A THEME-BASED CURRICULUM WITH EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPMENTALLY
APPROPRIATE PRACTICES AND SOCIAL SKILLS SPECIFICALLY FOR
CHILDREN AGES 14 TO 26 MONTHS

Leanne M. Rae
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2002

PROJECT

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SUMMER
2011
A THEME-BASED CURRICULUM WITH EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPMENTALLY
APPROPRIATE PRACTICES AND SOCIAL SKILLS SPECIFICALLY FOR
CHILDREN AGES 14 TO 26 MONTHS

A Project

by

Leanne M. Rae

Approved by:

__________________________________, Committee Chair
Ana Garcia-Nevarez, Ph.D.

__________________________________, Second Reader
Sheri E. Hembree, Ph.D.

Date
Student:  Leanne M. Rae

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this project is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the project.

_____________________________, Graduate Coordinator _________________
Sheri E. Hembree, Ph.D.                                    Date

Department of Child Development
Abstract of
A THEME-BASED CURRICULUM WITH EMPHASIS ON DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES AND SOCIAL SKILLS SPECIFICALLY FOR CHILDREN AGES 14 TO 26 MONTHS
by
Leanne M. Rae

Statement of Problem
Creating activities that challenge toddlers has been difficult for teachers to develop. California has designed foundations as a resource for preschool teachers to construct and implement activities that assist children in social-emotional development, language and literacy, English-language development and mathematics (California Department of Education, 2008). Other resources are the approach to use in the development of such curricula such as a theme-based and developmentally appropriate practice (Katz & Chard, 2000). However, these resources are often not geared toward children younger than three years of age. The current project is designed to assist toddler teachers in the preparation of developmentally appropriate activities, which are linked, to the California Preschool Learning Foundations (California Department of Education, 2008).
Sources of Data

To develop the curriculum, the scholarly literature and California Preschool Foundations were consulted. Vygotsky’s (1989) theoretical ideas of the Zone of Proximal Development and the importance of social interactions in cognitive development served as the basis for the project. The review of literature focused on the following areas: developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), theme-based curricula (Katz & Chard, 2000), Reggio Emilia approach (New, 2003), the preschool foundations (California Department of Education, 2008), and social competence skills (Brownell, 1990).

Conclusions Reached

The classroom should include a well-rounded environment that fosters the development of young children. The resource materials in this theme-based curriculum will comprise of challenging lesson plans that are in line with the current research on the best practices in teaching young children and that compliment the California preschool learning foundations (California Department of Education, 2008).

______________________________, Committee Chair
Ana Garcia-Nevarez, Ph. D.

____________________________
Date
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my husband, Christopher Rae, who deserves recognition for his patience and understanding. This day would not be the same for me. Thank you my love! Without Lucille Sexton this degree and endeavor would never have transpired! She assisted me financially and gave me inspiration to get my project finished! I would also like to recognize that my mom, Sharon Collester has been my constant motivator and encourager and she gave me my never-ending hope of finishing my project and degree! Without my mom and her prayers, this day really would never have happened! Thank you mommy!

Thank you to my colleagues, friends, and especially my family! Without all of you and your love, support, and encouragement this day would never have happened!
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ana Garcia-Nevarez for not giving up on me and for her continued commitment to me over the many years that I worked on my project! It has been a privilege to work alongside you. Also I would like to thank Sheri Hembree for encouraging me and for assisting with the coursework involved as well as the final touches for me to get this project finished!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................... vi

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION .......................................................................................................................... 1
   Statement of the Problem ........................................................................................................... 1
   Purpose of the Project ............................................................................................................... 6
   Significance of the Project ....................................................................................................... 8
   Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................................... 10
   Definitions of Terms ............................................................................................................. 12
   Development of Project Materials ....................................................................................... 13
   Limitations ............................................................................................................................. 14
   Organization of the Project .................................................................................................. 15

2. LITERATURE REVIEW .............................................................................................................. 17
   Developmentally Appropriate Practice ............................................................................... 18
   Theme-Based Curricula ......................................................................................................... 20
   Reggio Emilia Approach ..................................................................................................... 24
   Preschool Foundations ......................................................................................................... 27
   Social Competence ............................................................................................................ 31
   Summary ............................................................................................................................... 34

3. METHOD ..................................................................................................................................... 35
   Project Design ....................................................................................................................... 35
   Settings and Participants ....................................................................................................... 36
   Development of the Curriculum .......................................................................................... 37
   Implementation of the Curriculum ....................................................................................... 39

4. DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS ........................................... 45
   Discussion ............................................................................................................................... 45
   Conclusions and Recommendations .................................................................................. 47
Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The toddler years are an important time in children’s growth and development. As soon as children are able to crawl, grab, climb and sit up, they are curious about the world around them (Morrison, 2001). They are developing a sense of agency, as well as learning to trust the people around them, and they are acquiring social competence (Dodge, 1995).

In today’s world of dual income families, many toddlers are enrolled in preschool or daycare programs. According to Kinch and Schweinhart (2004) in 2000, 55% of women in the labor force were mothers of children under one year of age. Furthermore, in 2001, 64% of mothers who had children under age six were also in the labor force. For these families, child care is a necessity, and both formal and informal child care arrangements have increased over the past three decades (Kinch & Schweinhart, 2004).

Inasmuch as daycare is in high demand, the quality of the program is as important to most parents (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). Quality care is defined by Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, and Howes (2002) as a childcare facility staffed with caregivers who are stable, trained in appropriate child development practices and who in turn are able to assist children in proper problem solving techniques. Furthermore, quality childcare programs are found to assist in reducing family stressors due to the family
support that is offered (Howes, 1990).

Quality care includes developmentally appropriately curriculum that promotes skill development and social skills (Dodge, 1995). Currently, curriculum materials for toddlers are lacking in resources for teachers to teach independent and social interaction skills, as well as age appropriate materials. Generally, the activities included in a toddler curriculum are geared toward children three years and older, and minimal activities are specified for children two and younger. There is a need for available resources for teachers serving children of this age. Some teachers in the early education field find it difficult to locate age appropriate activities for toddlers ranging in age from 14 to 26 months (Soler & Miller, 2003).

Teachers and caregivers find it difficult to provide interesting and challenging activities for the toddlers they encounter, and they struggle to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices (Soler & Miller, 2003). The National Association for the Education of Young Children refers to a developmentally appropriate practice as the teacher’s ability to recognize the level of each child and to provide activities that are challenging and that each child is able to achieve (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The teacher must take the child’s age into consideration and attune the activities to the uniqueness of each individual. The activities should be suited to the child’s learning and development as well as challenging in order to arouse interest and promote the child’s progress. Incorporating developmentally appropriate activities at an early age, in toddlerhood, will benefit not only the children but also the society as a whole due to the
long-term positive outcomes from implementing such practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). For example, Dodge (1995) reports that with early positive experiences in the classroom children will succeed not only in school but also in life. The reason for this success is intentional implementation of developmentally appropriate practices (California Department of Education, 2008).

The current project, a theme-based developmentally appropriate curriculum geared toward children aged 14 to 26 months, is designed to benefit toddlers by keeping them involved in creative activities such as acting out various animal movements, imitating animal sounds, and even acting out feelings (music and movement), but would also provide challenging activities that build resilience and promote competent social interactions and the development of social skills (Utay & Utay, 2005).

Challenging activities are those that cause children to make an effort to conquer something and in this case, in a particular developmental domain such as cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language (Katz & Chard, 2000). An example of a challenging activity would be a teacher concentrating on strengthening the fine motor skills of a toddler by having the child use tweezers to pick up beans off of a tray and place them in a cup. This activity would be considered a challenge in the physical domain of development. Creating lesson plans that address all developmental domains can be a challenge for teachers, let alone implementing activities that will enrich the lives of children in an effort to prepare them for Kindergarten and beyond (California Department of Education, 2008). The current project is aimed at providing teachers with materials
that provide such challenging activities for toddlers. The author created various theme-based activities to be implemented in the toddler classroom, due to the idea that themes can assist children with the application of some basic skills while allowing them to enjoy some arts, crafts, dramatic play and other developmentally appropriate activities (Katz & Chard, 2000). Furthermore, with assistance from the teacher, toddlers can expand on their basic skills and refine them.

One way to ensure that children will strive to meet a challenge is to build up resilience. Resilience enables individuals to master certain skills, and overcome hardships and challenges (Alvord & Grados, 2005). Essentially, building up resilience in children and challenging them go hand in hand. The current project focuses on developing curricula that promotes such self-reliance and resilience in toddlers (Alvord & Grados, 2005).

Recognizing the importance of school readiness and quality childcare, each state in the United States has created or is creating guidelines and standards for preschool programs (Boone, 2003). In 2008, in California, the Department of Education published the California Preschool Learning Foundations comprised of several developmental areas, such as social-emotional development, language and literacy, English-language development and mathematics. In the publication the authors discuss the importance of school readiness as well as closing the achievement gap in California (California Department of Education, 2008). In addition, the authors discuss such competencies as knowledge and skills, that with appropriate support, all young children generally will
exhibit. The current project provides developmentally appropriate activities that are linked to these foundations and that also present a challenge to the toddler (Katz & Chard, 2003). Furthermore, Boone (2003) discusses the importance of teachers acquiring the knowledge of childrens’ development in order to implement developmentally appropriate practices that eventually assist with school readiness. Once toddler teachers attain this knowledge, they will have a better idea of developmental practices as well as implement challenging activities in the classroom (Boone, 2003).

The investigator of this project has witnessed children’s abilities in the 14 to 26 month age range, and reports that toddlers, if given the opportunity, can master several tasks that are similar to what the preschoolers have accomplished. For example, in a pegboard activity, with some trial and error 15 to 35-month-old toddlers have succeeded in placing pegs in the holes of pegboards (Jennings, 1993). This research supports the notion that this activity is developmentally appropriate for children 14 to 26 months, the target age of the current project. Such results are borne out in empirical study of toddlers’ skills. For example, Chen, Keen, Rosander and Hofsten (2010) investigated the kinematics of reaching on toddlers aged 18 and 21 months, with a tower building activity. They found that for the precise task of building a tower, toddlers slowed their reach to pick up a block and slowed even more as their hand approached the tower (Chen, Keen, Rosander & Hofsten, 2010). In other words, the toddlers exhibited intentional actions and thus were able to succeed in this gross motor activity. The author of this project contends that toddlers are capable of succeeding at many other activities including fine motor,
emotions, dramatic play and cognitive activities, and may benefit from more challenging activities.
Purpose of the Project

The purpose of this project is to develop a theme-based developmentally appropriate curriculum specifically targeted to early childhood programs serving toddlers ranging in age from 14 to 26 months. The reason for this targeted age is due to a lack of available curricula geared toward children under the age of three years. While there are several challenging theme-based curriculum programs for older children (Haas, 2000; Lonning, DeFranco, & Weinland, 1998; Melear & Lunsford, 2007; Thurmann & Otten, 1995), most of the resources that are geared for children younger than three years is deficient in challenging the child cognitively, physically, and socially. For example, in *Active Learning for Ones* by Cryer, Harms, and Bourland (1987) there is an activity called “Fill the cup” in which the teacher is to give one-year-olds small food pieces in a short cup and show them how to use two fingers to pick up the small pieces. This is an age appropriate activity. However, the author of this project created an activity similar but in addition the activity includes tongs in which the toddlers are to pick up small objects and put into and take out of a bowl. This part of the activity is challenging for the toddlers in that at first they may be unable to use the tongs appropriately but with practice they eventually may be able to do so. Furthermore, the latter activity strengthens the toddlers’ fine motor skills as well as enhances their symbolic representations, which Vygotsky claims assists with cognition and communication (Sigel, 1999). This type of
activity not only uses Vygotsky’s idea of symbolic representations but also pulls on his idea of the Zone of Proximal Development which is the child’s area of development that is led by a more accomplished adult or peer and the difference of the child’s own ability along with the assistance from the other person (Morrison, 2001).

The current project provides a theme-based curriculum in the form of lesson plans based on what is referred to by the California Preschool Learning Foundations (2008) as competencies. A competency influences children's' ability and success in preschool and further (California Department of Education, 2008). Some examples of the themes and competencies in this current project include; (a) Me, Myself, & I (self-regulation, acting out feelings), (b) Occupations (interaction with peers, dramatic play), (c) Familiarity (friendships, building together), and (d) Rhyming (phonological awareness, matching game).

The current project provides materials that serve to educate teachers about issues related to developmentally appropriate curriculum for toddlers (Boone, 2003). The current project also includes a list of resources consisting of ideas for creating an interactive curriculum intended for parents in the home. The researcher anticipates that this list of resources will better prepare teachers for a successful lesson plan that can be implemented in the toddler classroom. Furthermore, this list will include an outline of the standards that have been developed by the California Preschool Learning Foundations, Vol. 1, (2008) and that are applicable to the target age group (California Department of Education, 2008).
Another goal of the project is to design activities that promote social skills. The toddler years are also critical for the development of social skills. Utay and Utay (2005) noted the importance of facilitating appropriate social skills at an early age and the far-reaching affects the development of these skills has in the life of adults in areas such as career success, job longevity, promotions, and general job success, and it is a precondition for academic success.

Significance of the Project

Toddlers can benefit from being engaged in developmentally appropriate activities in that it creates the opportunity for them to succeed in the task at hand which promotes their interests and assists in their progress through various activities that encompass all aspects of development. The goal of the teacher is to create an environment rich in challenges so that the toddler will thrive and the achievement gap will close for future accomplishments (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

According to Dodge (1995), using a developmentally appropriate curriculum is a key factor in creating quality programs for young children. The developmentally appropriate curriculum should be based on theory and should also provide educators a structure for planning the curriculum. In addition, some childcare programs, as well as some elementary schools (Haas, 2000) and colleges (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt,
use a curriculum that is based on meaningful themes. An example of such a theme in the preschool context is “Me, Myself, and I” used at Discovery Tree Schools. This particular theme covers character building, emotions, and social skills. Other themes are Discovery Days, covering new friends, new school and new rules, as well as Safety and Our School, which include safety drills, both on the playground and away from school safety. Such themes are used in the toddler room as well as at the preschool level. At Discovery Tree Schools, the main focus is teaching 3- to 5-year-olds and the curriculum is designed for this preschool age group, however the curriculum has been modified for the toddlers. There is evidence that toddlers are able to achieve a great deal more than expected; therefore it is necessary to identify specific learning objectives for this age group (Chen, Keen, Rosander, & Hofsten, 2010).

Creating a developmentally appropriate learning environment includes the teacher modeling how to perform a task and giving praise when the task is completed. Hakman and Sullivan (2009) found that when given short verbal directions, toddlers showed higher levels of compliance in a clean up task. Clean up is a daily part of the classroom, therefore teachers can incorporate various ways to make this activity interesting for toddlers to participate in and can succeed at with little effort and have a sense of accomplishment. It is a developmentally appropriate activity and can incorporate math (sorting), social-emotional development (interactions with peers), and language (use and conventions) (California Department of Education, 2008). Incorporating activities that
include these various developmental areas will assist children along the pathway of learning and development in a healthy way (California Department of Education, 2008). Further, an important ability that children gain when introduced to social behaviors at an early age is the capability of using such practices appropriately in different contexts. Brownell (1990) studied peer social skills in children 18 and 24 months of age in mixed-age as well as same-age dyads, finding that by the second year of life, children have the ability to adjust their behaviors with a peer partner as opposed to “responding in kind” (p. 844). Findings such as these emphasize the importance of implementing appropriate social skills in the toddler classroom, as well as a challenging theme-based curriculum (Brownell, 1990; Katz & Chard, 2000).

Children are able to function in social situations if they are better equipped with the knowledge of appropriate behaviors. Teachers, who also incorporate structure and guidance in the classroom through modeling, are empowering children with the great gift of knowledge in behaving appropriately in social situations. While learning these skills in the classroom, children are also better prepared for situations in the “real world”. By teaching children these qualities, teachers are helping to improve society one child at a time (Utay & Utay, 2005).

Theoretical Framework
Vygotsky used the term Zone of Proximal Development to refer to the child’s actual development in relation to the child’s potential development; it is the zone in between such levels (Wertsch, 1992). This zone takes place within the child’s intramental (within self) and intermental (with others) functioning. This type of learning cannot take place without the assistance of more competent adults or even peers. Therefore, the child’s cognition occurs within his or her own mind, while also interacting with others. It is Vygotsky’s premise that an individual’s cognition develops through his or her own mental functioning and through social interactions with others (Wertsch, 1992). Therefore, using developmentally appropriate activities in the classroom will foster toddlers’ cognition within their Zone of Proximal Development.

Social interactions occur on a daily basis in the everyday world. As children attend school and find themselves in the social setting of the classroom, they will no doubt experience social interactions with their classmates and teachers. Based on Vygotsky’s idea of sociocultural theory, humans are meaning makers and generally use any tools at hand to make sense of the world, and more precisely human activity (Kozulin, 2004). In addition, Vygotsky (1989) believed that at the core of every human lies the innate ability to incur social interactions and relationships. He insisted that it is the driving force in all development, especially within any culture (Vygotsky, 1989). Furthermore, Vygotsky’s emphasis was on sociocultural human cognition in the classroom. In his analytical approach, Vygotsky asserted that the interaction between the individual, the natural, and the social forces lead to consciousness. Children are able to co-construct the meaning of
things through these social interactions. This model was a source of how every student’s psychological functions would develop in such a way as to enable him or her to build on each additional educational step (Kozulin, 2004). Therefore, all students including 14 through 26-month-old toddlers, who are in an educational setting, are constructing knowledge through the varying interactions with each other as well as with the teacher. Following Vygotsky’s theory will give teachers a framework for creating lesson plans that build on previous activities that are developmentally appropriate, as well as utilizing the environment, and integrating various subject areas (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

**Definition of Terms**

The following constructs are employed in developing the current project. First, a theme is a set of activities that surround a large concept or broad topic (Katz & Chard, 2000). For example, “summer” is a theme and “vacations”, “beaches”, and “water play” are the activities that surround that theme. Curriculum refers to lesson plans that contain various aspects including but not limited to art experiences, learning centers, music and movement, and problem solving activities (Cherry, Harkness, Kuzma, & Bates, 2000). In this project, a theme-based curriculum was referred to as lesson plans implemented in a toddler classroom. In the current project, Quality care occurs when a childcare facility is staffed with caregivers who are stable and trained in developmentally appropriate
practices, and who in turn are able to assist children in proper problem solving techniques (Howes, 1990).

With respect to children’s outcomes, Social interaction is the process of learning through interacting with peers, teachers, parents, and all other persons (Morrison, 2001), while Challenge refers to the perspective, which a child takes when the teacher explains an activity in a particular way (Katz & Chard, 2000). Building Resilience refers to enabling individuals with the ability to conquer certain skills, hardships, and challenges (Alvord & Grados, 2005).
Development of Project Materials

This project is based on a review of curriculum and scholarly literature regarding the implementation of appropriate skills and practices in the toddler classroom and the effects that these lessons have later in children’s lives (Brownell, 1990). The importance of age appropriate activities and quality care are included in the review of literature (Dodge, 1995).

To develop the project materials the California Preschool Learning Foundations (California Department of Education, 2008) were reviewed for specifications that are expected by children around 48 months of age. Although the age in the Foundations is a higher age range than the target age of this project, the author contends that children 14-to 26 months are capable of various activities that cover the domains found in the Foundations (Chen, Keen, Rosarnder, & Hofsten, 2010). After a closer look at each domain; Social-Emotional Development, Language and Literacy, English-Language Development, and Mathematics, there are strands that were also used in the creation of the project materials (California Department of Education, 2008). Furthermore, the use of a theme related template used in a private toddler classroom setting was used as a guide to determine which subjects to be taught in the toddler classroom. After reviewing the Foundations and the decision of themes to use, an activity was created which also included materials needed and instructions on how to implement in the classroom. For
example, in Activity #1 “Acting out Feelings” the investigator decided on the domain of Social-Emotional Development in the California preschool learning foundations, the theme Me, Myself and I, the foundation of self regulation from the California preschool learning foundations, and came up with an activity that incorporated a familiar song that includes acting out feelings: “If you’re happy and you know it” (California Department of Education, 2008). The only materials needed for this activity are the children, enough room for them to act out feelings, and mirrors. This song requires understanding of different feelings and ways to act them out. For instance, the first verse of the song is “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands”. The teacher sings this verse, claps and then encourages the children to imitate. After several verses of different feelings, the teacher can then inquire if the children can think of their own feeling and an action to accompany it. Also, the teacher can discuss various feelings and request that the children look at them in the mirror to see if they recognize the different emotions. This activity introduces the children to various feelings, appropriate behaviors that supplement that feeling, and assists them with recognizing that other people possess feelings as well (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer, 2007).

**Limitations**

The author of this project is currently employed at a private preschool in a classroom for which the project is specifically geared. At this school there are only
certain materials purchased monthly or yearly. This limitation may create financial
constraints for the investigator in the event of purchasing additional materials that are not
regularly supplied by the employer. Another limitation for this project is attendance by
the enrolled children in the intended classroom in which this curriculum will be
implemented. At the beginning of this project there were eight children enrolled in the
classroom and every child does not attend each day of the week. Therefore, it was
challenging to ensure that each child received an opportunity to engage in each planned
activity. Some children stopped their attendance either from transitioning to an older
classroom (preschool) or by the parent’s choice (disenrollment). Therefore, the
investigator had difficulties in deciding whether or not each created activity was a
success or could use improvement, due to the classroom being disrupted in this way.

Because the curriculum is designed for a specific classroom environment, it may
not be directly applicable to other toddler classrooms. Even so, the hope of the researcher
is that the materials might be modified and used in other childcare programs serving
toddlers.

Organization of the Project

This chapter has presented an introduction to the project, its purpose and
methodology. Chapter two consists of a review of literature that covers the following
topics: developmentally appropriate practices and approaches, theme-based curriculum,
the Preschool Learning Foundations, and social competence. Chapter three describes the
development of this project and the procedures used to create the lesson plans (included
in appendix). Chapter four is comprised of the discussion, recommendations and
conclusion.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of creating curriculum for childcare programs is not uncommon. The idea of creating age appropriate curriculum and the effects it may have later in a child’s life is a newer concept (Dodge, 1995; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1998). In fact, The U.S. Department of Education instituted a goal of ensuring that each child is ready to learn at school entry by the year 2000 (Dodge, 1995). The goal was meant to challenge teachers to nurture children in order for them to be in the right mind set by kindergarten.

If one were to ask a teacher in a toddler or preschool program what he or she does all day with children he or she would let you know right away what ideas are implemented into the classroom. Once teachers are given the theme or material that they must cover in the classroom, they may end up having a difficult time figuring out how to implement the topics. The purpose of this project is to develop such a theme-based curriculum for toddler teachers. This chapter will cover such topics as developmentally appropriate practices and approaches (Boone, 2003), theme-based curriculum (Katz & Chard, 2000), the California Preschool Learning Foundations (California Department of Education, 2008), and social competence.
Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Dodge (1995) asserts that it is important for educators to be guided by a curriculum framework that is based on child development theory. Not doing so could lead to inappropriate practices in infant and toddler classrooms as well as decisions that could be harmful to children. Therefore, this project is based on the works of the theorist Lev Vygotsky and more specifically his view on the Zone of Proximal Development and on symbolic representation (Sigel, 1999; Wertsch, 1992).

According to Sigel (1999), Vygotsky stressed that symbols can be used as cognitive tools in order to record events, aid in planning, and assist in lightening the burden of memory. Every culture has its own symbols and symbol system that supports the cognition and communication that is important to each culture. Symbolic representations refer to the use of symbols as a tool in order to make sense of the world around us. At an early age, children learn how to reason and problem solve through the very symbols that represent various experiences (Sigel, 1999). Furthermore, creating mental representations is directly related to our cognition; and cognition is necessary for learning; thus learning is how teachers assist children in succeeding academically. In order for teachers to promote student success, they need to have a theoretical foundation on the developmentally appropriate curriculum in order to apply structure in their teaching methods. In this way, once toddler teachers understand the basis of Vygotsky’s
use of tools (Sigel, 1999) and have adapted concepts about the domains from the California Preschool Learning Foundations (California Department of Education, 2008), and have decided on themes (Katz & Chard, 2000), then they will be ready to enter the classroom with an array of developmentally appropriate activities (Boone, 2003).

Lauritzen (1992) believes there is an urgent need for the preschool settings to incorporate developmentally appropriate practices. Boone (2003) also discusses this practice and how it is linked to cognition and positive social outcomes for young children, which assists in school readiness for kindergarten and beyond. Furthermore, there is concern for the number of children who are failing as well as the failing schools in the United States (Boone, 2003). Boone (2003) describes how the teachers in a preschool class planned around the children’s interests to extend their learning and comprehension. In this way, they were able to accommodate the children’s specific skills and with modification and repetition the children could master skills that resulted in the development of self-competence. Therefore, the author of this project incorporated developmentally appropriate practice alongside a theme-based curriculum in order to promote young children’s cognitive and social skills. Lauritzen (1992) goes on to say that integrating Vygotsky’s, Erikson’s and Piaget’s theories provides the groundwork for a new paradigm of teaching as well as learning in the early childhood programs. Although this paradigm is no longer new, it would be an emphasis on the preschool child and the interacting adult, that would include a knowledge that is personal and lends a hand in constructing meaningful levels of integration that is made up of the physical and social
environment “with internal levels of mental schemas” (Lauritzen, 1992, p. 531).

Lauritzen (1992) has dubbed the contributions of these theorists as “the process approach” (p. 532). This is an approach that releases children’s inhibitions by protecting their confidence, and it will give them the opportunity to play without the stressors of being right or wrong. Such practice will enhance the process in which children construct knowledge by creating a disposition to learn. This approach also necessitates that the teacher have a great respect for and a deep understanding of child development, age appropriate stages of growth, and the ability to learn from each individual child through observation. In short, all of these factors make up Lauritzen’s (1992) process approach and as a toddler teacher takes each of these aspects into consideration in the classroom, the toddler will be able to thrive.

Dodge (1995) discusses that it is not merely enough to define what to teach, but to focus on an environment that is able to nurture each child’s growth and development with both the physical and social aspects in mind. In addition, many researchers are interested in creating new models of teaching in which to test their hypothesis, in hopes of reforming the practices that they feel are not “teaching” students how to apply what they learn to real life situations (Lonning, DeFranco, & Weinland 1998). Some newer models of teaching include “open court”, “teaching to the test”, “Montessori”, “hidden curriculum”, and “theme-based curriculum”. In addition, there are several areas of interest within the ideology theme-based curriculum.
Theme-Based Curricula

There is a great deal of available resources for a theme-based curricula for children ages three to five years, however very little is targeted for toddlers, mainly 14 to 26 months (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Lonning, DeFranco, & Weinland, 1998; Thurmann & Otten, 1995). There are several articles regarding theme-based curriculum, and although some of the research is focused on older children, it is relevant to the present project because it defines what is meant by theme-based curriculum.

Lonning, DeFranco, and Weinland (1998) have defined theme-based curriculum as “both a focus and organizing framework that guide the development and implementation of a cohesive, interrelated series of lessons or activities” (p. 312). Once Lonning et al. implemented their themes, they determined that the themes were too narrow in focus. Therefore they adapted their themes and discovered stronger validity and found that the new theme created a wider variety of concepts from which students could learn. Likewise, toddler teachers may need to determine what themes work best in their classrooms after some trial and error.

Katz and Chard (2000) have defined theme-based as a set of activities that surround a larger concept or broad topic. They discuss the importance of the goals that teachers set for their students. These goals help determine the themes that also assist in challenging the students. How a teacher explains an activity can elicit different kinds of responses from the children that can either warrant a challenge seeking perspective or a
challenge avoidance perspective (Katz & Chard, 2000). Katz and Chard (2000) developed a project approach using themes in order for children to learn firsthand with something familiar to then be able to expand their understanding of their experience and their environment. In addition, the authors were concerned with the child’s growing mind and creating an education that focused on all aspects of knowledge and skills, such as emotions and social behavior (Katz & Chard, 2000). Creating an environment full of various opportunities and developmental domains is of concern for the toddler teacher as well (Burchinal, Cryer, & Clifford, & Howes, 2002).

An example of a theme is “summer” in which various activities could include discussions of warm to hot weather, vacations, and beaches, as well as engaging in water play. Teachers could read a book about beaches that includes an array of pictures showing toddlers what kinds of items are associated with the beach. The teachers could then bring in their own photographs from a time when they were at the beach. An activity could be a clear container with sand in it with water, shovels, pails, shells, etc. and the children could explore the sand and water as a sensory and gross motor activity. This activity that surrounded the theme “summer” also incorporated several developmental domains that the California Department of Education (2008) has outlined in their publication, California Preschool Learning Foundations, Volume 1. For example, under the Language and Literacy domain, the activity surrounding the theme of summer could include pictures and stories, in the Mathematics domain; the sand and water activity could have a focus on measurement. This measurement activity is linked to the child’s
cognitive abilities through symbolic representation. Melear and Lunsford (2007) created a theme-based unit on earthworms to demonstrate how a long-term activity could attend to the various content afforded by the National Science Education standards. This long-term activity fostered small group as well as entire class discussions, in which students created their own questions and were able to assist others with their questions. The teacher was able to facilitate question asking as well, to enhance the learning process as well as create a collaborative, scientific learning community within the classroom (Melear & Lunsford, 2007). Therefore, linking a theme-based measurement activity to science standards can increase the toddlers’ interest and can cover various domains of learning.

Toddlers are just learning to communicate through language as they are beginning to grasp the concept of what words describe what thought, action or object. If the teacher is able to assist in the connection between language and thoughts, then the toddlers will gain more competence (Thurmann & Otten, 1995). In this way, using a theme-based curriculum sparks an interest in students to discover the world. It enables them to have a better understanding of matters that are strange and different to them, through assimilation. Morrison (2001) states that “assimilation is the taking in of sensory data through experiences and impressions and incorporating them into knowledge of people and objects already created as a result of these experiences” (p. 136). For example, toddlers use assimilation when they encounter a cotton ball and they try to bounce it. They discover that it does not bounce like a regular ball; therefore, they create a new
knowledge of an object that resembles a previous object that they have encountered. In addition, the teacher can use language to explain that the cotton ball is similar to a bouncy ball and in the future the toddler can accommodate their next experience of a ball. A theme could be “Balls” and a lesson could surround this theme by including various round objects such as cotton balls, bouncy balls, oranges, and tomatoes. Furthermore, the teacher could discuss the similarities and differences with each object. This could further assist with the toddlers’ knowledge of balls and the teacher’s use of language could enhance the process and could create competence in the toddler. Thus, a theme-based curriculum can be useful for toddlers in the same way that it is useful for older children. In addition, there are other practices that can be incorporated into a curriculum for toddlers, such as the Reggio Emilia Approach, that are very successful.

**Reggio Emilia Approach**

The Reggio Emilia Approach is an approach that is a combination of ideas, or theories of many great thinkers. The approach is focused not only on children 3 to 6 years old, but also infants and toddlers (Hewett, 2001). In this model, the entire community works together to enhance the childrens’ learning by creating a dynamic school. The main foci of this approach are the classroom environment, long-term projects, partnerships with the parents, and language (New, 2003). The author of the current project also has an interest in creating a well-rounded classroom environment, the use of
long-term projects, with the use of language to support this approach, in order to assist in
toddlers’ learning in the most efficient way possible.

The Reggio Emilia approach assumes that as a learner, the child is seen as having
rights instead of having simple needs. The concept is that children be given the same
opportunity as adults to develop their intelligence in order to reach their full potential. In
this role, everything about the child “is beheld as beautiful, powerful, competent,
creative, curious, and full of potential and ambitious desires” (Hewett, 2001, p. 96).
There is great emphasis on protecting the child, rather than interfering. Therefore, by
creating a challenging curriculum, the educator is assisting with the development and
learning style of the child. In this sense, toddler teachers could also assist young children
in the United States with their development and learning styles in the classroom by
beholding them as the cornerstone of our future generations.

In addition to having rights, the child is also viewed as an active participant in the
construction of knowledge. The idea is that children play an active role in their learning
environment and are considered protagonists, in which they are able to learn and discover
and they have an innate desire to make sense of their immediate world. The child works
alongside others in order to construct and solve various problems in a way that is done by
the child and not to the child. This approach is considered “active education” (Hewett,
2001, p. 96). In this way, educators can construct an activity that facilitates social
interactions in the classroom. An example would be building a town with blocks in a
group setting. Each child has his or her own idea of how to build a town, however,
another child may give one an idea that had not previously been thought of, that can be incorporated into the group “town”.

Another facet of child as learner is the child as researcher. In this phase, the child is able to fulfill his or her natural curiosity by asking questions, hypothesizing possible solutions, predicting outcomes, experimenting, and also reflecting on his or her discoveries. This is one of the biggest premises of the Reggio Emilia Approach; children experience a no holds barred environment while engaging in a project. They are able to discuss, observe, and explore, all the while building on everything that has been learned previously (Hewett, 2001). The educator can implement an activity that is of interest to the children, and watch as they explore. The more the children explore, the more the educator is able to add to the activity and provide experiences that children are able to build on in future activities. Such a premise can be incorporated into the toddler classroom as well. Once themes are set in place in the toddler classroom, various activities can be implemented that are based on the childrens’ interest and that can be built upon in the future.

The final aspect of the child playing the role of learner is that children are considered social beings in which they learn through relationships with adults and peers, not in isolation. The Reggio Emilia schools draw on Vygotsky’s contention that children will come to terms with the errors in their thinking by interacting with those around them and through language and communication (Hewett, 2001). The activities that educators
put into practice can provide children with a greater vocabulary in order to have successful social interactions with their classmates.

One reason the Reggio Emilia model is so innovative is because it has the full support of the parents, of the teachers, and of the general community, with the guidance of Loris Malaguzzi. Another reason is due to the fact that the theories supporting this approach regard the child as someone who plays the role of a learner, an instructor, and also takes a look at the nature of the knowledge that is to be learned. The Reggio Emilia curriculum provides a model for the current project by allowing the toddler teacher to adjust the activities implemented in the classroom by taking into consideration the child as a whole and by creating the opportunity for the toddlers to play the role of learner as well as be an instructor by sharing knowledge with peers. Furthermore, this approach allows the teacher to play the role of researcher by finding long-term projects to implement and by creating an environment that fosters all of the ideas of the Reggio Emilia concept (New, 2003).

Many researchers are intrigued with how the essential ideas of this one setting in Reggio Emilia could have such a profound impact and be dispersed around the world (New, 2003). New (2003) points out that the reform initiatives in the U.S. concentrate on what is wrong with schools, children, teachers and classrooms, whereas those taking a Reggio Emilia approach are optimistic about the potential in the educational institutions in Italy. Toddler teachers in the U.S. could reap the benefits of utilizing such an innovative approach in their classrooms.
Preschool Foundations

The state of California has taken an interest in closing the achievement gap by creating standards for preschools (California Department of Education, 2008). The preschool learning foundations are tools in an effort to reinforce quality preschool education. The premise of the foundations is with appropriate support, preschool children will exhibit certain knowledge and skills. The goal is to assist all children in various domains of development, through high quality programs as well as purposeful teaching.

The foundations were created in order to describe the typical behavior that teachers can expect by a certain age. For example, there are particular age-appropriate competencies that children between the ages of 40 to 47 months typically exhibit (California Department of Education, 2008). In addition, the foundations include competencies that are observed “at around 48 months of age” and “at around 60 months of age” (California Department of Education, 2008, p. 1). These foundations are helpful in setting guidelines for teachers to develop age appropriate curriculum in preschool classrooms, in arranging the environment for optimum learning, and in the assistance of closing the achievement gap (Chudowsky, Chudowsky, & Kober 2009). However, evidence shows that children are capable of exhibiting several of the competencies at an earlier age than what is discussed in the California preschool learning foundations.
Research by Chen, Keen, Rosander, and Hofsten (2010) showed that toddlers, 18-21 months of age, were able to build a tower with blocks; a gross motor skill. In addition, the toddlers slowed their movements, which the authors interpreted as planning for the future. Thompson (1993) also discusses the refining of thumb and finger coordination that naturally takes place in young children and the correlation to cognitive development and how it enhances childrens’ exploration of everyday objects. Toddlers can succeed in a gross motor activity, therefore with this empirical support displaying toddlers’ abilities, the author of this project concedes that children 14 to 26 months are well capable of succeeding at other various skills, and may benefit from introduction of skills related to the preschool foundations. Thus, the current project focuses on activities which begin the process of preparing children to meet the California standards.

There are four domains of development included in the California Preschool Learning foundations: Social-Emotional Development, Language and Literacy, English-Language Development, and Mathematics. Under each broad domain, there are sub domains. Under Social-Emotional Development, the sub domains that are included in this project are self-regulation, interactions with peers, and friendships. Under the sub domain of interaction with peers, the California Department of Education (2008) has decided that children around 48 months old could interact comfortably with a few playmates and with adult support, they could cooperate in a mutual manner in a project. Rakoczy and Tomasello (2006) found that by their second birthday, young children are able to exhibit pretend play such as using a wooden block in place of an apple and they can make
chewing movements and comments such as “‘Yum. Apple, delicious’” (p. 557). The author of the current project included this sub domain in a dramatic play activity of hair stylist in which various hair stylist materials could be manipulated, such as smocks, unplugged curlers and hair dryers. The intent of the activity is to familiarize the toddlers with the materials, and support interactions with peers and facilitate cooperative dramatic play (Rakoczy & Tomasello, 2006).

Another sub domain utilized in the current project is self-regulation in the activity “Acting out Feelings” in which children are able to recognize various emotions (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer, 2007). In the sub domain of friendships a “Building Blocks” activity was created to pair the children with a familiar friend in order to work together in a block activity (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999). Language and Literacy includes sub domains in vocabulary, phonological awareness, and writing strategies. The author chose vocabulary and phonological awareness due to the importance of language development in the first few years and the correlation with cognition (Redcay, Haist, & Courchesne, 2008). The last sub domain used under Language and Literacy is writing strategies. Toddlers are interested in using crayons to color on paper and according to the California preschool learning foundations (2008), children around 48 months are able to exhibit emergent writing skills. Therefore, introducing children at an early age to grasping crayons or pencils can only enhance their cognition and experiences by the time they reach the age when they are expected to write their names (Thompson, 1993).
Under English Language Development the sub domains included in this project are listening and understanding, nonverbal and verbal strategies, appreciation and enjoyment of reading. Hakman and Sullivan (2009) investigated compliance of toddlers and levels of verbosity from their mothers. The mothers gave short and longer commands during a clean up task; this is an example of listening and understanding found in the sub domain of the same name. The authors found that children need more encouragement versus punitive comments, while engaged in tasks too difficult or in situations in which they are unsure of what is asked of them (Hakman & Sullivan 2009). This indicates the need for teachers to give praise and simple repeated explanations during tasks with toddlers. The reason for nonverbal and verbal strategies for this current project is to encourage teamwork amongst the toddlers in an activity of creating a city together (California Department of Education, 2008). The author chose the sub domain of appreciation and enjoyment of reading because of the correlation between cognition and emerging literacy development. The younger children are exposed to literacy the greater appreciation and enjoyment in reading they will have and the greater their understanding of everyday experiences (Zeece, 2008).

Under Mathematics the sub domains included in this project are number sense, algebra and functioning, measurement, and mathematical reasoning. The reason for using all of the sub domains under mathematics in the current project is to assist children as they are beginning to understand quantities and numbers and how they can relate their
everyday environment to the world, as they grow older (California Department of Education, 2008).

**Social Competence**

An effective toddler program will also address issues related to developing social competence. Many parents, as well as day care providers, are concerned with the quality of care that they provide the children that attend their site (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). According to Dodge (1995), offering a quality program assists in shaping children’s social competence as well as fostering academic success. In addition, high quality programs help develop trust, a positive sense of identity, and children attain characteristics that enable them to be successful learners. A high quality program will prepare children for school in terms of both social and academic skills. One focus of the current project is on the promotion of social skills that will lead to later academic and social success (Houck, 1999).

Social competence overlaps with several aspects of social emotional development such as autonomy and one’s relationships with others (Houck, 1999). The way that children develop a sense of how they fit into the world has a great deal to do with the social competence that parents and teachers are able to instill in them. Houck (1999) was interested in childrens’ self-concept and how it relates to risky behavior such as substance abuse, depression, and criminal behavior later in life. The author investigated the social
arena of infants and toddlers and how it is related to social competence and found that with early intervention by age 3 the characteristic of self-concept is fairly stable. Toddlerhood is an extremely important time to introduce social competence due to the beginning stages of autonomy and independence. Social situations are imperative to the toddlers’ development of self and their accomplishments. Once children realize that they have the ability to produce a desired outcome then the way they behave in social situations could have a positive or negative result. Having higher self-esteem assists children in their cognition as well and makes for a more productive participant in society (Houck, 1999). Creating a positive social environment for children to learn appropriate social skills can be a tall order for the toddler teacher (Brownell, 1990). Therefore, toddler teachers need to take into consideration the significance of implementing appropriate social skills in their curriculum by including activities that incorporate such practices as turn taking, politeness, how to behave when in a group setting, and using appropriate communication (Beeber, Chazan-Cohen, Squires, Harden, Heller, & Malik 2007).

Due to the vast developmental changes that children undergo in the first few years of life, Brownell (1990) was interested in the social behavior of 18- and 24- month-olds and whether or not they could adjust their social behavior depending on the context which they were in; same-age and mixed-age dyads. The results showed that both the 18- and 24-month-olds were able to adjust their behavior in each setting. Likewise, is the interest of the author of this project: how well do toddlers interact with same-age peers as
well as mixed-age peers, due to the large age range of 14 to 26 months. Some of the
toddlers that participated in the activities have just transitioned from the infant room,
others are about to transition to the preschool room. The social well-being and
interactions of a toddler are of importance to any toddler teacher (Spinrad, Eisenberg,
Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer, 2007).

Toddler teachers have an important job to fulfill besides providing activities for
the children they serve. They also need to incorporate various appropriate social skills in
order to instill these qualities in young children today for a better tomorrow (Dodge,
1995). An example of an activity that includes teaching appropriate social skills is in the
activity “Building Blocks” (see Appendix A) included in this project. In this activity,
toddlers are paired together with a familiar friend and directions are given to build a city
together in their own designated area. This activity includes teamwork, verbal and
nonverbal communication, gross and fine motor development, social skills, and use of
space (California Department of Education, 2008; Dodge 1995). Several of these aspects
such as teamwork and verbal and nonverbal communication are found in the domains in
the California Preschool Learning Foundations (California Department of Education,
2008). In the directions the teacher can explain the importance of each of these areas by
giving the toddlers examples of appropriate behaviors, such as using nice words to ask
for a block that he or she would like to place in a specific place and by saying thank you
after receiving the block.
Summary

Toddler teachers need support and encouragement as well as challenging activities to implement. Finding appropriate activities can be discouraging and may lead to inappropriate practices in the classroom, therefore, the activities in this project could be just the beginning for some teachers. The California Preschool Learning Foundations (2008) provide teachers and educators with guidelines on key skills that toddlers and preschool children can achieve when provided with a rich environment and curriculum. The foundations have further encouraged the investigator to continue searching for challenging activities for the toddlers served and for the future teachers in the toddler classroom (California Department of Education, 2008).
Chapter 3

METHOD

Project Design

The purpose of this project was to develop a curriculum in the form of several activities, linked to specific guidelines set forth by the state of California, that are designed to afford toddlers with opportunities to develop problem solving skills and social competencies, and to reduce stress for the toddler teachers. The investigator developed a theme-based curriculum specifically targeted to early childhood programs serving toddlers ranging in age from 14 to 26 months, by examining and incorporating the California Preschool Learning Foundations (2008) and the scholarly literature. The activities were created in a developmentally appropriate practice, and were also guided by a theme related outline from a private preschool as well as from previous experiences of the investigator. In short, the activities were created to help children expand on their social skills, generate mental representations, and experience challenging activities (Dodge, 1995; Sigel, 1999).

This project also served the purpose of creating opportunities for toddlers to learn appropriate social skills. Ways of implementing these positive behaviors include modeling, practicing, and verbal reinforcement (Spinrad, Eisenberg, Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Grevling, Liew, & Hofer, 2007). Another way in which children learn social skills
is through experiencing social situations that demand appropriate skills, for example having to wait their turn or share toys with their friends. Learning these skills at an early age will help children function in everyday life situations when they are older, their success in academics, and how to interact with others in society (Dodge, 1995).

The project included a supplemental curriculum for toddler teachers. Along with the theme-based curriculum was a list of resources for teachers as well as parents. Furthermore, the curriculum was designed to be transferred to any toddler classroom at any given site.

**Setting and Participants**

The activities were conducted in the toddler classroom at a private preschool in Sacramento metropolitan region that serves children six weeks to five years of age. This particular location is located inside the Legislative Office Building and serves up to 9 infants from 6 weeks old to approximately 14 months, up to 9 toddlers approximately 14 to 26 months, and 24 preschoolers aged 26 months to 5 years.

The theme-based curriculum was implemented with children aged 14 to 26 months in a toddler classroom. There are several criteria that the teachers look for in order for the children to transition from the infant to the toddler classroom, such as, the child is weaned from the bottle to a cup, can get in and out of the chairs at the table, and shows signs of walking. The child also needs to have enough teeth to chew the food
provided. Another aspect that the child must exhibit is showing interest in the higher activity level, social skills and evidence of interacting with the other children. The toddler classroom was set up in several different learning areas designated by what is referred to as “rooms”. For example, the area that was called “Sun room” was a dramatic play area, the “Rainbow room” was known as the art area, etc. The other areas were “Tree room”, which was the science and nature area, the “Block room” that was for large motor activities such as music and movement, and the “Quiet room” was for quiet activities such as reading and relaxing. The foundations and activities served as a way to incorporate the use of some of these “rooms” such as the Block room used for Activity #1, “Acting out Feelings”.

**Development of the Curriculum**

The toddler curriculum in the current project contains 13 activities to improve the quality of lesson plans implemented in the classroom, in order to guide social interactions while assisting with children meeting theme-based challenging activities. The activities are set up in a way to account for each child’s varying learning style by allowing children to work at their own pace and discover in their own way. The activities linked a theme-based curriculum with the domains found in the California Preschool Learning Foundations (2008), which includes the following domains: (a) Social Emotional
Development, (b) Language and Literacy, (c) English-Language Development, and (d) Mathematics.

Each of the lessons developed for this project included four components. First, one of the four Domains, listed above, found in the Preschool Learning Foundations was addressed. The domains were created by the California Department of Education to assist with the learning and development of young children prior to kindergarten. Although the youngest target age for the Preschool Learning Foundations is 48 months, the investigator believed that toddlers could also exhibit similar intermediate level accomplishments related to the Preschool Foundations. There is good support for focusing on both social-emotional and cognitive learning domains in preschool curricula (Brownell, 1990).

Second, a Theme was generated from the theme-based curriculum in place at the private preschool in which the investigator was employed. The themes assisted with a broad topic wherein multiple activities could be created and implemented. The use of themes is widely supported in the literature as a way to organize and implement skills and domain related knowledge (California Department of Education, 2008; Katz & Chard, 2000).

Third, a foundation skill from the Preschool Learning Foundations was addressed (California Department of Education, 2008). The foundations, created by the California Department of Education (2008), were based on research in an effort to understand children’s learning and to guide teachers in augmenting these efforts so that children may gain these competencies in order for them to succeed in school (California Department of
Education, 2008). For example, one of the foundations is self-regulation (California Department of Education, 2008). Along with the need for developing such skills is also well supported in the developmental literature (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999).

Finally, each lesson contains an Activity. Activities for the current project were focused on providing new, challenging activities for toddlers. Activities are the cornerstone of any functioning quality classroom, regardless of the age of the child (Brownell, 1990; Chen, Rosander, & Hofsten, 2010; Howes, 1990). Materials needed and instructions for implementation are also provided. Lastly, the investigator compiled a list of resources for teachers. This list, as well as the newly created curriculum is available to all other sites operated by the owner of the target preschool. These lesson plans and resource list are provided in the Appendix. In addition to these select preschools, the list will become available to any schools interested.

**Implementation of the Curriculum**

Before the implementation began, the parents of each toddler were informed of the plan to implement an expanded curriculum based on the existing theme-based curriculum. Then, the co-teachers were informed of the plan and were recruited to assist in the implementation of the newly created ideas of the expanded curriculum, by helping to supervise the toddlers so that the investigator could focus on the implementation.
The investigator first implemented Activity #11 - Classification/sorting in the toddler classroom with three toddlers aged 15 to 23 months (see Appendix A for full description). The purpose of Activity #11 was to assist toddlers with the ability to “sort and classify objects by one attribute into two or more groups, with increasing accuracy” (California Department of Education, 2008, p. 153). According to the California Department of Education by age four, children are expected to be able to select some of the items set before them by grouping these items in a way that makes sense to them. In implementing this activity, the investigator wished to evaluate (a) whether toddlers were able to sort objects, in this case by color, and (b) whether the use of tongs might be used to strengthen the fine motor skills of the toddlers. There is evidence that toddlers have the ability to sort much younger than four years old and are able to accomplish such a task (Choudhury & Gorman, 2000).

Materials for Activity #11 consisted of trays, tongs, bowls, and colored plastic bears. The investigator set out the materials needed and instructed the toddlers to place one bear at a time, by color, into the bowl using the tongs and after that task was finished, to take the bears out of the bowls. Only one child followed part of the directions, but used her hands, not the tongs. Once the toddlers had manipulated the materials for a while, the investigator changed out the bears for puffballs. Furthermore, none of the toddlers were able to use the tongs with the puffballs.

Based on this initial activity, the investigator concluded that the design of the activity was appropriate, and the setting was ideal, however the implementation could
have been conducted differently. First, the investigator could have used the tongs to place
the bears into the bowl as the directions were explained. If the investigator had given an
example of what was meant, the toddlers possibly could have met the challenge. Second,
the investigator could have started with the puffballs instead of the plastic bears, in this
way; the toddlers may have had better success with the tongs.

The investigator then implemented Activity # 1 - Acting out Feelings - in the
toddler classroom (see Appendix A for a full description). The purpose of this activity
was to observe whether the children understood emotions and were also able to act out
their own feelings (California Department of Education, 2008; & Spinrad Eisenberg,
Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer, 2007). According to the California
Department of Education by age four, children are expected to seek guidance from
teachers in managing their feelings as well as attempting to understand others’ feelings
(California Department of Education, 2008). The objective of this activity was to (a)
model feelings with facial expressions while singing a song about emotions and observe
whether the toddlers were able to imitate the feelings (Spinrad Eisenberg, Popp, Smith,
Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer, 2007) and to (b) discover if the toddlers were able to
express their own feelings when given the opportunity (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith,
1999).

Materials for Activity #1 consisted of a large enough space for children to act out
movements and feelings and a large mirror in which the children could observe
themselves. The investigator requested that the toddlers stand up, two of them did, and
one did not at first. Next the investigator started by singing the song “If You’re Happy and You Know it, Clap Your Hands” with the toddlers. The oldest that was 23 months old, clapped when it said to clap in the song and stomped when it said to stomp. In addition, she clapped at the end of the song. The middle child tried to help the youngest child up off of the floor, yet neither of them participated in the hand movements; they just looked at the investigator.

The investigator and the toddlers then moved to the mirror on the wall and they were asked to look at themselves while they sang the song. They all looked at the investigator in the mirror. The oldest did look at her and smiled briefly. The investigator then attempted several times to get the children to look at themselves, however they all continued to look at the investigator. The investigator continued to sing the song however this time with the different emotions (happy, mad, sad, excited). None of them made any faces in the mirror except the slight smile from the oldest. Due to time constraints only two activities were specifically implemented and investigated at the time that this project was written.

After careful consideration, the investigator was able to locate better materials for the Activity #11 Classification/sorting. Tongs that were easier to manipulate were incorporated in the activity and the investigator made a second attempt in the same toddler classroom. This time there were seven toddlers ranging in age from 13 to 22 months. However, the 13-month-old did not participate, likely due to his recent transition to the toddler room from the infant room. Materials for Activity # 11 consisted of new
tongs, trays, bowls, bears, large and small blocks, corks, and puffballs. The investigator modeled the use of the tongs and showed how to manipulate the items with the tongs while giving verbal directions of placing the items into the bowl by using the tongs. During the activity this time, all but one of the six children that participated displayed use of the tongs by squeezing them with one hand although without grabbing a toy. The child who was unable to use the tongs correctly was 15 months old and was unable to further the activity with success. The remaining toddlers who participated used the tongs with both hands and attempted to scoop the large block with their hands around the tongs. The investigator then added puffballs to the activity. Eventually all participating children were able to manipulate the large blocks and puffballs with the tongs using two hands and placed the items into the bowl without scooping.

The investigator deduced that with better modeling and explanation, the use of new tongs, and the implementation of larger materials that the overall success of the activity was better than the first attempt. Although the children used two hands with the tongs, the investigator determined that the activity was still appropriate due to the toddlers being able to use the tongs, and with the use of larger items to grasp. In time as their hands grow larger and with further practice, the toddlers should have even better success with the tongs. The investigator will also continue to research other materials and will create more activities that will assist toddlers with fine motor development such as using scissors to cut play dough.
The investigator also decided to attempt Activity #1 - Acting out Feelings for a second time. There were eight toddlers present ranging in age from 13 to 22 months. The investigator had the eight toddlers sit in a circle and discussed different emotions, feelings, facial expressions and reasons why a person may feel these emotions. Three of the toddlers; aged 18 months, 20 months, and 22 months, sat and listened and also participated at different times during the song. The rest of the children were uninterested in the song. The 18-month-old shouted “yay” during the part of the song when the children were asked to say “hurray”. The 22-month-old clapped during the correct time of the song and the 20-month-old made a happy, sad, and mad face at the correct times during the song. A teachable moment occurred during this activity; one of the nonparticipating toddlers fell on a participating toddler and as a mad expression appeared on the toddler’s face, the investigator discussed that emotion further.

The investigator determined that this activity went better than previously due to higher levels of participation from the toddlers. However, this activity may be better suited for smaller groups and for toddlers 18 months and older. Although toddlers are known for having various emotions, they may not yet grasp which facial expression corresponds with which emotion. With further situations and discussion from the teachers, the investigator is confident that the toddlers will have a better understanding of and will be able to self-regulate their responses to their own emotions (Calkins, Gill, Johnson, & Smith, 1999).
Chapter 4

DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

As an employee of a private toddler and preschool program, there have been times that the investigator had difficulties attempting to create fun yet challenging activities. On the other hand, the teachers that work in the preschool program find many fun activities that their 3-, 4-, and 5-year olds can accomplish with ease. However, when the preschool teachers share these ideas with the toddler teachers, it can be discouraging to them, in that the toddlers are developmentally less capable of engaging in the same sustained complex activities. For example, toddlers are not able to use scissors properly or engage in activities that include following directions, especially when they first transition to the toddler room. These factors prompted the investigator’s interest in designing activities to introduce new content and strengthen the toddlers’ skills in a way that was developmentally appropriate, and that introduced toddlers to skills that corresponded to the Preschool Foundations.

The result of the activity that was implemented was partly what the investigator expected to see but not entirely. For Activity #11 - Classification/sorting, the part that was expected was with the oldest child, who was 23 months old, was able to listen to the directions of putting the red bears into the bowl. Chen, Keen, Rosander, and Hoften
(2010) found that toddlers 18 to 21 months of age were not only able to build a tower with blocks, but they also displayed purposeful thought. Therefore, the idea that toddlers could purposely put bears into a bowl seemed logical to the investigator. Furthermore, although, the oldest child did not use her words and tell the investigator the color of the red bears, the toddler communicated through her actions that she knew which ones were red, by placing all of the red bears into the bowl. Another aspect that was partly anticipated was with the youngest child, who was 15 months old, when she was unable to use the tongs or listen to directions. The investigator determined the reason the youngest toddler was unsuccessful in these factors was mainly because she had just recently transitioned to the toddler room and had no previous experiences of these activities in the infant room. On the other hand, she did follow directions of putting the bears as well as the puffballs into the bowl, albeit with her hands and not the tongs, after she was instructed to do so. However, after locating different tongs and implementing them with larger items, the investigator anticipated more success than the first attempt, which was produced.

The part that was not anticipated by the investigator was with the 20-month-old. Although she followed directions by putting the bears into the bowl by using her hands, she was able to use the tongs, even if it was only in the air. Once the investigator started the activity and saw the difficulty that these children had with the use of the tongs, the use of them correctly was not anticipated at any point.
In regards to Activity #1 - Acting out Feelings, the investigator had anticipated some kind of expression from the toddlers. The fact that only one showed a slight smile was of some surprise during the first attempt. The children had just recently arrived to the class for the day. It could be that it was too early in the morning for them to participate. The aspect that these children are not quite yet able to communicate with words did change the investigator’s anticipation of an outcome that included the children being able to express their own feelings when given the opportunity. For example, feeling mad and acting out a movement with it. However, since none of them acted out any feelings as the investigator sang the first chorus, the decision was made not to ask them to share any feelings. In fact, Spinrad, Eisenberg, Popp, Smith, Kupfer, Greving, Liew, & Hofer (2007) found that with maternal support of validating feelings, toddlers could learn effective ways to regulate strategies through such processes as modeling and after the development of emotional security and secure attachment. After the second attempt, the investigator determined that this activity would be better suited with toddlers 18 months and older.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although a slightly higher level of success was anticipated the investigator carefully considered the results and determined that with practice and repetition the toddlers could eventually reach the level of success for the activities implemented for this
project. However, the investigator will start Activity #11 - Classification/sorting with a large spoon or small ladle in the beginning and will slowly incorporate different materials that will assist with fine motor development such as salad tongs. Some other activities for fine motor development are cutting play dough or paper with child scissors or stringing large beads and then after some practice with small beads. For Activity #1 - Acting out Feelings the investigator decided to invest in books with pictures of children who are displaying different emotions. Also the investigator decided to incorporate more teachable moments into the daily lives of the toddlers with more discussion of what emotions are and appropriate responses to these emotions.

Coming up with creative ideas to implement in the classroom has been a challenge for the investigator over the years. Several teachers came and went from the toddler room. It takes a special person with a lot of patience and passion to stick with this age group. It is the time that children want to do everything for themselves and do not want any assistance from teachers or their parents. They discover independence. Their mentality is “I can do it myself”. Some teachers may get discouraged when encountering the toddler. The investigator has been discouraged in the past, but somehow managed to carry on. Today is the time to instill social skills and knowledge in our young students.

In regards to the activities that were chosen to implement for this project, the investigator would recommend in the future finding better tongs for the toddlers to use as well as explaining the activity more explicitly before beginning. Another recommendation would be to find different items for the children to place into the bowls
as well as to find something else for them to put the items into. In reference to the Acting out Feelings activity the investigator recommends discussing different feelings more thoroughly before beginning the feelings activity. For the Acting out Feelings activity, repeated exposure is recommended. The investigator contends that with practice and repetition, the toddlers will eventually participate in the feelings, by making the different faces and by making movements that go along with them. As they are able to communicate better, it is anticipated that they will be able to come up with a feeling and movement on their own.

Seeing as the activities that the investigator provided were only a few children in a small setting, one recommendation would be to create more of them in collaboration with other toddler teachers from within the private preschool, from teachers in other schools, from preschool teachers, from directors, and even from parents. A reason for this collaboration idea is stemmed from the findings of Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, and Howes (2002) in which they discovered that caregivers who had received a higher level of early childhood education were more apt to provide considerably better quality care. Not only were they specifically trained to work with young children, but they continued their professional development through workshops and classes. How this equated to the classroom was through the caregivers being more sensitive in their interactions with the children and by providing even higher quality care than those caregivers with more experience (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002). When caregivers engage in continued professional growth, it could result in a more well rounded curriculum in the
toddler classroom. Another recommendation is for the teacher to take into account the wide range of ability found within the toddler group by observing the implementation and adjusting the activity accordingly to meet the individual needs. Repetition is also recommended in order to assess if the toddlers were able to improve their abilities.

Furthermore, the knowledge gained helped the investigator decide to create a website in order to share the activities as well as encourage fellow teachers in the field who work with the target age range, 14 to 26 months. The purpose of the interactive website is to provide a support base in which others can post their ideas so that the resources will ultimately enrich the lives of children. This will benefit parents who will educate their children and be ready for Kindergarten. It is the investigator’s goal to share the knowledge gained with more than the single private school where it was developed. It is hoped that a website will disseminate the information more widely, as well as inspire others so that teachers and children will be better equipped in meeting the challenge of the transition to school.

Since the research presented in this project communicated that early exposure to developmentally appropriate activities based in theory give way to future success, the investigator suggests further research into the benefits and outcome of linking a theme-based curriculum with the Preschool Learning Foundations (2008). Research has shown that the earlier children are equipped with social skills, knowledge, language, and resilience, the better their academic and personal life will be (Dodge, 1995).
In addition, upon further investigation, the author of this project discovered that under each Domain there is a Foundation with various strands, and what the investigator will refer to as Sub strands under each strand. For example under the domain of Social Emotional Development, there are three strands of foundations Self, Social Interactions, and Relationships, and under the foundation of Self, there is the sub strands of “self-awareness, self-regulation, social and emotional understanding, empathy and caring, and initiative in learning” (California Department of Education, 2008, p. xii). Each of the strands under the domains presented in the foundations has sub strands. The investigator, therefore, decided to further create several more activities under each domain, one with each theme where possible under the strands and sub strands.

**Limitations**

When the investigator began work on this project there were older toddlers enrolled in the classroom, however with the downward state of the economy and with many parents finding that they need to stay at home with their child out of necessity for surviving this economy, the enrollment had dropped considerably. Having only a few children in the classroom can actually be beneficial to an inexperienced toddler teacher; it gives more one-on-one time with each child. In this way, the teachers would be able to let the children discover for longer or shorter amounts of time and it makes it easier to adjust
the activities as needed in order to keep them challenging. In addition, these conditions would be perfect for a newer teacher who just started her career in a toddler room.

Another limitation is the lack of available resources for the materials needed to incorporate certain activities in the toddler classroom. Finding appropriate tongs for toddlers proved to be problematic for the investigator. They were either too big, too difficult to use or too expensive. There are financial constraints to working in any preschool and there are not always the perfect available resources in the school or to be found elsewhere for particular activities.

APPENDIX A

Activity Summaries
Activity #1
DOMAIN~ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
SELF
Self regulation
Theme: Me, Myself & I
Foundations: Self regulation
Activity: Acting out feelings
Materials needed:
Space
Feelings
Mirrors

Instructions:
Have children stand in their own space and follow movements to “If you’re happy and you know it”. Use alternate verses such as “If you’re mad and you know it, stomp your feet” and “If you’re sad and you know it, say boo hoo”. Furthermore, make different faces for different ‘feelings’ and ask children to copy. Also, discuss these various feelings and emotions and ensure the children that each emotion is allowed to be felt, and give various examples of how to deal with such feelings. In addition, have children look at themselves in the mirrors as they make different faces for different feelings/emotions and discuss how they feel when they see their face.
Activity #2
DOMAIN~ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT
SOCIAL INTERACTIONS
Interactions w/ peers
Theme: Occupations
Foundations: Interactions with peers
Activity: Dramatic play~Hair stylist
Materials needed:
Curlers
Curling iron
Hair straightener
Brushes
Combs
Smocks
Hair dryer

Instructions:
Introduce the idea of occupations, specifically ‘hairstylist/barber’. Discuss how each
person has a different color of hair, a different type/texture of hair, and a different style of
haircut. Introduce the various materials needed for the activity and show how they are used. Let children play and interact, giving guidance as needed.
**Activity #3**

**DOMAIN~ SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**RELATIONSHIPS**

**Friendships**

Theme: Familiarity
Foundation: Friendships
Activity: Building blocks
Materials needed:
Blocks of various sizes
Space

**Instructions:**

Pair up children with who they play with most often. Distribute blocks to each pair and designate a specific area for them to build. Discuss building with a friend and teamwork.

Encourage communication and guide as needed. Let children build what they imagine and create together. After the activity is complete, have each pair show their finished work and let them talk about how they worked together. Ask questions as needed to facilitate for children who may not be able to use their words.
Activity #4
DOMAIN~ LANGUAGE AND LITERACY
Listening and Speaking
Theme: Colors
Foundation: Vocabulary
Activity: Color song
Materials needed:
Flash card with colors
Space

Instructions:
Have the children sit and as you sing the color song point out who is wearing what color
and have the children follow directions of the song.

Song: “______, ______ is the color I see, if you’re wearing _____ then show it to me.
Stand up and turn around, show me your ______ and then sit down” (fill in the blank
with different colors, singing the song multiple times)
**Activity #5**

**DOMAIN~ LANGUAGE AND LITERACY**

**READING**

**Phonological Awareness**

Theme: Rhyming

Foundation: Phonological Awareness

Activity: Matching word game

Materials needed:

Various flash card pictures of objects that rhyme with each other, and with objects around the classroom

(ex. mop and top, rug and mug, etc.)

**Instructions:**

Show the flash card pictures to the children and have them guess what the picture is of. If they are having trouble communicating the words, have them point to any objects in the room and assist with the words as needed. After the object has been identified, direct children to find matching objects around the classroom.
Activity #6

DOMAIN~ LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

WRITING

Writing strategies
Theme: Names
Foundation: Writing strategies
Activity: Stencils

Materials needed:
Paper
Large letter stencils
Crayons
Thick pencils

Instructions:
Find the letter stencil that the child’s first name starts with, then have the children use crayon or pencil to trace the letter. Discuss how that child’s name starts with that letter.

Also, find objects in the classroom that start with the same letter. Continue the activity with the letter stencils that complete the child’s name. Again discuss objects in the room that start with the same letter as all the letters in the child’s name. When all letters are written, have the child read his or her name.
Activity #7
DOMAIN~ ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
LISTENING
Theme: Language use
Foundation: Listen with understanding
Activity: Follow the leader
Materials needed:
Space

Instructions:
Have the children follow you around the room doing various movements. For example,
hoping on one foot, walking backward, patting head, spinning around, etc. Give each
child a chance to be the leader.
Activity # 8
DOMAIN~ ENGLISH LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
Speaking
Theme: Teamwork
Foundation: Nonverbal and verbal strategies
Activity: Creating a city
Materials needed:
Animals
Occupational vehicles
Legos
Waffle blocks
Traffic signs

Instructions:
Distribute manipulatives in an open space, speak directions to children asking them to work together and build a town with various specific buildings (ex. hospital, police/fire station, hotel, residents, post office, zoo, etc.). Further explain how to have children make roads with stop signs/signals, parks, safety zones, etc. Later, let children show what they created and how they built it together.
Activity #9

Domain: English Language Development

Reading

Theme: Literacy

Foundation: Appreciation and enjoyment of reading

Activity: Flannel board story

Materials needed:

- Book with pictures of familiar storyline
- Flannel board story matching the book

Instructions:

Pass out each piece of flannel that corresponds with the storybook. For example, have available a lady, a fly, a spider, a bird, a cat, a dot, a goat, a cow and a horse for the story “There was an old lady who swallowed a fly” and pass each one out to various children.

As you read the story, let each child come up to the flannel board and put their piece on as it occurs in the story. When finished, let the children who didn’t have a turn the first time, have one until all the children have had a turn to tell the flannel board story.
Activity#10
DOMAIN~ MATHEMATICS
Theme: Math
Foundation: Number sense
Activity: Marble fun
Materials needed:
Various marbles
Containers

Instructions:
Have the children sit at a table, pass out the containers; two for each child. Put the about
5 marbles in one container, place an empty one next to it. Have the children put the
marbles from one container into the empty container, one by one; counting as they place
them in the empty container. Discuss how placing one more marble to the others is a
form of adding. Follow by subtracting, etc.
Activity#11  
**DOMAIN~MATHEMATICS**
Theme: Following directions  
Foundation: Algebra and functioning  
Activity: Classification/sorting  
Materials needed:  
Container of plastic bears of 4 different colors and at least 2 different sizes  
4 trays  
16 cups  
4 pairs of tongs

**Instructions:**  
Place container of 4 different colored and 2 different size bears on the table, place 4 cups on each of the 4 trays. Ask the children some ways to classify or sort the bears. If they need some guidance, ask them to find all of the red bears by using the tongs provided and place them in one of the cups. Continue with each color until all the bears are sorted and classified by color. Once this task is complete, have the children return the bears to the original container. Next, have the children sort the bears by size, again by using the tongs provided. Continue this until all bears are sorted by size. Once this task is complete, have the children return the bears to the original container. Ask the children if they can think any more ways to sort the bears. For example, sort by color and size.
Activity#12

DOMAIN~ MATHEMATICS
Theme: Water safety
Foundation: Measurement
Activity: Water table
Materials needed:
Water table
Measuring cups
Spoons
Dishes
Tubes
Sifters

Instructions:
Introduce the water table to the children by discussing water safety rules. Then give the children the materials needed and talk with them about measuring, weighing, sifting, pouring, etc.
**Activity#13**  
**DOMAIN~ MATHEMATICS**  
Theme: Nutrition  
Foundation: Mathematical Reasoning  
Activity: Snack time  
Materials needed:  
- Cups  
- Plates  
- Spoons  
- Forks  
- Food  

**Instructions:**  
Let the children know that it is snack time. Count the children and have them figure out how many cups, plates, spoons and items of snack are needed for each child. Count with the children discussing that each child should receive one cup, one plate, one spoon, one fork, and how ever many items of snack that are being served.
APPENDIX B

List of Teacher Resources
California Preschool Learning Foundations:

Early Childhood.com Articles
http://www.earlychildhood.com/

Early Childhood Links: Teachers Resources
http://www.earlychildhoodlinks.com/teachers/resourcesinfanttoddler.htm

Early Experiences Matter: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families
http://www.zerotothree.org/

High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.
http://www.highscope.org/

Kiddie Academy: The Difference is Our Curriculum.


New Toddler Teacher
http://www.theteacherscorner.net


Redleaf Press: Exceptional Resources for Early Childhood Professionals.
http://www.redleafpress.org/showproducts.cfm?Step=1&FullCat=74

The Project Approach: In Early Childhood & Elementary Education. http://www.project-approach.com/

REFERENCES


