and learning to read, with one parent (Parent 5) stating that you cannot expect children to be able to read if they do not have the oral language skills to problem solve, and one teacher (Teacher 1) clearly stating that children's inability to express themselves orally means that children will not be able to express themselves through reading and writing. However, despite agreement that oral language was important, there was no consensus among respondents about a primary focus on oral language as imperative for literacy learning.

Some responses from a parent and a teacher, in answer to how parents could help support children's oral language development, indicated that sight words and writing alphabet letters were given priority. Parent 2 equated a "struggling" child with one who cannot read sight words, and Teacher 1 stated that an important skill to have when starting school would be, "Make sure that they even know the letters of their own name and can write their own name". Yet, the Language and Reading Research Consortium (an organisation based in Ohio, US, that investigates language and reading development) found a strong influence of early oral language skills on reading comprehension (Language

and Reading Research Consortium & Chiu, 2018). Henry and Solari (2020) noted that the structural skills (semantics, grammar and vocabulary) and higher order thinking skills (inferential, narrative, conceptual) of oral language were necessary for text comprehension. This gives further impetus to the need for early identification of oral language difficulty.

To add further confusion, Campbell (2020) highlighted how early childhood teachers' beliefs about the best way to teach reading were counter to government recommendations and what they viewed as pressure from parents to change their daily practice, indicating that teachers will do what they believe is best. However, some studies have indicated a concerning lack of metalinguistic knowledge underlying reading instruction among Australian teachers and internationally (Moats, 2014; Reilly et al., 2010; Stark et al., 2016; Tetley & Jones, 2014). The strength of teachers' opinions coupled with a less than secure grasp of evidence-based developmental expectations was evident in the current study. One teacher stated that they did not think children were expected to be able to form all of their sounds until the age of seven years or older, and added that she felt the futility of trying to teach children to read and write when they were not developmentally ready (Teacher 2).

All four teachers commented on a lack of training and professional development in developing children's oral language skills, and all indicated a desire for more training in oral language development. This is an important perspective, as professional learning opportunities build teacher confidence (Nolan & Molla, 2017), which is a crucial condition for enacting teacher professional capital. Teacher 3 commented on the lack of oral language development focus in their teacher training, prompting them to seek out further training themselves.

This response is not surprising and entirely in line with research from the US and Australia. Meeks et al. (2017) stated that Australian graduate teachers had limited

knowledge of oral language development and were not able to apply this knowledge to practice. In another recent study in California, teachers' beliefs about reading instruction were found to be tied to their feeling that there was not enough time to implement all the activities that promoted oral language to help with reading while also delivering the mandated Common Core Standards phonics first approach (Constantino, 2020). Similar findings were reported in England and Ireland (Ring et al., 2016). Likewise, most teacher participants in the present study also considered children's ability to communicate effectively and follow directions in the first year of school to be more important than knowing the letters of the alphabet. However, Davies et al. (2020) noted that parents often believe teachers are more concerned with children's academic skills, and this influences how parents prepare their children for school.

Concerningly, Piasta et al. (2020a) found that an at-scale, state-sponsored professional development program aimed at enhancing language and literacy skills for early childhood teachers did not achieve its desired effects on a school readiness scale for language and literacy. Professional development is generally viewed as an important mechanism for improving classroom practice and ensuring all children have access to high-quality early childhood programs (Burchinal et al., 2016; Hamre et al., 2017). However, it does raise questions regarding the highly variable nature of early childhood settings, not only in how they prepare children for school but also in the expectations conveyed to parents.

Teacher comments from this study, questioning the quality of day-care services, could be connected to the fact that the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority only stipulated at the beginning of 2020 that at least 50% of educators must be diploma-level qualified or higher. Sun et al. (2020) found that teacher's education and

experience play a crucial role in teacher talk during shared book reading, and this can affect children's early language proficiency.

In the present study, contrary to the general opinion expressed about the importance of play-based learning to develop oral language skills, one parent talked about moving their child from day care to kindergarten, criticising the day care for "just playing" while stating, in the same sentence, that language skills were important. They went on to describe that their children knowing how to write demonstrated to them as the parent that their child was learning and getting ready for school:

"The day care was just playing. I didn't feel that there was any focus on any of the language skills at all when she was there. So, it was really important to me that she went to a kindy where she was learning, "this is how I do my name, this is how I start a letter, this is what letters are". You know, getting some form around it before she came to big school". (Parent 1)

These comments indicate there is still some confusion about what parents should emphasise when preparing their children for school and what teachers should emphasise to ensure a successful transition into and through the first year of school. In answer to what they considered to be the most important skill for children to have a successful first year of school, Teacher 4 stated that the ability to function in the social environment of the school, play with others and to follow routines was paramount. This view of a reciprocal relationship between language skills and emerging social-emotional skills, echoes the Vygotskian view of development in that these skills are mediated through language and vice versa. This implies that a deficit in these skills could affect the child's ability to function effectively in the school environment and participate fully in school-based activities.

Strong evidence from the literature review about the effectiveness of play to develop oral language skills to aid literacy prompted the question of how parents and teachers felt about play-based learning (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Armstrong & Sutherland, 2020; Barblett et al., 2016; Edwards, 2011). In line with the theoretical framework (see Chapter 3), Vygotsky (1934/1962) theorised play as a leading activity, the goal of which is to act as a bridge between emotion and memory as a central psychological function. An understanding of how mastery of one leading activity provides the impetus for a new psychological function from which the next leading activity can emerge (Edwards, 2011), particularly among teachers, would indicate a good understanding of how best to utilise the environment to support children developing oral language through play. This also informed the probing questions of “What do you think can be done to improve children’s oral language development?” and “What kind of oral language activities do you do with your children [in class (for teachers) or at home (for parents)]?” The first question elicited unanimous support for a play-based curriculum from all participants. Teacher 4’s response was that the classroom itself and conversations with peers during play greatly promote oral language development by giving purpose to its use.

This was not surprising, as the study school advocates a play-based approach to learning. With all parent respondents aware of this, it may even have influenced their decision to send their child(ren) to this school. However, all teachers voiced reservations about system pressures making them feel that they could not truly implement a play-based approach. With narrowly defined curriculum frameworks and outcomes, play can often be perceived as a non-beneficial activity (Somolanji Tokić & Borovac, 2020). Although the school advocates a play-based curriculum, the teachers talked about pressure to conform to a three-week cycle of literacy teaching and meeting deadlines for assessments. They described feeling hindered to implement a truly play-based approach and utilise oral

language development to individualise instruction. Teacher 3 mentioned focusing on a particular book and completing set activities they considered some of the children were not ready for and others were too advanced for. This teacher felt individual children's needs could be better catered for in a play-based environment that also involved a focus on engagement and fun:

“The pressure of having to have “here’s a book, you’ve got three weeks and you’ve got to do these activities and that kid’s not ready for those activities. Like, and that other child, that’s too easy for that other child. If it was more play-based again, then you can cater more for individual children and its fun, learning should be fun, and speech and language should be fun for kids to do”.

A recent synthesis of international studies on teachers' views of play-based learning found that, like the present study, teachers reported challenges in enacting a play-based curriculum effectively, and that there is a lack of definitional consensus of play-based learning among teachers, which limits its potential in professional practice (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019). Colliver (2014) noted a difference between mothers' and teachers' perspectives of play-based learning and argued that improving teachers' knowledge about how to better utilise the imaginary content of play would help align stakeholders' perspectives. Interestingly, following the return to school after COVID-19 lockdowns, O'Keeffe and McNally (2021) found that 82% of teachers recommended play activities to parents in order to progress children's learning at home, and 99% of teachers said they would now use play as a primary pedagogical tool to support children's transition back to school.

A better understanding among parents and teachers of how to use play as a leading activity to increase opportunities for oral language development would perhaps support improved literacy outcomes. Bronfenbrenner's (1986) bioecological model highlights the

way overarching systems can affect the daily lives and, therefore, decision-making processes and perspectives of parents and teachers. Ewing (2019) advocated an arts-based curriculum for the early years of school to create language-rich experiences across both the home and school environments. From Bandura et al.'s (1977) efficacy point of view, consistency of language and practice could build confidence in adults to support oral language development within children's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

When asked what they felt could be done to improve children's oral language development, all participants stated that better information (in terms of quality and accessibility) for parents was necessary. Parent respondents wanted more information from schools, kindergarten teachers and specialists about developmental expectations, and teachers wanted parents to be better informed before school started, as well as better initial training for teachers and more specialist help in the classroom.

It is interesting to note that no participant named play activities as a remedy, with three parents and one teacher adding that children also needed to "know" letters and how to write their name before coming to school. This could suggest that while there may be a general awareness of the benefits of play for developing children's oral language for literacy learning, this has not been entirely committed to by all participants. Further, in response to the question about oral language activities they engaged in, both sets of respondents named a limited range of play-based activities engaged in at school and home to improve children's oral language development. Although most of the reported oral language activities were related to developing literacy skills (i.e., reading, talking about words and letters, and playing I spy), they mainly related to formal print awareness.

With conflicting information and misinformation abounding across social networks, from politicians and in the media, Adoniou (2016) stressed that whatever approach is taken towards reading in the classroom will be compromised if teachers do not

have sufficient language knowledge. Hulme and Snowling (2016), approaching the subject from the perspective of problems children demonstrate when they have difficulty learning to read, pointed out that there are only two distinct types of reading difficulty (with some children exhibiting both): developmental dyslexia (decoding difficulty) and reading comprehension impairment (understanding text). They argued that both forms of difficulty are principally dependent on oral language development impairments, and that these impairments can be addressed by parents and teachers. Yet, the responses in the present study demonstrated that while all parents expressed the importance for teachers to know how children's oral language develops, they did not unanimously agree that parents needed to have this knowledge.

Conversely, all four teachers insisted that it was important that parents know more about oral language development. This aligns with research on the importance of the home learning environment to children's success at school. For example, Fernald and Weisleder (2015) showed a lack of engagement in rich verbal interactions in the home environment despite 50 years of research highlighting how parental involvement affects (assisting or impeding) children's language and cognitive development. The home learning environment has been recognised by many researchers, policies and programs as critically important to children's development in general and language development specifically (Silinskas et al., 2020, Su et al., 2020).

Indeed, as the current study highlights, the perspectives of parents and teachers are a crucial influence via which children's oral language can be supported. Understandably then, improved parent education was a key theme in teachers' responses. All teachers expressed that the range and type of activities engaged in at home affected children's oral language abilities in school. For example, Teacher 2 stated that they could see a clear difference in the home activities of children who came to school with strong oral language

skills, adding that these children were more capable in terms of their literacy achievement than others.

Several parents were able to adequately describe a rich home learning environment, such as regularly conversing with the child, daily reading with the child, positive socio-emotional climate, access to language-rich materials, engaging in a range of play activities, singing and diverse experiences (Black et al., 2017; Bornstein et al., 2020; Krijnen et al., 2020; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2014). However, similar to the teachers knowing what a play-based, oral language-focused classroom looked like but feeling unable to effectively achieve that, the parents demonstrated awareness of the need for quality interactions at home but felt this was difficult to achieve. Parent 8 expressed how they try to use weekends for quality time, indicating the busyness of the week.

This is worrying, given the longstanding and ongoing concern about the level of vocabulary children have been engaged with by the time they start school, creating the so-called 30-million-word gap between low-income and high-income families (Hart & Risely, 1995). A common recommendation to try to close the word gap is to improve how parents talk and interact with their children (Golinkoff et al., 2019; Hindman et al., 2016; Logan et al., 2019; Morgan et al., 2015). Again, this seemingly simple solution is not without its confounding elements. Sperry et al. (2019) have criticised the validity of the original findings about the word gap, adding that there is a danger in focusing on one aspect of oral language and limiting this to issues of SES. Rogoff et al. (2017) posited that language is culturally organised and stress that a strengths-based rather than deficit model would be more effective.

Interestingly, parents' reported barriers to regular, quality shared reading at home in prior research were similar to those in the present study; all focused on a need for more knowledge and time (Preece & Levy, 2020; Riordan et al., 2021).

Again, this is where an understanding of utilising play as a leading activity within the child's social situation of development would be beneficial. In terms of creating an optimal learning environment for literacy, Vygotsky (1978) wrote "teaching should be organised in such a way that reading and writing are necessary for something...That writing should be meaningful...and that the natural methods of teaching reading and writing involve appropriate operations on the child's environment" (p. 117). In this way, parents and teachers interacting in meaningful activities with a child's social situation of development can identify if the child's immediate difficulties are being helped or hindered by the social situation (Кинтанар, 2020). An understanding of utilising play as a leading activity could minimise parental stress through strengthening proximal processes (adult-child interactions).

According to Heidlage et al. (2020), the most efficient way for children to learn language is to be actively engaged with an adult who supports the language process. However, the present study identified a perceived lack of knowledge about how to effectively engage children in their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978), because parents felt they needed information about how to read and talk with their child. For example, "A lot of parents want to engage with their children, and use that book or use you know, other opportunities to engage with their children, but they don't know the types of questions or how to ask questions" (Parent 5).

When time was perceived as a major barrier, focus seemed to move from investing in rich play language activities to a narrower academic focus on reading, letters, sounds and phonics. Following considerable research around the positive effects of parent-child book reading, Taylor et al. (2016) focused on barriers they perceived as affecting parent-child book reading and found a consistent association between multiple risk exposures and the absence of parent-child book reading. Aligning with the findings from the present

study, they found that parents who did not read to their child had other stressors and/or family priorities that prevented them from devoting time to reading. One parent in the present study commented on the effect of having more than one child and changed work arrangements: “Oh, I spent so much more time with [eldest child’s name], reading a lot more. We drew, we coloured, we chatted. [Second child’s name] doesn’t get as much of that, so for me that’s a big factor as well” (Parent 8).

Unless both sets of key stakeholders ensure children are understanding and decoding what they are reading, it seems likely that children will continue to struggle with reading competency. As stated earlier, with relatively recent technological advancements, there is increasing evidence of the connection between children developing oral language skills and brain architecture. Overall, these studies align with Vygotsky’s (1978) ZPD, supporting the notion that a more knowledgeable person in the child’s immediate environment is of great importance for the mastery of developmental skills such as language. The present study’s findings give some indication of the difficulties caused by lack of consistency when translating research into practice through teacher training and professional development and parent education and support programs. Parents and teachers in this study appeared to have some awareness of the importance of oral language for literacy learning but felt limited by their lack of expert knowledge. Parent 1 felt that expectations of children in their first year of school had increased since her first child started school two years prior:

“By the time they’re here, you know, it’s game on by the time they’re here now.

The expectations seem to be a lot higher for prep, whereas I think people may be still in the mentality that that’s the learning year”.

Another major area of concern mentioned by both sets of participants was specialist support. Parents and teachers felt strongly that they were not adequately supported by

specialists to identify delays in language development or adequately support children after a diagnosis was made. This is in line with calls from other fields of study for speech and language therapists to work with families and educators (Ebbels et al., 2019). Studies have shown that language difficulties at five years of age can predict severe literacy problems in later years more so than demographic factors (Botting, 2020), and five-year-old children with DLD can often be indistinguishable from other children in their academic outcomes (McGregor, 2020). Because of the ongoing lack of agreement around terminology and criteria for diagnosing problems with children's language development (Bishop et al., 2017), Norbury et al. (2016) found that only 39% of children they identified as meeting the criteria for DLD were receiving intervention. For this reason, Adlof and Hogan (2019) urged schools to systematically measure children's oral language development simply because children with language impairments are frequently not being identified. This, Adlof and Hogan argued, is hindering research, practice and access to services. In the UK, after noting that not enough was being done to address young children's language needs, Bowyer-Crane et al. (2019) focused on ways to strengthen the home learning environment by increasing parental knowledge of oral language development through a home visiting program. The ambiguity around terms used to define DLD means that parents and teachers need to be aware of what a language problem is so that they do not confuse language with speech (Bishop et al., 2017). It is not surprising then that other studies have also found that parents and teachers feel they need support to judge if children's language development is on track, relative to that of other children (Antoniazzi et al., 2010; Hendricks et al., 2019).

In the current study, one parent was told by a doctor that they were overreacting when they thought they noticed signs of language difficulty in their child. Conversely, one teacher in the current study indicated some frustration when dealing with the failure of parents to get specialist help for their child, whom the teacher believed may have a

language delay. Another teacher bemoaned the lack of specialist support help in the classroom, needed to support children with other needs, particularly when the teacher was trying to attend to the needs of children with identified language difficulties.

One parent in this study questioned the lack of screening processes as children start school. However, Dockrell and Marshall (2015) argued that language development is so complex that regular rather than one-off screening is preferable, alongside better parent orientation and better training for teachers, so that early identification by specialists can take place. It is worth noting that the study school, following the same system guidelines as many other schools in Australia, does not have a specific or ongoing process for assessing oral language skills specifically. Assessments of concepts about print, sound letter knowledge and benchmarking reading are the only mandatory, regular, checklist-style assessments currently taking place in the first year of school. Progress in these checklists is monitored by school leadership as one form of evidence, and parents often ask about what “level of book” their child is reading.

Other forms of assessment, such as narrative, can be difficult to communicate to others and apply consistently (Anzai et al., 2021). Adlof and Hogan (2019) argued that substantial investment has resulted in an increase in mainly word reading frameworks in schools, yet improving literacy in the long-term language, particularly language comprehension, should be a focus in the first year of school. Oral language skills are necessary for both reading and writing (Bazerman et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2015a), and children with low oral language skills are at risk of developing reading and writing difficulties (Levlin & Waldmann, 2020). Yet, by the end of the first year of school, children are expected to be able to communicate in writing (Kirby et al., 2021).

A general lack of clarity between parents and teachers about how oral language development for literacy is being assessed in their child’s particular classroom context

would appear to be resulting in confusion about how best to support children's language development at home. This was evident in Parent 1's comment that the way they supported their previous child was "no longer considered suitable".

The Australian Curriculum clearly states, "The English curriculum expands students' understanding of the conventions of spoken and written language use at home, at school, socially and in other contexts to promote skills and interest in language and its use and importance". The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2020), referring to the English curriculum, states, "Oral language, vocabulary and comprehension are reflected across many areas of the progressions, and phonemic awareness, phonics and fluency are addressed as sub-elements" (p. 8). However, there is still a lack of reliable, quality assessment for measuring the complex and multifaceted nature of children's oral language and literacy development over time. This is partly because the assessment needs to be authentic and embedded within quality ongoing interactions between adults and children, which makes it difficult to communicate to all stakeholders at transition (Cloney & Picker, 2021).

### ***6.2.2 Wellbeing***

All parents and teachers strongly agreed that oral language development is important for children's personal and social wellbeing at school, particularly for making friends and having personal needs met. The majority of participants stated that one of the most important skills children need to be successful in their first year of school is social skills.

This is in line with considerable research that identifies early language development as strongly linked to children's behaviour, social and personal development, and overall wellbeing (Aro et al., 2012; Asmussen et al., 2018; Ayers Denham et al., 2011; Bendezu et al., 2018; Carpenter et al., 2016; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2016). Language

development acts as a pathway to the development of relationships, and problems with language acquisition can put children at risk of poor social and behaviour functioning (Chow & Wehby, 2019; Girard et al., 2014; Yew & O’Kearney, 2013). Similarly, children with strong oral language skills are less likely to have severe social-emotional problems (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2016).

There was a general consensus among participants that oral language development is related to behavioural issues, though teachers expressed more concern about this than parents. This is not surprising, as Australian teachers nationwide have reported a decline in feeling capable of controlling disruptive behaviour (Thomson & Hillman, 2019). Parent 1 likened it to toddlers having tantrums because children could not express themselves, and Teacher 2 talked about the disruptive and aggressive behaviour exhibited by children in the classroom because they were frustrated at not making themselves understood.

Teacher and parent respondents referred to challenging behaviours and increasing additional needs in children. Parent 5 stated that they felt the number of children starting school with inadequate communication and social skills is increasing every year. Teacher 3 talked about the difficulties inherent in managing classes with increasingly high numbers of children needing targeted support. This view is supported by Hughes et al. (2016), who found in a study of 53,256 children starting school in Australia that 20.4% had either language or behaviour difficulties.

Further, epidemiological studies since 2010 have shown a prevalence of anxiety disorders in young children starting school, ranging from 0.3%–6.5% (Carpenter et al., 2016). Research has detailed how co-occurrence of language and emotional disorders can be detected from before school age (Aro et al., 2012; Levickis et al., 2018; McKean et al., 2017), and there is much evidence that negative future trajectories such as later social

adjustment problems and emotional disorders can ensue if deficits in oral language remain unaddressed (Snow, 2016; Snow & Powell, 2012; Sutherland et al., 2018).

Aggressive and reclusive behaviours are quite easy to see and concerning for parents and teachers alike. In the current study, Teacher 4 noticed how children avoided challenging tasks when they reached a level of frustration caused by limited communication skills. They felt that a child would be experiencing a fear of being different or rejected by their peers. In line with the theoretical stance of this study, all respondents indicated an awareness of the impact felt by children when moving from one environment to another, indicating the connections between the bioecological systems of home and school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Parent 4 referred to the need for children to be able to understand how to function in the school environment and understand that the demands are different from functioning at home. Teacher 1 also commented on how children who have positive interactions at home can transfer this to interacting positively with teachers and peers at school. In recent years, studies have found that inhibited children's anxiety disorders and broader externalising problems in the early years of school can be significantly predicted by daily parent-child practices (e.g., Bayer et al., 2019). If children have a history of problem behaviour that begins prior to school and then continues in the school setting, transactional theory (Sameroff, 1983) would suggest that the behaviour of the child affects the behaviour of adults, which in turn affects the behaviour of the child. In this way, pre-existing negative patterns of behaviour between the child and their parents can be compounded by a negative teacher-child relationship in the first year of school.

Bandura (1997) indicates that as teacher efficacy is informed by their expectations, classroom management skills and experience of handling problem behaviours, a resulting negative relationship can contribute to long-term adverse effects for children. It is

interesting to note that early coercive parent–child interaction at two years of age was negatively linked to children’s social skills at five years of age (Akcinar & Shaw, 2018). However, once in school, conflictual teacher–child relationship can exacerbate problem behaviours, even when accounting for family and child factors (Collins et al., 2017).

It is clear then, and in line with the theoretical stance of the current study, that the cumulative ecological effects of parent–child and teacher–child relationships as proximal processes within the child’s context are paramount (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). An increase in teacher stress and attrition levels due to the need to manage behaviours in an increasingly high-stakes testing environment was a recurrent view in this study. For example, “We’ve seen the pressure and the stress that some new teachers have been in and I’ve seen somebody who’s actually left as a result of it all being just too much” (Teacher 2). This is congruent with a recent Australia-wide report into teacher and public perceptions of the teaching profession. That report found that one-third of teachers were dissatisfied with their role, mainly because of workload and concerns about health, safety and their own wellbeing (Heffernan et al., 2019).

It is interesting to note that, in terms of perspectives, although the public felt teachers were respected and trusted, this did not transfer into teachers’ feelings of being appreciated. This is important because if teacher efficacy in classroom management is low, there will be a high rate of emotional exhaustion caused by children’s behaviour (Dicke et al., 2014). In this way, teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are determined by how environmental impediments and opportunities are perceived (Bandura, 2006). Therefore, improving teacher self-efficacy could decrease stress and burnout and increase motivation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2014). As Crowther, (2021) states “No matter how secure students may seem to be, many worry about the world around them and what it has in store for them. If their teachers feel deeply stressed, worried or anxious, the impacts of external forces on students

are likely to be exacerbated” (p. 63). Studies have shown that reducing stress and promoting teacher efficacy can improve student–teacher relationships, which in turn can improve student behavioural and academic outcomes (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Croft et al., 2016; Hoglund et al., 2015; Lippard et al., 2018). Therefore, the importance of positive relationships between teachers and young students for developing appropriate behaviour and academic achievement cannot be underestimated.

As stated earlier, when asked about oral language experiences they engaged in at home, most parents reported only literacy-related activities. This may indicate a lack of awareness about how to use oral language activities to build critical social and emotional skills. This is supported by Davies et al. (2020), who found that parents associated school readiness more with narrow academic skills rather than the wider social and behavioural aspects of children’s development. However, two parents in the current study did demonstrate an understanding of focusing on children’s language development to build social skills—one was a speech pathologist (Parent 5) and the other was a high school teacher (Parent 4). Parent 5 said their focus for their child was on positive interactions with their peers, and Parent 4 said that parents needed to treat everything as a learning experience for their child and share that journey with them. This view aligns with Bendezu et al. (2018), who highlighted the important connection between early childhood language skills and parenting behaviours in the development of emotional regulation, by capitalising on children’s growing language skills to help children describe and monitor their emotions.

Responses from participants about the connection between oral language skills and social competence are supported by research such as Vander Wilt et al. (2020). That research positions children’s oral language development within the connected, nested bioecological system within which children who struggle with language may experience peer rejection and resort to externalising/internalising maladaptive practices. Studies have

also highlighted worrying statistics regarding young offenders in prison having language and communication difficulties in their early school years (Bryan, 2004; Snow, 2019; Snow & Powell, 2012).

The classroom is a complex language environment. Classroom teaching and learning relies heavily on language, so much so that fostering oral language skills in the classroom is imperative because children are taught, learn, demonstrate knowledge and are assessed through language (Cregan, 2019). Considerable, recent research indicates that the importance of the teacher promoting dialogic talk patterns in the classroom cannot be overstated and is just as important for the teacher as the student (Alexander, 2020; Clarke et al., 2016). Once again, developing children's oral language skills is more than just laying the foundations for literacy; building their facility for effective communication is important for their mental health, with strong communication skills to help children manage emotions, make friends and learn (O'Connor et al., 2018). Parent et al. (2019) noted an increase in children's cortisol levels caused by transition to formal school, with the decrease in this stress response taking three to six months to recover. Further research on the significance of this and the ways parents and teachers can accentuate or attenuate this response demonstrates how research from many disciplines helps paint a clearer picture. Teacher 1 said they felt children became anxious when they do not have the words to express themselves and that this can lead to disengagement from school. Teacher 3 stated that a paediatrician had expressed concern to them about referred cases of school-related anxiety in children.

There was strong agreement from all parents and teachers in this study that social skills are important for a successful first year of school. Unsurprisingly, the teachers were better able to articulate the connection between oral language development and behavioural issues that affect budding social relationships at school. For example, "If they

have poor oral language, it hinders their social development, their ability to play with other children. It hinders their ability to learn” (Teacher 4).

With research attesting to the large gains for children in all areas when they enter school with adequate oral language skills (Burchinal et al., 2020; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2016), and the evidence that behavioural and emotional competence can be supported by language development (Streubel et al., 2020), there is hope for interventions that are mindful of parent and teacher perspectives. The increased knowledge and support of adults closest to children can aid development of linguistic and neural pathways, as they are effectively stimulated by those around them and the environment. In this way, children construct their ability to communicate as they are afforded opportunities to communicate with others.

According to Vygotsky (1978), children’s social relations and their meaning-making processes are central to navigating this critical period of change. The increased demands of school can lead to crisis for a child, and during this period, the new mental structures formed, such as language, become the driving force that determines the character of the next age level (Mahn, 2003). As children emerge from this social situation of development, they begin to control their own behaviour through self-regulatory private speech that enables them to both communicate and problem solve (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Without socially shared activities and personal development through talking, interacting and listening to others, children will have difficulty utilising the signs and semiotic systems necessary for continued psychological growth to control individual behaviour (Ivić, 1994).

### **6.2.3 Time**

All parents and teachers in this study cited a lack of time as the main contributory factor that prevented them from optimally supporting children’s oral language

development. One aspect of perceived lack of time was having sufficient time in a day to do things (e.g., “Being a single mum with four kids, it’s very hard to spend enough time with each child, each with different learning levels [Parent 7]) and changed times (e.g., “We don’t have that connection to grandparents and aunts and uncles and all those older siblings and all those people that we can share that communication with” [Parent 6]). Hedegaard (2017) argued that children’s conflicting motives and demands as related to the different settings of home and school makes it clear that “the change in persons; their motive orientation and competences, are dialectically related to the change in their environment” (p. 223). This relationship was evident in parents’ comments about engaging with school activities at home. This is important because high levels of parental self-efficacy are related to better developmental outcomes for children (Gilleece et al., 2015; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Wittkowski et al., 2017). If parents are to become aware of oral language difficulties in their children, they need to believe they have the ability to build strong parent–child interactions (Hendricks et al., 2019).

Thinking of Bronfenbrenner’s (2001) bioecological theory and the critical effect of the processes and conditions between and within systems, this overwhelming response from parents of not having enough time to simply talk with their children could be contributing to the ongoing problem of low oral language development at school entry. This is then compounded by teachers’ reported frustration at not having time to effectively implement the required amount of oral language activities to compensate in the classroom.

Another mentioned aspect of time was the age of children when they begin school. There can be a year of difference between the oldest and youngest child in the prep year and, depending on the country, the first year of formal school can be anywhere between four years of age (Northern Ireland) and seven years of age (Finland). Hanly et al. (2019) concluded that in the first year of school, the strong age–development relationship meant

that children who start school older than their peers are more likely to have developed the skills necessary to succeed in a formal learning environment.

Although children started school at seven years when Vygotsky (1933) was writing about child development, his concern was more with the mastery of external means to grow in societal practice, such as speech and conceptual thinking. His theoretical analysis of age distinguishes between biological and cultural development, to the social situation of development: “At each given age, we always find a central neoformation seemingly leading the whole process of development and characterising the reconstruction of the whole personality of the child on a new base” (p. 195). In this way, the critical period of starting school, the focus of this study, is not bound by biological age but viewed as a culturally, historically, societally structured period in which the next stage of a child’s development depends on the formation of central psychological capabilities to enable them to act in relation to their social environment (Hedegaard, 2014; Vygotsky, 1933).

The children referred to in this study ranged in age from four years and eight months to five years and eight months at the start of the school year. This is interesting, as Frith and Frith (2006) pointed out that an adequate level of theory of mind needed to navigate the social environment of the classroom is not fully utilised until five years of age. Other researchers have noted how the social pretend play of three- to six-year-olds can be seen as not only leading language development but enhancing and enriching it (Banerjee et al., 2016; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Quinn et al., 2018). Thus, the types of activities children engage in before starting school are critically important for them to optimise the rapid progress in language acquisition that occurs between the ages of two and seven (Kuhl, 2010).

Parent 1 questioned whether parents should send their child to school at four and a half, and Teacher 2 thought children would be better with an extra year of kindergarten.

However, Teacher 2 also questioned the quality of preschool teaching in terms of oral language skills.

One argument for starting school later comes from developmental psychology, suggesting that an extended period of informal play-based learning complements language development and the capacity for self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1978). Some studies found that delaying school entry reduced inattention and hyperactivity, and children with an older school starting age were less likely to develop speech impediments and behaviour problems (Balestra et al., 2020; Dee & Sievertsen, 2018). This may be part of the reason that parents in many developed countries are choosing to delay when their children start school (Fortner & Jenkins, 2017). Of course, delaying school entry is only beneficial if a child is engaged in quality language interactions at home or in their ECEC service. Teacher comments in the present study suggest that the teachers had considerable reservations about the quality of interactions children had been exposed to before starting school. For example:

“They’re never challenged to do anything else, so they don’t learn to follow instructions, they’re not being told what to do, they don’t have to come and listen to a story if they don’t want to, they don’t have to interact with anyone if they don’t want to because day cares are all about keeping the clients happy not teaching children and I’m very worried about the latest trend that’s coming in” (Teacher 3).

The teachers in this study felt that many children were arriving at school with low oral language skills even though the majority of children attended some form of day care before coming to school. This is in line with Fisher (2010), who highlighted the problems inherent in a pedagogical disconnect between preschool and school system requirements and expectations.

Not only age but also level of maturity—social, emotional and in play—cannot be ignored as affecting engagement with learning and peers (Norbury et al., 2016). The lack of continuity between home, preschool and school settings voiced by participants in the present study has been echoed in other research, where the recommendation has been to prioritise oral language-focused activities, such as “serve and return”, play, dialogic book reading, warmth of parenting and child wellbeing, to address the ambiguity for parents and teachers and position children for future success (Asaridou et al., 2017; Burchinal et al., 2020; Landry et al., 2017; Morgan et al., 2015; Quirk et al., 2017; Ring et al., 2016).

The four teachers also cited system pressures such as class sizes, school leadership’s demand for data collection, increasing number of children with diverse needs and an overcrowded curriculum as factors they felt diminished the time that could be spent on developing children’s oral language skills. There emerged in their answers a sense of impotency about changing system processes. Teacher 3 stated that they were confident in their ability, but the class size, extreme behaviours and additional needs meant that she could not give the one-to-one support that they felt was necessary. The four teachers also felt there was not enough time in one year to get children on track: “I think there are time constraints because it’s such a heavy, full curriculum and fitting everything in is a bit of a problem” (Teacher 4). Interestingly, Hu et al. (2020) noted that in the second half of the first year of school, language growth generally decreased, indicating a need for a higher level of teacher–child interactions to maintain children’s language development.

While teachers in the present study acknowledged the importance of oral language development for literacy and wellbeing, they also reported a focus on purely academic rather than play activities when they felt time was in short supply. This is in line with other studies that found that teachers felt there was not enough time to focus on wellbeing (e.g., Adler, 2016; White & Kern, 2018), despite the evidence that focusing on wellbeing can

enhance academic performance. Considering the significant evidence that children in play-based classrooms outperform children in direct instruction classrooms on many measures (Lewis-Presser et al., 2015; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Walsh et al., 2006), it is a little concerning that many teachers struggle to integrate play despite endorsing it as a mode of learning (Pyle et al., 2018). One way to combat this tension may be to improve teacher self-efficacy for play-based learning through collaboration with other teachers (Reyhing & Perren, 2021).

#### ***6.2.4 Technology***

Despite no participant being asked about technology specifically, all participants mentioned technology to some degree. The majority indicated that they viewed the proliferation of technology in today's society as a hindrance to children's developing oral language skills. Parent 8 spoke of the lack of communication between parents and their children due to the availability of electronic devices. Teacher 3 expressed concern about the effect on children of being "stuck in front of the TV or computer", which they felt negatively affected children's thinking skills and imagination. Only two comments from parents related to technology use in a positive manner. Parent 4 noted that it is what a parent does with technology in their home *and* that technology is important for their child to "be able to share and reflect on his learning orally using technology to support this". There was just one comment from a teacher about a good "story app" they used with their daughter at home.

The overall view of the four teachers is in line with recent research in the UK that recorded 72% of primary school teachers felt that overuse of tablets/phones/computers during the COVID-19 pandemic will negatively affect the language development of children who were already struggling in school. Unlike the majority of parents in the present study, Zabatiero et al. (2018) found that parents held generally positive views

about children's technology use while acknowledging an awareness of potential risks. Similarly, Ihmeideh and Alkhawaldeh (2017) found that parents hold more positive perceptions than teachers regarding technology use.

There is the possibility that parents did not want to admit the extent to which they utilise technology, in case they thought this reflected poorly on them, as the general view appeared to be that technology use was in place of spending time talking to children. This may have been the reason that parents referred to things they thought other parents did, although one parent did state a criticism of their own practice: "I try to choose educational things, they're still watching rubbish as well" (Parent 1).

The communicative practices of family literacy from one generation to the next are key factors in the home environment and have a considerable effect on children's oral language development (Marsh et al., 2017). Parents are therefore, in a key position to aid or hinder children developing oral language by controlling children's access to digital devices and regulating their own use of technology to make time to converse with their children. Of concern then, are comments from the current study relating to parents' use of devices to keep children entertained while they do other things, and teachers' concerns that children are spending long periods on devices at home, as this could suggest a lack of monitoring.

As mentioned earlier, parents' reluctance to talk about the extent of digital technology use at home could indicate a perceived societal pressure that they will be judged unfavourably. Alternatively, it could stem from confusion over what parents feel they should be doing. This is not surprising, as many health authorities have voiced concerns about children's cognitive, emotional and physical development being negatively affected by increased digital technology use. The Australian Government (Department of Health, 2019) stipulates children of five years of age (the age of most of the first-year

children of participants in the current study) should have no more than one hour of screen time in a 24-hour period. However, there are conflicting messages from other sources such as the Australian National Curriculum and Early Childhood Australia (2018), which actively promote digital technology use for young children.

Non-conflicting and evidence-based advice is integral to the decisions parents make regarding their children and the technology they use (Straker et al., 2018). Despite concerns about children's overuse of digital technology being related to hearing loss, obesity and negative emotional development (McVeigh et al., 2016; Student Health Service, 2014), increasing research indicates that digital technology use by and with young children can be utilised to support and enhance, rather than impede, development by strengthening the adult-child communication within and beyond the home environment (Early Childhood Australia, 2018; Griffith & Arnold, 2019; Konok et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2017; Yelland, 2018). However, as stated earlier, communication via the closest adult relationship to a child is crucial for oral language development. Studies such as Csibi et al. (2021) show high levels of conflict and mood modification among three- to six-year-olds connected with smartphone usage—something particularly concerning. Evidence from the current study indicates an urgent need for consistent advice, as one of the fastest growing sets of internet users in the world is comprised of young children (Livingstone et al., 2015).

In response to the overwhelmingly large range of apps referred to as educational, and marketed to children under eight years of age, some scholars are developing frameworks and conceptual tools that align with children's development and enhance opportunities for children to develop mature play across a continuum of digital to non-digital activity (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015). It would appear from parents in the current study that there is a definite need for consistent advice, and a need to improve their own

confidence with digital technologies to support children's oral language development (Pavlenko & Pavlenko, 2020).

In the current study, the four teachers mostly talked about how too much technology use at home could be deteriorating communication skills, possibly indicating their belief that home has the greater influence. One teacher commented, "There's not as much social interaction in the family, if kids have their own computer in their room, they go off and then they're isolated, so they're not learning the social interactions and those important language skills" (Teacher 3). Significant results were reported from research in Taiwan that incorporated Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, in which adults mediated children's use of a technical tool (iPad), with aspects of Bandura et al.'s (1977) efficacy theory modelling effective use of the tool for adults to observe and imitate. It would appear that evolving technologies can affect how children learn about the world and should be considered as artefacts in the life of children (Arnott & Yelland, 2020).

When viewed from a sociocultural perspective as cultural tools, children's interactions with digital technologies can foster emergent literacy (Neumann & Neumann, 2017). In a UK study of families with children aged five years and under, children were found to be competent users of tablets (Livingstone et al., 2015). Arnott and Yelland (2020) referred to the multimodal "lifeworlds" of children in the twenty-first century and sought to move away from concerns about screen time and the positioning of traditional play materials at the opposite end of a continuum with digital technologies. Responses in the current study indicate that the majority of parents and teachers are not yet rethinking ways to include technology in play-based practices. One reason for this could be that evidence from research is not the same as the messages portrayed on social media (Arnott & Yelland, 2020).

The way parents perceive, engage with and mediate children's play affects children's development. In terms of efficacy, the research points to the ability of parents to modify associations between child development and media use, with inconsistent parenting increasing the risk of developmental problems. For example, Lauricella et al. (2015) found that parents' screen time was strongly associated with children's screen time across four platforms (television, smartphones, tablets and computers) and highly influenced by parents' attitudes. This is particularly evident when combined with child characteristics, such as tantrums and difficult behaviour, where a digital device is given to frequently calm them down. Parents and teachers in the present study referred to parents' use of digital devices to occupy children so that parents could complete chores.

The need for children to effectively use technology is stated as an expectation in the Australian Curriculum:

“Students develop Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability as they learn to use ICT effectively and appropriately to access, create and communicate information and ideas, solve problems and work collaboratively in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school”.

As more digital testing is implemented (e.g., NAPLAN Online), there is an increased need for children to become capable users at an earlier age, indicated by the end-of-first-year school expectations in Australia (see Table 6.1).

**Table 6.1**

*Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Capability in the Australian Curriculum*

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Typically, by the end of Foundation Year, students:

Apply social and ethical protocols and practices when using ICT:

- recognise ownership over their own digital work

- follow class rules about using digital information
- follow class rules when sharing personal information with known audiences and demonstrate an awareness of applying social protocols when using ICT to communicate
- identify how they use ICT in multiple ways on multiple devices

Investigate with ICT:

- use ICT to follow or contribute to a simple plan for a solution
- use ICT as a creative tool to generate simple solutions, modifications or data representations for personal or school purposes

Communicate with ICT:

- use purposefully selected ICT tools safely to view information shared by trusted adults
- understand that messages are recorded, viewed or sent in computer mediated communications for others to receive

Manage and operate ICT:

- identify and safely operate ICT systems to complete relevant simple specified tasks and seek help when encountering a problem
- identify common consumer ICT systems with input and output functions
- save and retrieve digital data with support

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The Australian Curriculum also states that “Literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts”. There is an expectation that, at the end of their first year of school, students need to be able to: “listen to, read and view spoken, written and multimodal texts” and “understand concepts

about print and screen, including how books, film and simple digital texts work” as well as “construct texts using software including word processing programs”.

In another area of the Australian Curriculum, Digital Technologies, it is stated that by the end of Year 2 (age seven to eight years in Australia), “students will have had opportunities to create a range of digital solutions through guided play and integrated learning, such as using robotic toys to navigate a map or recording science data with software applications”.

Therefore, it could be argued that children are being expected to achieve outcomes that they are not adequately equipped to achieve, from within their home and school learning experiences in the first year of school. Particularly if the children do not have a sound foundation in oral language and parents and educators both willing and able to support children’s developing oral language through multiliteracies.

The New London Group (1996) addressed the issue of the increase in multimodal literacies in today’s culturally diverse society by stating that educators need to change literacy programs to teach all students new ways of communicating. They argued that this is important for the equitable participation in education and society (Mills, 2009). Digital technology is so much a part of children’s lives that any current definition of literacy that does not recognise the need for people to manage the complete range of everyday digital literacy demands is inadequate (Yelland, 2018).

Therefore, it is surprising that none of the four teachers mentioned the effective use of technology to support children’s oral language development in the classroom. This is despite all the study school’s early year classrooms having a considerable number of devices for children to use (six iPads, six laptops, a large interactive TV, microphones and three programmable robots). When asked about oral language activities in the classroom, none of the teachers mentioned digital devices. This could indicate a lack of knowledge

about optimising digital literacies for oral language learning, or a lack of confidence in using digital technology in the classroom. Several studies have noted the reluctance of teachers to effectively integrate technology in the classroom, with reasons ranging from lack of training and professional development to issues of individual self-efficacy (Alelaimat et al., 2020; Brenneman et al., 2019; Gràcia et al., 2020; Nikolopoulou et al., 2021; Petko et al., 2018; Voogt & McKenney, 2017; Zabatiero et al., 2018)

One parent in the present study suggested using technology to pass on information to combat the low attendance rates at free information nights hosted by the school: “I think there needs to be videos, whatever is presented in the school needs to be videoed and put into a location where parents can access it” (Parent 4). This may address both knowledge and time barriers to some degree.

There was a strong consensus among both teachers and parents that digital technology use adversely affected children developing social skills. Despite curriculum guidelines (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2016) indicating the place of technology within literacy learning, teachers’ and parents’ overriding concern with developing oral language for social skills may be dominated by their negative attitudes towards children’s access to technology. If so, the lack of knowledge about how to use digital technology with siblings and peers to increase opportunities for interaction with others and help develop children’s social and language skills (Ihmeideh & Alkhawaldeh, 2017) could indicate that children are engaging in solitary use of digital devices at home. Similarly, teachers’ low sense of efficacy to use technology to support children’s language development in school may mean that classroom technology is limited to quiet, independent work where children complete computer tasks with the use of headphones. Researchers have shown how learning from a screen can be enhanced by the presence of another person, facilitating play practices around a digital toy

that encourages discourse can enhance language learning and decision-making, and the way in which adults engage with children and mediate the social context for playing with digital toys and games can improve children's development (Lin et al., 2015; Lytle et al., 2018).

Bandura et al. (1977) suggested that learning is a result of observing the behaviour of others, and Bronfenbrenner's (2001) bioecological theory shows how these activities take place within the child's microsystem and affect development, particularly when they occur frequently. So, it would seem that parent perspectives are important indicators of actions they take, including choices concerning access and use of resources for their children (Bleumers et al., 2015). This, in turn, can affect their cognitive, behavioural, physical and language development.

The responses of parents in this study is not surprising, as Edwards et al. (2018) found that parents' attitudes and beliefs about children's technology use has become increasingly polarised, with concern about internet safety and impact on social and physical development on the one hand, and the need to learn modern skills and convenience on the other. In Ihmeideh and Alkhawaldeh's (2017) study, teachers and parents were asked about their perceptions of the role of technology and digital media in developing child culture. They found that educators were concerned with children being too sedentary (leading to health problems), becoming less socialised and early exposure stunting their imagination and language skills. These views were echoed by teacher comments in the current study. Teacher 3, for example, felt that parents had little regard for the quality of language their children were viewing. Speaking of their own grandson, "during this [online] viewing time, he resists any social contact or interactions with people".

According to the current Australian Early Years Framework *Belonging, being and becoming* (Department of Education and Training, 2019), literacy refers to the capacity to use all forms of language, and it states that children need opportunities to explore and develop confidence in technology use. Unfortunately, research is still finding that teachers are not well supported or educated in making the most of available technological resources (Brenneman et al., 2019).

Vygotsky's (1978) view of culturally mediated tools used within the social situation of development to aid the process of meaning making, has major implications for teachers using technology with children in the classroom and parents using devices at home, as this can greatly influence adult-child interactions (Kucirkova et al., 2015). Play in all its forms, including digital play, is a vehicle for the development of thought and speech. As thought is separated from action and action arises from ideas, the optimal form of engagement is through play. As such, play is a leading activity that is crucial for children to navigate periods of crises such as starting school (Vygotsky, 1934/1962). Through Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, adults can support children's use of language and technical tools to enable higher order mental processes to emerge (Wertsch, 1994). According to Bronfenbrenner (1971), strong congruence between the home and school systems is imperative and essential for:

“Caring adults to engage in this reciprocal and ever-more complex “game” there must be time, and patience, and willingness to engage and learn from the other, over an extended period of time. It is not only engagement with others that should be of this nature; toys, games, and the entire world of symbols should also “invite exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination”” (p. 3).

In this way, sharing a digital text on a device could be considered as a proximal process that depends on the relationships between the adult, child and text characteristics.

According to Grolig (2020), the home environment and classroom environment are the two main places where oral language development is directly related to shared reading.

Proximal processes described by parents in the current study included reading with children and playing games with children. Bronfenbrenner considered proximal processes as the driving forces of development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In terms of technology use, we know from Bandura et al. (1977) that parents and teachers' sense of self-efficacy will determine how they think, act and feel. In line with the current study's theoretical stance, future endeavours to increase teachers' readiness to use technology in the classroom will be largely dependent on teachers' perceived skills and beliefs (Petko et al., 2018). Also, parents' sense of low efficacy has been found to be a predictor of increased television and tablet screen time for children, resulting in a decrease in home literacy practices that requires adult interaction (Chen et al., 2020).

### ***6.2.5 Perceived Dominant Influence***

The first main finding about parent and teacher efficacy to support children's oral language development in the first year of school was that parents and teachers consider parents to have the most influence on children's oral language development. There is also strong consensus among scholars that the home environment has a significant effect on children's readiness for school and their continued engagement with school (Farver et al., 2006; Gilleece, 2015; Hughes et al., 2016; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002, 2014). Increasing the quality of programs for children under five years and parent intervention programs are some of the suggested ways to supplement the home environment (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2016; Trivette et al., 2010), as parent perceptions of requirements for school are recognised as conflicted (Davies et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2008).

The findings from this study that both parents and teachers feel that parents have the greatest influence on children developing oral language skills at this stage aligns with

studies from both high- and low-income countries that show quality parenting enhances early child development (Black et al., 2017; Britto et al., 2016).

It is important to note the perspectives of parents, as parental beliefs translate into concerns and behaviours that are visible to children and can affect their developing beliefs (Madigan et al., 2019). This was evident in the present study, as parents expressed concerns over social and anxiety problems and teachers noted social behaviour difficulties in children. Teachers place a high value on social-emotional skills in the classroom and, similar to Stillerova et al.'s (2019) findings, the four teachers in the present study perceived a large number of children as experiencing problems in this developmental domain.

Parenting practices have changed in Western societies in recent decades. With macrosystem changes in societal expectations, technology and social media, parents are spending more time with their children and using less authoritarian control than they did 15 years ago (Glatz & Buchanan, 2021). However, it is parental self-efficacy that will determine their ability to positively influence their child(ren)'s development (Bandura, 1997). In addition, parents' self-efficacy will be influenced by their children's behaviours and can be responsive to parenting interventions (Mouton et al., 2018).

The Abecedarian Approach is an example of an oral language-focused intervention that helps parents to support their children's oral language from birth (Sparling et al., 2021). The Abecedarian Approach also illustrates how high-quality early intervention programs can positively affect parents' and children's lives (Koshyk et al., 2021). This is in line with Bronfenbrenner's (2001) view of the bidirectional influence of adult-child interactions. In agreement with the findings of the current study, De la Rie et al. (2016) found that family literacy programs targeting home activities were more effective than those that targeted home and school activities.

Research from psychobiology, paediatrics and epigenetics shows how stress and instability can affect the developing circuitry of the young brain (Hagoort, 2014), so we cannot ignore parents' ability to mitigate some of the effects of children developing oral language by engaging in rich verbal dialogue with their children. It is interesting to note that parents are not always aware that simple everyday back-and-forth conversations with their children are vital for oral language development (Kiely et al., 2021).

Several parents in this study remarked on the value of information provided by the school but also agreed that there was a significant lack of uptake when information events were organised. They considered this mainly an issue of time and, therefore, competing for priority status in their daily lives.

#### ***6.2.6 Perceived Constraints***

The second main finding about parent and teacher efficacy to support children's oral language development in the first year of school was that parent and teacher self-efficacy is mitigated by a sense of constraints to implementing effective oral language strategies. This leads us again to Bandura (1997) and his theories about self-efficacy. Without belief in themselves, these key adult stakeholders will not be able to optimise the quality of their teaching/parenting and fully support their children's oral language development (Wittkowski et al., 2017). Bandura et al. (1997) spoke of four sources that parents and teachers would draw on to gauge their self-efficacy. These were all evident in the responses in this study:

- 1) Mastery experiences—having experience of performing a task successfully before. Parents and teachers who had more experience felt much more confident than those who did not. Most respondents initially stated that they felt capable of adequately supporting children's oral language development; however, when delving further, parents and teachers expressed concerns about their ability to adequately support the oral language

development of children in their care. The four teachers commented on the lack of professional development in children's oral language development, and there was an absence of specific oral language assessment that led teachers to feel they needed more support from specialists. This view is supported by Dockrell and Marshall (2015), who noted that there are very few evidence-informed language tools that teachers can use to assess the language learning needs in their classrooms.

2) Vicarious experiences—observing the success of others. This was particularly evident in the absence of teachers' comments about integrating educational technology. Petko et al. (2018) noted how teacher readiness to integrate technology is based on their perceived skills and beliefs. Voogt and McKenney (2017) reported that there is little attention given to providing teachers with the knowledge to use technology to support early literacy, despite several studies highlighting this. As in the present study, time was stated as a major barrier by teachers in prior studies.

3) Response to verbal/social persuasion—the questions about expectations of others and questioning themselves evidenced how praise can cultivate self-efficacy and criticism can reduce it. This was particularly evident when referring to social media and technology use, as there seemed to be a perception among most parents and all teachers that overuse of technology was an indication of lazy parenting (e.g., “I do think that you know, there is a culture of sticking your kid in front of the iPad and then using it as a learning tool, it's just lazy, it's lazy parenting really” [Parent 1]). Parents and teachers commented on what they perceived as overuse/misuse of technology, particularly among younger children, which may have a detrimental effect on their developing oral language skills. All of the children had access to digital technology at home and school. According to the AAP, this is now an accepted state of affairs in Western European communities. In response, the AAP reviewed their recommendations of screen time for young children, a change to their previous

recommendations that young children's screen time should be extremely limited (Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

4) Physiological and emotional state—all parents and teachers felt disempowered by excessive demands on their time, leading to stress and anxiety. Parents commented on difficulties with work–life balance, managing several children on their own and other competing demands on their time. Wang et al. (2015) note discouraging teacher attrition rates, stating that 75% of Australian teachers leave the profession for reasons other than retirement. Crowther (2021) confirmed the increasingly high levels of stress felt by teachers. Increased stress levels for both parents and teachers were indicated when talking about dealing with children's anxious and/or aggressive behaviour resulting from difficulty communicating thoughts, feelings and needs.

The literature has consistently reported the benefits of play on children's social and emotional development (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Armstrong & Sutherland, 2020; Arnott & Yelland, 2020; Bodrova & Leong, 2015; Edwards, 2011; Quinn et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1933, 1934/1962, 1967, 1978). However, when time is in short supply, priority is given to the things that the adults perceive as necessary and important. Bleumers et al. (2015) and Lin et al. (2015) noted how children's play is facilitated through the social context by the adults and peers around the children and the toy. The adults provide the materials and make the decisions over what toys/activities are available (technical or otherwise). As Vygotsky (1978) pointed out, this kind of learning through play is a facilitated experience shaped by the social context and how parents and teachers perceive, mediate and engage with children.

In the present study, both parents and teachers commented on the marginalising of play opportunities for children when time was at a premium. A lack of support from school leadership and system pressures to follow prescribed activities was felt by teachers to be a

major constraint. This is in line with Slep et al. (2017), who argued that successful instruction experiences are difficult to enact without both top-down and bottom-up approaches from leadership. If children's motivation to learn improves quality interaction with teachers and leads to reduced teacher stress (Heerman et al., 2017), the reverse can be true—that is, teacher stress can reduce the quality of interaction and thereby lower learning motivation in children. This was echoed by all four teachers, who expressed their frustration at barriers and limited time to develop quality interactions (e.g., “Talking to them [children] when they express an interest. It's about being able to explore that a little bit and having the time” [Teacher 2]).

### **6.3 Collective Importance of the Findings**

The findings for research question 1 that show the connection between oral language and literacy learning is acknowledged by parents and teachers, but not prioritised, is important because of the negative long-term effects of inadequate literacy skills. Being literate in today's society requires an aptitude to navigate multiliteracies (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Neumann & Neumann, 2017; Roseberry et al., 2014; Stephen & Edwards, 2017). Low literacy skills are found to be significant among young offenders, and inadequate communication skills are affecting productivity and global competitiveness (Skeat et al., 2011; Snow, 2019; Snow & Powell, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016).

With calls for oral language development to be considered a public health concern (Beard, 2018; Greenwood et al., 2017; Law, 2019; Law et al., 2017b; Law & Levickis, 2018), it is imperative that parents and teachers are capable of optimising children's oral language development early. Parents' and teachers' perspectives are important and make a difference to children's oral language development. As Pesu et al. (2016) pointed out, parents' beliefs play a stronger role in children's development at the beginning of the first year of school, but by the end of the first year, this role is reversed, as teachers' beliefs

about children's abilities are strongly associated with children's self-concept of ability and subsequent performance. Dockrell and Hurry (2018) warned that a significant number of children are starting school with undetected speech and language impairments.

If the perspectives of parents and teachers do not change, oral language development will not be utilised in this critical window of time. As Ahrenkiel and Holm (2020) argued, there is a danger in limiting measurements of children's oral language development to purely literacy requirements; a more holistic understanding is needed to provide a more sociocultural approach.

The findings showing that oral language development is considered by key adult stakeholders as important for children's social and emotional wellbeing is important because parents and teachers already see this connection and appear to value it. This suggests that targeted intervention might be successfully framed by focusing on the benefits of children's developing oral language skills as enhancing their ability to make and maintain relationships.

The findings show all participants considered a lack of time to effectively support children's oral language development as a major concern. This has been echoed in much research worldwide and is undeniably experienced by parents and teachers in today's busy world. However, there is much promise in advancing the long-held argument for play-based learning. Effective play-based learning at school would potentially connect all areas of the curriculum and greatly enhance literacy and cognitive skills. An understanding of play-based learning at home would also reduce parenting pressure for time spent fostering oral language development means that children would be otherwise occupied in an activity known to support language development.

The finding that technology is generally considered unhelpful to children's developing oral language is important because of the proliferation of technology in

children's lives. Understanding and embracing technology as part of children's play-based learning at home and school can greatly affect the perceived capability for change among key stakeholders in children's lives (Constantino, 2020; Fleeer, 2020; Mantilla & Edwards, 2019; McLean et al., 2017; Sintonen et al., 2018).

The finding that parents and teachers considered that parents have the most influence on children's oral language development is in line with research from other fields relating to children's development from birth. However, successful transition to and through school is highly dependent on the teacher-child relationship, meaning that both parents and teachers need to be highly motivated and responsible for children's oral language development at this time.

The finding that parent and teacher self-efficacy is mitigated by a sense of constraints to implementing effective oral language strategies is probably the most important finding in this study, as parents and teachers hold an important position in children's development. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) indicates that the joint context of school and home need to be addressed to effect sustainable change in children's development. Children's oral language development takes place through their level of engagement with activities in particular settings at particular times, that are in turn influenced by motives and demands from other places (Hedegaard, 2014).

Further, Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD highlights the important role of adults closest to a child that determines the level of potential development for the child. Through their belief in themselves and their subsequent actions, these key adult stakeholders can facilitate or hinder children's oral language development. This is because, "Perceived self-efficacy affects people's choice of activities and behavioural settings, how much effort they expend, and how long they will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The

stronger the self-efficacy, the more active the coping efforts” (Bandura et al., 1997, p. 288).

Without addressing these issues affecting children’s oral language skills at school entry, and their subsequent disposition for learning fostered in the first year of school, children’s oral language may continue to decline, with inherent social consequences, as children grow older. Understanding the themes evident in the perceived barriers articulated by the parents and teachers in this study could assist targeted practice in the form of additional support, and policy in the form of increased emphasis on relationships and play in the early years. If parents and teachers feel they do not have enough knowledge and support to help children achieve oral language development milestones, how can this be addressed? If parents and teachers believe there is a scarcity of time to engage in the rich oral language activities beneficial to children’s developing oral language skills, how can this be mediated so that the transition into and through the first year of school is successful? If parents and teachers believe social skills are of primary importance for children’s wellbeing at this stage, how can this be utilised in a way that clearly promotes children’s oral language development? If parents and teachers view technology in children’s lives at this time as detrimental, how can they be encouraged to view and use the technology they have in a productive way that promotes children’s oral language development?

Self-efficacy beliefs are an alterable characteristic (Bandura, 1982). The importance of parent and teacher perspectives, as key stakeholders in children’s lives, has been highlighted by this study and provides an opportunity for policymakers and teachers and parents themselves to improve the language environment within which children’s oral language development can flourish. Parents’ self-efficacy is crucial when assessing the effectiveness of parenting interventions, as self-efficacy beliefs influence parenting

behaviours and parental competence is integral to children's development (Wittkowski et al., 2017). Teacher self-efficacy beliefs are connected with both their sense of agency and their commitment to the profession of teaching (Grant et al., 2019).

By looking at how relationships are nested within wider systems, we can see how parents and teachers' perspectives are in a position to filter other influences. If parents can be persuaded to view children's oral language development as critical for literacy and wellbeing, they may be more effective at managing pressures of work and needs of other family members against time for quality interactions from birth. When parents are in receipt of well-evidenced information about children's developing oral language skills and the best way to foster these (i.e., through play), they are better able to make informed judgements about commercial program claims, discern information on social media posts and discriminate between useful and detrimental technology use in the home (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

Likewise, if oral language knowledge can be taught and assessed in pre-service teaching courses and regular mandatory professional development, it is likely that teachers will feel confident to dedicate more time to oral language activities (including integrating technology) in the classroom (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020).

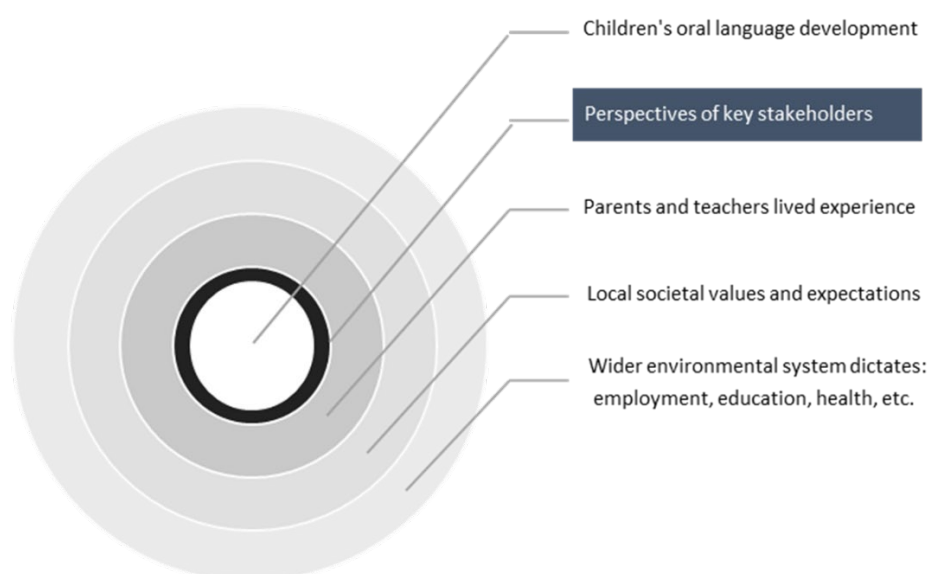
Improved knowledge of the connection between oral language development and children's wellbeing (externalising and internalising behaviours) could greatly improve teacher-child relationships and alleviate some teacher stress. Understanding the foundational nature of oral language development could provide teachers with the efficacy to argue against unsupportive practices and provide them with the language to collaborate with health professionals to identify problems early.

Figure 6.1 presents the ecological perspective taken in this study, based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris,

2006). The outer circle refers to the wider ecological, economic, political and social environment that can affect children's experience of the first year of school, as global factors are translated into national then regional educational and health policies. These can affect children's experience in the first year of school as employment, education and health policies affect family's daily lives. The local social and cultural environment, including SES and resources of the family and school community, directly affect the lived experiences of the adults closest to children in this space and time. The darkest ring around the child signifies the role of parent and teacher perspectives as crucial gatekeeping positions with the power to mitigate, ameliorate and guard against unwanted influences affecting the child's optimal oral language development at this stage.

**Figure 6.1**

*Influences on Children's Oral Language Development*



*Note.* Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1986).

## 6.4 New and Interesting Insights

This research contributes several new insights into the phenomenon of children's low oral language skills in the first year of school. Evidence from this study attests to difficulties in supporting children's oral language development experienced by a relatively

advantaged community, indicating that the burden on children coping with disadvantage when they start school is an even greater and more urgent concern than articulated in prior literature.

This study highlights parents' and teachers' perceived lack of knowledge to adequately support children's oral language development in the first year of school, with oral language development viewed as important but not necessarily understood or prioritised as such. Despite numerous research studies, government investment in early years schooling and the development of programs to inform parents and teachers of children's oral language development (Asmussen et al., 2018; Beard, 2018; Bundy et al., 2018; Chow & Wehby, 2019; Christensen et al., 2020; Greenwood et al., 2017; Hagen, 2018; Hagoort, 2014; Romeo et al., 2021; Schmerse, 2020; Snow, 2016, 2020), the reported perspectives in the current study indicate little research being translated into practice to support and enable parents and teachers in supporting children's oral language. This paints a picture of partial awareness of the importance of children's oral language development among parents and teachers, coupled with their perceived sense of frustration among adult stakeholders in children's lives from lack of time and knowledge.

Interestingly, the study school, similar to many other schools, did not have any formal oral language assessment structures in place. Currently, mandatory assessments in the first year of school in Australia consist of regular sound and letter checks, concepts of print checks and reading assessments. There are more general Australian Curriculum end-of-year achievement expectations and the AEDC administered every three years, but no specific, ongoing assessment of children's developing language skills.

Comments recorded in the current study suggest that teachers want the time to interact and build relationships with the children but, as part of what seems to be a growing

trend of datafication in schools, they feel pressure to focus on the measurable elements of children's learning (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016).

Surprisingly, technology was viewed by most parents and teachers in this study in a negative way. From their responses, it was clear that technologies were viewed as prolific in children's lives but not fully recognised as having the potential to aid oral language development. This aspect traverses all four findings in that parents would benefit from access to advice on how best to manage children's digital technology use to enhance social and emotional development and oral language skills at home. Likewise, teachers needed access to information to implement digital technology to the same end at school. Technology use is clearly prevalent in society at large, and could be utilised to address issues of time, knowledge and social concern (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017; Roseberry et al., 2014; Stephen & Edwards, 2017).

This study indicates that the problem of children's low levels of oral language competence in the first year of school can be alleviated if those adult stakeholders closest to children are given the knowledge, time and support to prioritise early language development. Thus, the study findings may inform educational policy by drawing out the focus on oral language as a key area in family literature, education and early health frameworks and assessments, early childhood settings and, particularly, the early years of school.

Disseminating information about oral language development and brain development in ways that lay people – including parents and teachers can understand is difficult, as is changing mindsets about the pivotal role of oral language development for academic learning, mental health and wellbeing. To achieve better oral language outcomes for children, high-quality environments for learning are necessary and achievable by raising the awareness of the adults closest to children (Leung et al., 2020).

This study shows that while many other factors contribute to inequalities in children's early education and life chances (Siddiqi et al., 2012), a focus on oral language development could improve equity for all children. This study showed that parents and teachers desire to be more easily connected to support services when dealing with concerns. Decreasing curriculum demands and increasing opportunities for conversations (effective play-based learning) would open up a space for children to experiment and learn how to talk through problems and express themselves appropriately.

Teachers' awareness of their own social-emotional functioning in relation to their interactions with children, as well as the monitoring of peer relationships, can create an optimal classroom environment that improves relationship quality (Valiente et al., 2020). A focus on children's oral language development means that anxious and/or aggressive behaviour can be addressed early and daily using a strengths-based approach. There would also be more chance of identifying underlying disorders/complications children are experiencing with language. The ensuing improved sense of belonging would improve children's general wellbeing and may be the critical turning point for some (getting the help they need before difficulties become a major problem).

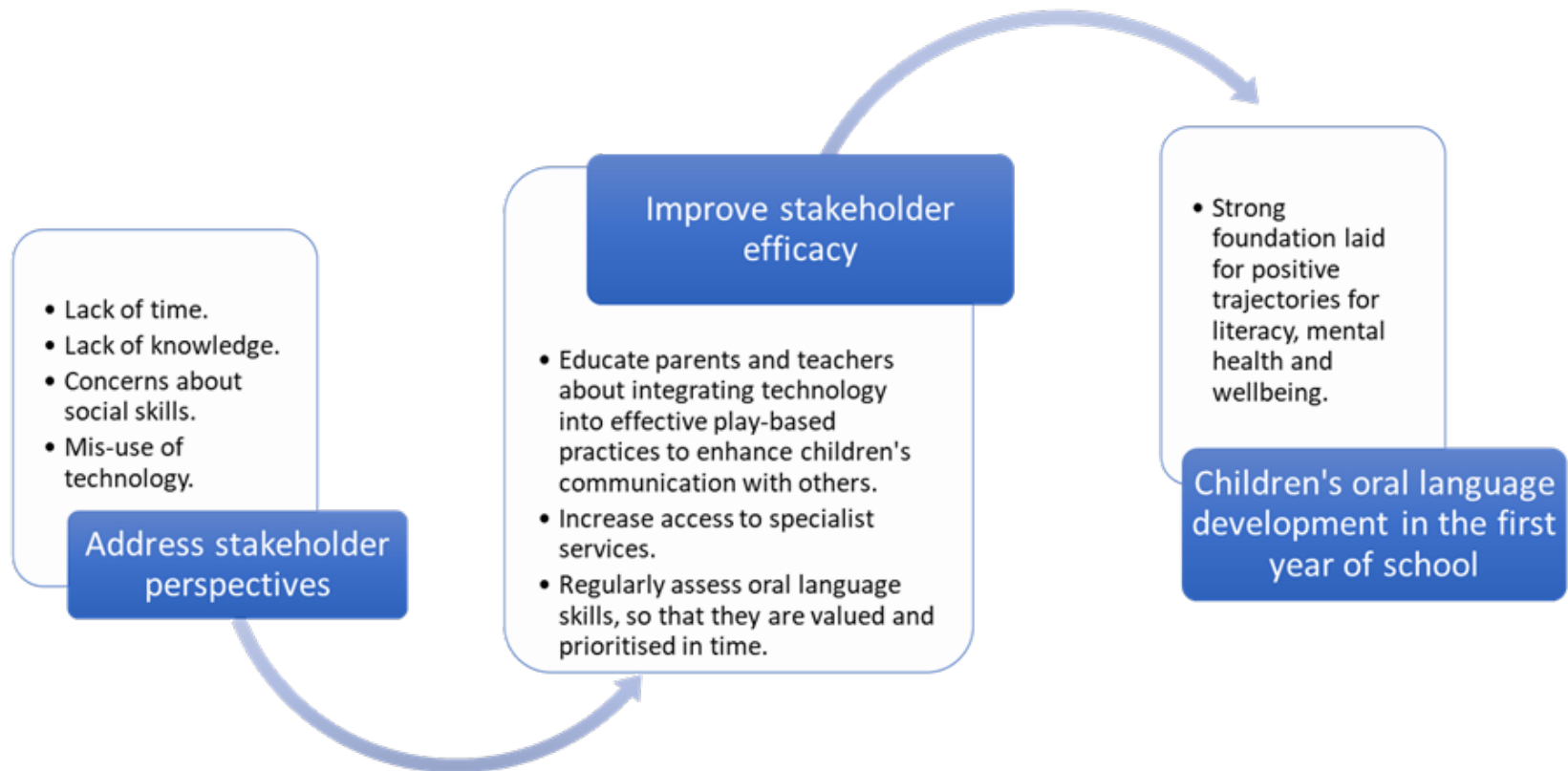
Although several studies have included oral language development as a key skill necessary for transition to school (AEDC, 2018; Bornstein et al., 2014, 2016; Christensen et al., 2020; Department of Education and Training, 2019; Goble et al., 2017; Snow, 2014; OECD, 2020), and the benefits of parent-child book reading for children's oral language development has been well documented over several decades (Grolig, 2020; Snow & Goldfield, 1983; Taylor et al., 2016), there has not been a strong focus in research on how to alter parent and teacher perspectives so that they not only prioritise children's oral language development in the first year of school, but also consider themselves capable of doing so. As such, the present study provides additional insights about the effect of key

stakeholders' knowledge and efficacy on children's oral language development at this critical life stage.

By unpacking the perceived barriers for parents and teachers to optimally support children's oral language development in the first year of school, possible solutions can be highlighted. This study proposes a new parent and teacher efficacy model for possible solutions to the phenomenon (see Figure 6.2).

**Figure 6.2**

*Parent and Teacher Efficacy Model*



This model indicates that parent and teacher perspectives must be addressed in order to build their efficacy to optimally support children's oral language development in the first year of school. To do this, oral language needs to be prioritised and regularly and appropriately assessed. Also, educating parents and teachers to understand play as a leading activity within children's social situation that drives development could strengthen adult-child relationships and optimise this crucial period of transition into and through the first year of school.

With parent and teacher perspectives central to the success of children's oral language development in the first year of school, there are obvious benefits to be gained from better communication between parents and teachers. The focus on teachers' and parents' perspectives and their perceived lack of ability to optimally support children's oral language development at this time adds to the growing concern about the number of undiagnosed children with developmental delay at school entry. As McGregor (2020) reported:

“DLD [developmental language disorder] often remains hidden from the two groups of adults who are a child's primary advocates when it comes to securing services: parents and teachers. Although parents are experts about their children, they are not reliable at judging whether their elementary-aged child's language development is on track relative to that of other children, and in many cases, neither are teachers” (p. 987).

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This study used a sociocultural framework because human activities take place within social contexts that are mediated by language (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). An understanding of children's language development as a social and cultural process, rather than the acquisition of a separate object, provided a more holistic perspective of the

phenomenon under investigation (i.e., low levels of children's oral language development in the first year of school). Taking a bioecological perspective of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) acknowledged the recursive role of the environment, both home and school, on children's oral language. Four main findings were established, including perceived lack of time, perceived negative impact of digital devices, perceived lack of knowledge and concerns about children's social competence. Taken together these findings suggest that adult stakeholder perspectives on children's oral language development are theoretically significant for the oral language opportunities children experience at home and at school. Mediating perceived barriers to supporting children's oral language development among adult stakeholders suggests potential for addressing the problem of low oral language development among young children in the first year of school.

The next chapter discusses the relevance of the findings, the study's contributions and limitations, implications for theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of low oral language skills among children in their first year of formal school by examining the perspectives of key stakeholders. The research questions were:

1. What are parents' and teachers' perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?
2. What are parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to influence young children's oral language development?

This chapter reviews the study's context (Section 7.1), discusses the relevance of the findings (Section 7.2), details the study's contributions to the literature (Section 7.3) and presents the finding's implications for theory and research (Section 7.4). The chapter concludes with a consideration of the study's limitations (Section 7.5) and recommendations for future research (Section 7.6).

### **7.1 Context**

Children need to have sound oral language skills when they start school because oral language is a necessary component of learning to read (Cervetti et al., 2020; Snow, 2020; Snowling & Hulme, 2021) and crucial for social interaction (Altman et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2020). Oral language forms the foundation for several aspects of school life, where most teaching is delivered using linguistic forms of communication (Gibson et al., 2021). Low oral language skill development can also affect behaviour, which in turn affects engagement with adults and peers, which can then negatively affect further oral language development (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). The home language environment and the school environment form critical components that can

determine how well children transition into school and cope with the language demands once there (Knauer et al., 2019; Lehl et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2020; Logan et al., 2019; Su et al., 2020).

Recommendations from research continually indicate that adults closest to the child in the early years have the greatest effect on children’s oral language development (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2019; Tarvainen et al., 2020). Advances in epigenetics and developmental neuroscience show how early life experiences are biologically embedded and influence life course trajectories (Garner et al., 2021). Therefore, the most notable key influencers of early language socialisation in the child’s first year of school are parents and teachers (Riordan et al., 2021).

Accordingly, a sociocultural stance was taken in the present study, with the work of Bandura (1982), Bronfenbrenner (1986) and Vygotsky (1978) used to situate thinking about the child in an optimal position alongside engaged adults with self-efficacy for change in supporting children’s oral language development.

**7.2 Relevance of the Findings**

The study findings are summarised in Table 7.1.

**Table 7.1**

*Study Findings*

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><b>Research question 1:</b> What are parents’ and teachers’ perspectives on the role of children’s oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teachers and parents were aware that oral language is important for literacy learning but did not prioritise it.</li><li>• Oral language development was considered important for children’s social and emotional wellbeing.</li></ul> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

- There was a perceived lack of time and knowledge to effectively support children's oral language development.
- Technology use was described as unhelpful to children's developing oral language by most participants.

**Research question 2:** What are parents' and teachers' perceived self-efficacy to influence young children's oral language development?

- Parents and teachers considered parents to have the most influence on children's developing oral language in the first year of school.
  - Parent and teacher self-efficacy was mitigated by a strong sense of constraints to implementing effective oral language strategies.
- 

These findings provide support for the increasingly necessary concern to address the role of children's early oral language development. By utilising Bronfenbrenner's (1986) framework, this study acknowledged the microsystem level in which children themselves influence the behaviours of others and are influenced by the behaviour of others, particularly nearby or proximal adults. Based on the literature, this study argues that strong oral language development can serve as a protective factor to minimise the risk of incurring both literacy and ongoing social difficulties (Burchinal et al., 2020; Clegg et al., 2015; Law et al., 2017a). Therefore, knowledge of risk and protective factors could help parents and teachers create the best environment for children's oral language development, as these factors determine the strength of children's internal abilities such as resilience (Bornstein et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2013). Also, by emphasising the transactional nature of human development, new public policies may be seen as relevant, supported and incorporated by the culture at the microsystem level, with potentially more successful implementation than universal intervention programs that do little to address the barriers

identified by key adult stakeholders involved in children's oral language development (Law et al., 2017a). This study highlights the interconnected influences that parents and teachers exert on children's developing oral language. Social policy and programs should consider the way in which culture operates in children's everyday activities at home and school, because not only does the ever-changing nature of culture define and organise microsystems such as homes and schools, but daily cultural practices themselves are interpreted through language and communication in the mesosystem (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017).

Parent and teacher efficacy in this study appeared to be affected by the wider indirect effects of the exo and macrosystems. One aspect of bureaucratic demands that parents and teachers have no control over is the school starting age. With the possibility of a gap of 12 months between the youngest and oldest child in a first-year classroom, teachers need to account for a diverse range of abilities, given that older children often having better developmental outcomes than their younger classroom peers. Age is an important factor to consider when helping children build a secure foundational first year of school (Hanly et al., 2019). It is also worth noting that because the school starting age is different in many countries (generally ranging from four to seven years), this may form part of the difficulty in translating research into practice. Research relating to children five years and under can often be viewed as ECEC research and considered to only pertain to a preschool context, when, in fact, many children under five are enrolled in primary school.

When considering the effect of the chronosystem, the beginning of school is situated in a sensitive period in children's lives. At this time, children's brains are undergoing increasingly complex systems of neural, cognitive and linguistic development (Romeo et al., 2018b; Sperry et al., 2019; Hagoort, 2014). Considerable recent research in education and health demonstrates how closely linked oral language skills are to literacy

attainment and social inclusion (Boyce et al., 2021; Hancock, 2019; Hulme et al., 2020; Schmerse, 2020), with longitudinal studies highlighting the detrimental effect of poor early oral language skills on employment prospects, mental health and wellbeing in adulthood (Snow, 2019; Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Advancements in medical technologies have lent further weight to the centrality of quality engagement in language, whether at home or school, to the optimal development of the young brain (Asaridou et al., 2017).

These issues have been recognised to the degree that education and health policies in many countries are making speech and language development a priority, and numerous investments have been made worldwide to improve early learning and the transition to school (Dicataldo et al., 2020; Dockrell & Hurry, 2018; Hulme et al., 2020; Law & Levickis, 2018). With evidence of success in the implementation of school interventions and home interventions, governments around the world are increasingly recognising the importance of supporting children's early language skills (Amorsen & Wilson, 2020; Cameron et al., 2020; Weadman et al., 2021). Policies and documentation improving the quality of preschool education are increasingly responding to how various aspects of children's development relate to, and affect, each other (Brenneman et al., 2019; Britto et al., 2017; Somolanji Tokić & Borovac, 2020; Van der Wilt et al., 2020). In line with the Vygotskian perspective of children constructing their understanding of the world through their experience with people and objects within their cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978), the current study viewed oral language development as more than just laying a foundation for literacy—it is critical to children's establishment of understanding, expression of intentions and creation of meaning (Ahrenkiel & Holm, 2020).

Using the lens of Bandura's (1982) efficacy theories, this study considered that high levels of parental self-efficacy are integral in promoting children's oral language development (Chen et al., 2020; Glatz & Buchanan, 2021; Mak et al., 2020). It also

considered that teachers with high levels of self-efficacy tend to have a strong sense of agency, enabling them to create a classroom environment that provides more authentic and exploratory children's talk (Grant et al., 2019; Peterson & Greenberg, 2017). However, despite increasing interest in the development of tools to measure early oral language skills and determine thresholds to identify typical development (Adlof & Hogan, 2019; Cloney & Picker, 2021; Stipek et al., 2017), there remains ongoing concern about the capabilities of teachers to confidently identify, measure and address oral language difficulty (Goldfeld et al., 2021b; Stark et al., 2020).

From this research, a focus on improving parent-child interactions for increased oral language learning has been one aspect of addressing the problem of low oral language development in the first year of school (Knauer et al., 2019). Another aspect is the demand for children's language difficulty to be recognised as a public health problem (Beard, 2018; Law, 2019). It is argued that low oral language meets the criteria of placing a considerable burden on society, and this burden is distributed unfairly among all children, with evidence that early preventative strategies could reduce the burden of the condition. This is particularly evident in terms of school readiness skills. As Law et al. (2017a) noted:

“Over time undiagnosed language difficulties are likely to contribute to poor literacy and reduced achievement at school, as well as reduced employment success in adulthood” (p. 26).

In light of all this, it is not surprising that children with language difficulties at school entry are at risk of poor educational attainment and can experience long-term social-emotional difficulties (Burgoyne et al., 2019; Law, 2019; Yew & O’Kearney, 2017). Therefore, knowledge of influences on parents and teachers, and their self-perceived efficacy to mitigate against any negative effects on children's oral language development from within these broader systems, places parents and teachers in a kind of buffer zone for

the developing child. However, without the ability to mitigate wider pressures on children's oral language development, parents and teachers are also in a unique position to have the most detrimental effect on children's development through no fault of their own. Therein lies the need for this study and others like it. Policies can be put in place, resources can be provided, and time and money can be put into information and services, but without understanding the perspectives and sense of efficacy held by those adults closest to children, these efforts are likely to have limited effect on improving low oral language development in the first year of school.

Based on the findings of this study, a parent and teacher efficacy model directed towards improving oral language development for children in the first year of school is proposed (see Figure 6.2).

### ***7.2.1 Addressing Stakeholder Perspectives***

Comments evident in the data from parents and teachers participating in this study (e.g., “When you both work full time and you get in late” [Parent 3] and “It’s such a heavy, full curriculum and fitting everything in is a bit of a problem” [Teacher 1]) clearly indicate the pressure felt by adults to spend time with children. This pressure can lead to a sense of frustration that inhibits agency. A perceived lack of knowledge about oral language was also indicated by comments (e.g., “Parents don’t have an understanding of how oral language is” [Parent 8] and “In your basic teacher training you don’t do much work on oral language development at all” [Teacher 3]). Again, adult stakeholders’ sense that they are hampered by a lack of knowledge to support children could increase feelings of inefficacy, potentially influencing the quality of their engagement with children. A strong understanding about oral language development and children’s social skills was expressed (e.g., “They may withdraw and give up trying or lash out with their peers” [Parent 1] and “They are then frustrated and annoyed and disruptive and sometimes aggressive” [Teacher

2])). These insights could provide a starting point to prioritise oral language in the first year of school, as parents felt it was very important that children had friends, and teachers felt their teaching was greatly affected by negative social behaviours in the classroom. The misuse of technology was also highlighted as an area where improvements could greatly enhance children's oral language development. Comments (e.g., "Parents are getting distracted with mobile phone calls and Facebook" [Parent 6] and "More and more children are given things to keep them quiet" [Teacher 2]) showed that technology is prolific in the lives of children today and that adults are alert to technologies in relation to influences on oral language opportunities. This view was supported by the literature, notably the American Academy of Paediatrics' recent statement that excessive screen time might limit opportunities for adults to engage in positive childhood relational experiences (Council on Communications and Media, 2016).

### ***7.2.2 Improving Stakeholder Self-Efficacy***

To improve parent and teacher efficacy, and thus children's oral language development, increasing access to specialist services could equip parents and teachers with effective strategies to identify and address difficulties as soon as they arise. Comments (e.g., "You could be waiting for up to a year for your child to be seen" [Parent 3] and "Every school cluster should have a speech therapist and an OT" [Teacher 3]) suggested that providing parents and teachers with aid to recognise and implement support for oral language at the microsystem level may also enable them to advocate for change at the macrosystem level.

### ***7.2.3 Children's Oral Language Development in the First Year of School***

Addressing stakeholder perspectives to improve stakeholder efficacy could result in successful oral language development for children, thereby forming the foundation for transition to literacy in the first three years of school and mitigating the effects of low oral

language skills at school entry and later problems with education, employment and mental health (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2019; Snow, 2019). Further, the proposed model supports the view that any child who starts school with oral language difficulty should be monitored and assessed by teachers and speech pathologists (Burgoyne et al., 2019). Training parents and teachers to recognise and monitor children's developing oral language means that by the end of the first year of school, children will have received the crucial support necessary to optimally develop oral language (Bendezu et al., 2018; Davenport & Holt, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019a).

### **7.3 Study Contributions**

The literature review presented in Chapter 2 found that low oral language development in the first year of school was not a problem unique to Australia but an ongoing concern in many parts of the world (McGregor, 2020; Schmerse, 2020; Stillerova et al., 2019; Yew & O'Kearney, 2017). There appeared to be no scholarly disagreement that oral language is a critical foundation skill for literacy and that literacy is an important life skill, with consequences for children's life outcomes. The present study noted how parent and teacher perspectives recognised this but did not prioritise it. Although ages vary, the start of formal schooling is generally agreed to be a major change in children's lives, so much so that the chronological age of first-year children is itself a contentious issue (Balestra et al., 2020; Hanly et al., 2019; Vandell et al., 2016). This study acknowledged the range in school-starting ages and highlighted that careful attention needs to be paid to children's age in published research, as confusion can arise in relation to the age or the stage (starting school) referred to. This study provided an interpretive aspect to the problem of low oral language development in the first year of school from the perspective of parents and teachers.

As soon as children start school, their oral language development takes place through interactions, primarily with parents and teachers. However, this study used Bronfenbrenner's (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) bioecological model of human development to indicate that the problem of low oral language skills cannot be addressed in the school or home alone. The home environment has been shown to have a significant effect on children's readiness for school and their continued engagement through the early years of school in terms of behaviour, wellbeing and early literacy (Bingham et al., 2017; Davies et al., 2020; Madigan et al., 2019).

It is undoubtedly true that the negative effects of poverty, mental health and various other forms of disadvantage affect several aspects of children's development (Christensen et al., 2020; Lervåg et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2020). The undocumented absence of these factors in this study (evident in the lives of the children associated with the participating adults) suggests the problem of children starting school with low oral language skills may exist even among relatively advantaged children. This means that the burden on children already coping with disadvantage when they start school is much greater and in urgent need of redress. This research helps to fill a gap in the literature by suggesting that even in situations of relative advantage, problems of identifying and supporting low oral language development, and shortcomings in the efficacy of adults in the lives of children to address this problem, may exist (Hendricks et al., 2019).

Difficulties with receptive and expressive oral language affect children's early literacy acquisition and create a less than positive disposition towards learning that can become worse over time (McKean et al., 2017; Snow, 2019; Winstanley et al., 2018). This study supported the view that disconnection with peers and adults resulting from the inability to communicate appropriately can lead to anxiety and create further blocks to learning (Bayer et al., 2019; Carpenter et al., 2016; Stillerova et al., 2019). A comment

from Teacher 4 was indicative of this: “If they have poor oral language, it hinders their social development, their ability to play with other children. It hinders their ability to learn”.

Improvements in brain-imaging technologies have added to our knowledge about brain development and highlighted how children’s oral language development requires particular conditions to thrive (such as adults using more complex, responsive language with children) and how children’s play develops their internal state language, thereby enhancing their ability to communicate socially (Hashmi et al., 2021; Levitt & Eagleson, 2018; Merz et al., 2020; Romeo et al., 2021). The proliferation of technology in the lives of children continues to be a rich area of research as both negative and positive effects are identified (Brenneman et al., 2019; Edwards, 2021; Edwards et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2019; Nikolopoulou et al., 2021; Straker et al., 2018). Results from this study echo the confusion reported in the literature by parents and teachers about how to utilise technology to benefit children’s oral language development (Constantino, 2020; Edwards et al., 2017; Nikolopoulou et al., 2021; Petko et al., 2018). This study supports the view that the quality of the language environment and interactions with adults within it are critical components of children’s oral language development, with parents and teachers acknowledging the importance of oral language for children’s emerging literacy, social and emotional skills.

Exploring the problem of low oral language in the first year of school through a constructivist paradigm aided in understanding the behaviour of parents and teachers, and the environmental framework within which they interpret thoughts and actions. By considering the values and beliefs inherent in the perspectives expressed by parents and teachers, it was possible to arrive at their perceived barriers to recognise and address the problem. Acknowledging that parents’ and teachers’ realities are subjective and contextually constructed highlighted the socially and historically constituted power

relations that have mediated their current beliefs and form part of their efficacy to change in the future.

Parents and teachers were invited as participants for in-depth consideration in this study as they are not only directly involved in children's oral language development but are in such proximity that they can have the most effect, both negative and positive, on children's oral language development on a daily basis. Policies can be formulated, resources can be created and training can be provided, but if the barriers these key adult stakeholders identify regarding oral language development are not addressed or recognised in policy, resources, or training, the problem of low oral language development is unlikely to improve. This study highlights the need to build and support parents' and teachers' efficacy to address children's low oral language skills in the first year of school.

#### **7.4 Implications for Theory and Research**

This study drew on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural thinking (including his description of language as a psychological tool and his theory of play as integral to children's development), was situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1986) bioecological model of human development and utilised aspects of Bandura's (1982) concept of self-efficacy. To highlight the critical role of children's oral language development as they transition and progress through the first year of school, the perspectives of key adult stakeholders were the central focus. Vygotsky's (1978) thinking about play as a leading activity informed how particular evidence-based practices, such as play and experiential learning, aid the development of oral language (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020; Allee-Herndon & Roberts, 2021; Armstrong & Sutherland, 2020; Arnott & Yelland, 2020; Edwards, 2011; McLean, 2020; Somolanji Tokić & Borovac, 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's (1986) bioecological model suggests wider overarching systems affect the daily lives and, therefore, the decision-making processes and perspectives of

adults as key stakeholders. Teachers' beliefs about the role of play affects how play is implemented in the classroom. While literacy learning is a central focus in the early years of school, a play-based approach requires teachers to negotiate a balance between open-ended and freely chosen play by children with academic learning led by adults (Pyle et al., 2018). This study also considered stakeholder perspectives using Bandura's (1997) sources of efficacy, as the literature suggests teachers with high self-efficacy seem to be able to use more proactive, student-centred approaches with children (Glackin & Hohenstein, 2018), while those with low self-efficacy find it difficult to create a classroom environment that enhances oral language development through exploratory and authentic talk (Peterson & Greenberg, 2017).

Higher levels of parenting self-efficacy have also been shown to improve developmental outcomes for children (Madigan et al., 2019; Wittkowski et al., 2017). This is particularly important, as many parents are not aware that their children have oral language difficulties (Hendricks et al., 2019). In line with the Vygotskian (1934/1962) theoretical framework of this study, children's development is a socially and culturally mediated process, and the child's mastery of any given leading activity gives rise to the higher mental functions necessary for psychological growth. Therefore, interaction with known aspects of a child's culture, such as digital devices, need to be mediated by adults within the child's social situation of development. This also requires a degree of self-efficacy in teachers at school and parents at home, so that oral language is enhanced across both systems (Azad et al., 2020).

Findings from this study suggest that understanding key adult stakeholder perspectives on children's oral language provides insight into the barriers they face in supporting children. Directly addressing these barriers via more targeted policies, resources, education and training has the potential to positively affect children's oral

language development in the first year of school. Further investigation is warranted, as some parents felt incapable of supporting children's oral language development in the first year of school. They may require support through programs and resources carefully targeted in a way that encourages parent participation with children, such as the Abecedarian Approach (Koshyk et al., 2021; Sparling et al., 2021). Another program implemented in school settings, Families as First Teachers, uses a cultural competence approach with Aboriginal children and their mothers to address the high level of vulnerability, particularly evident in the language domain, when they start school (Page et al., 2019). These and similar programs show that improvements can be made when parents are positively supported as significant adults in their children's learning (Krijnen et al., 2020; Leech et al., 2018).

In recommending a public health approach to relational health, the AAP suggests encouraging developmentally appropriate play and promoting positive parenting as two examples of changes at the provider level as a primary type of prevention strategy. In line with the current study, the AAP also recommends screening for barriers to safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their adults (Garner et al., 2021). Some teachers did not feel as though they could prioritise oral language development over other systemic requirements in the early years of school (e.g., "Data drives the school as much as we wouldn't want it to, that is something that happens" [Teacher 1] and "Prescribed activities are taking priority over play-based learning" [Teacher 3]) attest to this situation.

Teachers may need certain system requirements to be reduced (i.e., teaching practices and testing procedures that decrease opportunities for oral language to be reduced) and increased opportunities for dialogic teaching methods, teaching through the arts, time for conversations with and between children on a daily basis, and authentic assessment of language skills. It is also worth considering to what extent teachers are

hampered in their ability to adequately support children arriving at school with low oral language skills when parents are also ill-supported in fostering children's oral language development in the home environment.

## **7.5 Limitations**

This study involved a small number of participants in a relatively socio-economically advantaged area. Respondents were largely homogenous, all identifying as female mothers or teachers. While the sample size and structure mean the findings cannot be generalised to other populations, the key focus of the research was stakeholder perspectives on oral language. Thus, the sampling was appropriate for the focus of the research and the qualitative approach deployed, and provides new insight into the barriers and sense of efficacy experienced by adult stakeholders regarding children's low oral language development in the first year of school.

## **7.6 Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research on children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing needs to examine how parents and teachers can be best supported and enabled in fostering children's oral language development, identifying the range of societal and institutional barriers to providing this support. A possible avenue would be to concentrate on disseminating strategies for supporting oral language, such as through increased play-based learning opportunities using technology, in a manner that appeals to both parents and teachers, such as utilising apps and social media with children in a safe and productive way (Arnott & Yelland, 2020; Nikolopoulou et al., 2021; Paciga et al., 2017; Sung, 2019).

There is also emerging evidence that apps and other forms of digital connections with parents via government or not-for-profit organisations can prompt parental participation in play and/or oral language development (McClure et al., 2018). This is in line with the Vygotskian perspective of human activity being mediated by tools with the support of a

knowledgeable other. Bandura's (1982) efficacy theory would be helpful to further explore ways to improve the efficacy of adults in supporting children's oral language development and, therefore, the effectiveness of the knowledgeable other. Given that all participants in the present study identified as female, further research could seek the perspectives of those who identify as otherwise in the lives of children.

Further research is also needed to understand how play, relative to oral language development, can be facilitated in school settings. Of relevance to play in school settings, this study highlighted conflicting views from and between parents and teachers about play-based learning. While there was strong agreement among parents and teachers about the importance of play, when under pressure of time and competing demands, some parents and teachers did not view play as a primary means to develop children's oral language skills for literacy and consequent social and emotional wellbeing. The role of play could be researched further from the perspective of implementing an arts-based curriculum in the early years of school, thereby bridging the gap between home and school through language-rich experiences (Ewing, 2019; Walsh et al., 2019).

Following on from the findings of this study, future research could explore how to develop cost-effective approaches to collaboration between teachers, parents and speech pathologists (Azad et al., 2020; Oke et al., 2020; Van der Pluijijm et al., 2019). This could improve parent and teacher self-efficacy in understanding and promoting oral language by optimising the interrelated connections between the microsystems of the school and home environments for children's oral language development. If children enter school with adequate oral language development and are well supported by parents and teachers, the foundation is laid for literacy and social and emotional competence, with known positive future trajectories for school and life (Burchinal et al., 2020; Streubel et al., 2020).

When speaking of starting school, oral language is worth supporting.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Questionnaire

**Oral language refers to the use of speaking and listening skills  
to express and comprehend knowledge, feelings and ideas.**

These questions are about *your* perspective on the relative importance of oral language development in the first year of school. (Space is provided on the following pages for your responses.)

1. Do you agree with the view that low oral language skills in children's first year of school are related to low reading and writing achievement in national standardised tests in later years? Why do you think that?
2. Do you agree with the view that low oral language skill development is related to behavioural issues and anxiety in children? Why do you think that?
3. Do you think that it is essential for teachers to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?
4. Do you think that it is essential for parents to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?
5. To what extent do you feel confident in your ability to help your child/children develop their oral language skills successfully? Why do you think that?
6. Do you believe that play-based learning provides the best opportunities for children's oral language development? Why do you think that?

**Background information** (confidential)

|                                                                                                                                                                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Name                                                                                                                                                                                |  |
| Age                                                                                                                                                                                 |  |
| Relationship to child<br>(i.e., mother, father, teacher, etc.)                                                                                                                      |  |
| Highest level of education<br>(i.e., Certificate, diploma, degree, etc.)                                                                                                            |  |
| Is English your first language?                                                                                                                                                     |  |
| Do you have a language disability?                                                                                                                                                  |  |
| If you are a parent, does your child have a language disability?                                                                                                                    |  |
| If you are a parent, what place in the family does your child occupy?<br>(i.e., eldest, youngest, etc.)                                                                             |  |
| If you are a teacher, how long have you worked in Early Years classrooms?                                                                                                           |  |
| If you are a teacher, have you had professional training in oral language development?<br><br>If so, would you say it was adequate to support the language needs in your classroom? |  |

**Question 1**

Do you agree with the view that low oral language skills in children's first year of school are connected with their low reading and writing achievement in national standardised tests in later years? Why do you think that?

**Question 2**

Do you agree with the view that low oral language skill development is related to behavioural issues and anxiety in children? Why do you think that?

**Question 3**

Do you think that it is essential for teachers to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?

**Question 4**

Do you think that it is essential for parents to have a good understanding of how children's oral language develops? Why do you think that?

**Question 5**

To what extent do you feel confident in your ability to help your child/children develop their oral language skills successfully? Why do you think that?

**Question 6**

Do you believe that play-based learning provides the best opportunities for children's oral language development? Why do you think that?

**Thank you for completing this questionnaire**

## Appendix B: Participant Information Letter and Consent Form

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

**PROJECT TITLE:** Speak Listen Connect: Investigating key perspectives on oral language development at school entry

**APPLICATION NUMBER:** (2017- 348E)

**PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR:** Professor Brendan Bartlett

**CO-SUPERVISOR:** Professor Susan Edwards

**STUDENT RESEARCHER:** Mrs Deirdre Tate

**STUDENT'S DEGREE:** Doctor of Education EdD

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### ***What is the project about?***

The research project investigates your perspectives on children's oral language development in the first year of school. Everyone wants the best for the children in their care and in today's society there are a lot of competing demands for time, resources and energy. This research will help me examine how parents and teachers perceive the importance of oral language development as children begin formal schooling. It also will guide me in considering what parents and teachers know and understand about their roles as significant adults supporting the children's development. Findings from this project will contribute to a deeper understanding of the pivotal role of parents and teachers in building the foundations for children's successful transition to school.

#### ***Who is undertaking the project?***

This project is being conducted by Mrs Deirdre Tate and will form the basis of her studies for the degree of Doctor of Education at Australian Catholic University under the supervision of Professor Brendan Bartlett and Professor Susan Edwards. Mrs Tate holds a Master of Teaching Degree from Griffith University and is currently a teacher at St Rita's Catholic Primary School. She began her career in England and has been teaching in Australia for ten years. Mrs Tate is also a founding member of the Early Learning Redlands Group, a community group dedicated to the sharing of information and good practice to improve outcomes for local children aged 0–8 years.

#### ***Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?***

The project presents no significant risks or demands of the participants other than a commitment to complete a questionnaire and if selected, one individual interview. It is not anticipated that either of these processes pose any risk or discomfort for participants other than those of being involved in an interview environment.

#### ***What will I be asked to do?***

You will be asked to complete a short survey and, if selected, to participate in one interview. The interviews will take place at St Rita's Catholic Primary School at a mutually convenient time. It will be a relaxed, semi-structured process, with the focus on gaining an understanding of what each participant's experiences and views are when discussing children's oral language development. The interviews will be audio-recorded for efficient and accurate data collection. All recordings and data collected will be identity-coded and destroyed following completion of the project.

***How much time will the project take?***

The questionnaire has less than twenty questions and should take only 15–20 minutes to complete. If selected for interview, the interview will take no more than 30–40 minutes and you will be provided with a list of questions beforehand.

***What are the benefits of the research project?***

By undertaking this project, we hope to build the current knowledge base of how parents and teachers view the role of oral language in children's first year of school. The project aims to investigate parent and teacher perspectives as well as the influencing aspects of environments and organisations, to assist in providing a comprehensive, evidence-based picture of aids and barriers to children's oral language development in their first year of school.

***Can I withdraw from the study?***

Participation in this project is completely voluntary. You are not under any obligation to participate. If you agree to do so, you can withdraw from the project at any time without adverse consequences.

***Will anyone else know the results of the project?***

Participants names and the name of the school will not be used in any material that ensues from the study, including any university or professional presentations or publications. At all times the right of privacy, confidentiality and respect for the participant will be observed.

***Will I be able to find out the results of the project?***

At the completion of this research the results will be made available to all participants. Please note that this project will safeguard the confidentiality of all participants.

***Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?***

If you would like to know more about the project, you can contact Mrs Tate by email at:

[dtate@bne.catholic.edu.au](mailto:dtate@bne.catholic.edu.au)

You can also ring the school office and arrange to meet Mrs Tate before or after school

**Ph: (07) 3207 6628**

***What if I have a complaint or any concerns?***

The study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Australian Catholic University (review number 2017-348E). If you have any complaints or concerns about the conduct of the project, you may write to the Manager of the Human Research Ethics Committee care of the Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research):

Manager, Ethics  
c/o Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)  
Australian Catholic University  
North Sydney Campus  
PO Box 968  
NORTH SYDNEY, NSW 2059  
Ph.: 02 9739 2519  
Fax: 02 9739 2870  
Email: [resethics.manager@acu.edu.au](mailto:resethics.manager@acu.edu.au)

Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

***I want to participate! How do I sign up?***

If you agree to participate in this research, please sign both copies of the consent form. Keep one copy and return the other to the principal supervisor: Professor Brendan Bartlett, Faculty of Education, 1100 Nudgee Road, Banyo, 4014.

Thank you for your consideration of this research project.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Deirdre Tate, BSc (Hons), MTEACH

CONSENT FORM  
*Copy for Participant to Keep*

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Speak Listen Connect: Investigating key perspectives on oral language development at school entry**

APPLICATION NUMBER: .....(2017-348E) .....

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Brendan Bartlett

CO-SUPERVISOR: Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs. Deirdre Tate

I ..... (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Participant information letter. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this project that will take place between January and August 2018. I recognise that while the project will run between January and August 2018, my direct participation in the form of an audio-recorded interview will be dependent upon selection and will take place towards the end of this timeframe. I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE: ..... DATE:

.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE:

.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE: .....

CONSENT FORM

TITLE OF PROJECT: **Speak Listen Connect: Investigating key perspectives on oral language development at school entry**

APPLICATION NUMBER: .....(2017-348E) .....

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: Professor Brendan Bartlett

CO-SUPERVISOR: Professor Susan Edwards

STUDENT RESEARCHER: Mrs. Deirdre Tate

I ..... (*the participant*) have read and understood the information provided in the Participant information letters. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this project that will take place between January and August 2018. I recognise that while the project will run between January and August 2018, my direct participation in the form of an audio-recorded interview will be dependent upon selection and will take place towards the end of this timeframe. I realise that I can withdraw my consent at any time without adverse consequences. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

NAME OF PARTICIPANT: .....

SIGNATURE: ..... DATE:

.....

SIGNATURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR: .....

DATE:

.....

SIGNATURE OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: .....

DATE: .....

## Appendix C: Interview Schedule and Plan

| Interview schedule       |       |                     |             |
|--------------------------|-------|---------------------|-------------|
| Date                     | Time  | Location (school)   | Participant |
| Wednesday, 1 August 2018 | 17:15 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 3    |
| Wednesday, 1 August 2018 | 15:30 | Prep classroom      | Teacher 2   |
| Wednesday, 1 August 2018 | 16:00 | Prep classroom      | Teacher 4   |
| Wednesday, 1 August 2018 | 16:30 | Prep classroom      | Teacher 1   |
| Thursday, 2 August 2018  | 15:45 | Classroom 3 A Block | Teacher 3   |
| Thursday, 9 August 2018  | 15:15 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 8    |
| Friday, 10 August 2018   | 15:15 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 2    |
| Thursday, 16 August 2018 | 15:15 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 1    |
| Friday, 17 August 2018   | 15:00 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 6    |
| Monday, 20 August 2018   | 15:00 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 7    |
| Friday, 31 August 2018   | 15:30 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 4    |
| Friday, 19 October 2018  | 15:15 | Classroom 3 A Block | Parent 5    |

### Semi-formal Interview Plan

*Minimise sense of 'risk' as much as possible. Remind participants of confidentiality, no judgement, free to say how they feel, need for their expertise as a parent of a child in Prep, representing all parents with children in first year of school in Australia today.*

### Research questions:

1. What are parents' and teachers' perspectives on the role of children's oral language development for literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?

*Need to discover: Is children's oral language development considered a priority? In what way?*

2. What are parent and teachers' perceived capacity to influence young children's oral language development?

*Need to discover: To what extent do parents and teachers feel they can influence children's oral language development?*

**Main interview questions:**

- What do you feel are the most important skills children need to have in order to be successful in their first year of school?
- My studies so far have shown that lots of children are starting school with very low oral language skills, what do you think might be causing this?
- What activities do you do to help your child/children develop their oral language?
- How do you feel your child/ren's oral language is developing this year?
- If you could think of three things that can be done to address the problem of low oral language development, what would they be?

**Probing questions:**

How did you feel about that? Can you give me some examples? You said this, did you mean...?

What kind of oral language activities do you do with your children [in class (for teachers) or at home (for parents)]?

What do you think can be done to improve children's oral language development?

*Closing comments—ensure respondents feel empowered and that they have been listened to.*

## Appendix D: Codebook Field Explanations

| CODE              | DEFINITION                                                                                                                              | DATA EXTRACT                                                                                                                   | DATA                                                                                                |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                   |                                                                                                                                         | TEACHER                                                                                                                        | EXTRACT<br>PARENT                                                                                   |
| <b>TIME</b>       | Code refers to respondents talking about a perceived lack of time                                                                       | ‘It requires much one-on-one support, which I cannot give with 30 children in the class’.                                      | ‘You just get so busy in life, that it’s just come home, bath, showers, do a little bit, you know’. |
| <b>KNOWLEDGE</b>  | Code refers to respondents talking about lack of knowledge and their need for knowledge to support children’s oral language development | ‘Prep teachers need to be either trained or aware of, or have some professional development in early learning as a specialty’. | ‘But they [parents] don’t know the types of questions or how do I ask questions’.                   |
| <b>TECHNOLOGY</b> | Code refers to respondents talking about any form of digital devices                                                                    | ‘I find a lot of the time; children are stuck in front of the TV or the computer playing video games’.                         | ‘I try to choose educational things, they’re still watching rubbish as well’.                       |



## Appendix E: Sample Interview Responses Related to Research Questions

### by Theme

| Perceived importance of children's oral language development for Literacy                                                                                                                                                   | Perceived importance of children's oral language development for wellbeing                                                                                                                      | Perceived efficacy to overcome barriers to children's oral language development                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                       | Knowledge                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| A lot of parents want to engage with their children and use that book or use, you know, other opportunities to engage with their children, but they don't know the types of questions or how do I ask questions. (Parent 5) | Yes, children who are unable to articulate what they would like to get across, become frustrated and begin to act out because they are unable to communicate their needs and wants. (Parent 13) | I guess bigger classes, high needs. I think that it takes a bit of experience to manage all that. So, I think too, Prep teachers need to be either trained or aware of, or have some professional development in early learning as a specialty, and to see basically where they've come from. (Teacher 4) |
| Time                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Time                                                                                                                                                                                            | Time                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| When I think to myself, 'oh gosh, I haven't read a book to them in two days', or you know, like their school books, I'll sit                                                                                                | You just get so busy in life, that it's just come home, bath, showers, do a little bit, you know, get that quality time because                                                                 | I feel confident that I know how to help most of the children in my care, but it requires much one-on-one support, which I cannot give                                                                                                                                                                    |

|                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| down and read to all three of them when I have a minute you know (Parent 12)                                                                                            | life's busy and at school they have so much homework and so much stuff to do. (Parent 1)                                                                                                                                                    | with 30 children in the class and with some of the extreme behaviours that I need to keep under control as well. (Teacher 3)                                                                      |
| Technology                                                                                                                                                              | Technology                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Technology                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| I try to choose educational things, they're still watching rubbish as well. (Parent 1)                                                                                  | There's not as much social interaction in the family, if kids have their own computer in their room, they go off and then they're isolated so they're not learning the social interactions and those important language skills. (Teacher 3) | Parents are getting distracted with mobile phone calls and Facebook, social media and so forth. (Parent 11)                                                                                       |
| Social                                                                                                                                                                  | Social                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Social                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| It hinders their ability to learn, when learning literacy, being able to listen, being able to express their ideas, I guess, listen to a story. The impact is when they | They need to be able to have good oral skills so that they can express their needs, they can explain their thoughts, they can say what they need and what they don't need, they can                                                         | I think with the increase of behaviours and a lack of the oral language coming through, that maybe there needs to be: extra funding that goes towards prep, that can go towards bringing in extra |

|                                      |                                          |                                                      |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| go to read and write.<br>(Teacher 4) | say what they're feeling.<br>(Teacher 2) | resources, or bringing in extra<br>help. (Teacher 1) |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|

## **Appendix F: Ethics Approval**

Tuesday 10/04 at 11:52

Dear Applicant,

Principal Investigator: Prof. Brendan Bartlett, Prof Susan Edwards

Student Researcher: Deirdre Tate (Doctoral)

Ethics Register Number: 2017-348E

Project Title: Speak Listen Connect: Investigating key perspectives on oral language development at school entry

Date Approved: 10/04/2018

Ethics Clearance End Date: 31/12/2018

This is to certify that the above application has been reviewed by the Australian Catholic University Human Research Ethics Committee (ACU HREC). The application has been approved for the period given above.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that all conditions of approval are adhered to, that they seek prior approval for any modifications and that they notify the HREC of any incidents or unexpected issues impacting on participants that arise in the course of their research. Researchers are also responsible for ensuring that they adhere to the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct

in Human Research, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and the University's Code of Conduct.

Any queries relating to this application should be directed to the Ethics Secretariat ([res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)). It is helpful if quote your ethics approval number in all communications with us.

If you require a formal approval certificate in addition to this email, please respond via reply email and one will be issued.

We wish you every success with your research.

Kind regards,

Kylie Pashley

on behalf of ACU HREC Chair, Assoc Prof. Michael Baker

Senior Research Ethics Officer | Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research)

Australian Catholic University

T: +61 2 9739 2646 E: [res.ethics@acu.edu.au](mailto:res.ethics@acu.edu.au)

## **Appendix G: Invitation to Participants for Confirmation and Clarification of Interview Transcripts**

---

Dear

Thank you for contributing to this research. Your viewpoint is very valuable and will add to the body of evidence needed to affect change in the future. For the purposes of member checking, please read the attached transcript of our interview, add any further thoughts on the next page, then sign and return.

As you know, this study concerns the increasing problem of children starting school with inadequate levels of oral language development to meet the social and academic demands necessary. The knowledge and understanding teachers/parents have and their perceived ability to sufficiently support children's oral language development, may be critical to address this issue. We need to know what current barriers exist for you as a teacher/parent, that may prevent you, or other teachers/parents from fully supporting children to develop these skills.

Please sign here:

---

Kind regards

Deirdre Tate  
BSc (Hons) MTEACH

---

Do your answers adequately express **your** perspective of what you know and understand about children's oral language development and its relation to literacy learning and wellbeing in the first year of formal schooling?

Yes

☐

Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

---

Do your answers adequately express **your** perspective on your capacity to influence your child's oral language development?

Yes

☐

Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

---

Do your answers adequately express **your** perspective on what can be done and when, to tackle the problem of declining oral language skills?

Yes

☐

Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify:

---

Do your answers adequately express **your** perspective on what you see as barriers preventing teachers/parents from fully supporting children's oral language development?

Yes

☐

Not exactly, I would like to add or clarify: