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Emergent Literacy Practices for Preschool Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Speech Language Therapy

at Massey University, Albany

NEW ZEALAND

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2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly and foremost I would like to thank the teachers who shared their time and thoughts, as without them this study would not have been possible. To those who facilitated recruitment in particular the Auckland Kindergarten Association and North Auckland Kindergarten Association I am very grateful. I am hopeful that these contributions will facilitate wider discourse about the literacy possibilities for children with ASD and support children with ASD reaching their full literacy potential.

To my supervisor and friend Dr. Sally Clendon, your enthusiasm is inspiring. I wouldn't have been able to complete this journey without your unfailing support and encouragement, not to mention your attention to detail and superior proof reading skills. A small thanks also to Jack whose bedtime routine was oft interrupted by my late night academic dilemmas. I would also like to thank my secondary supervisor Dr. Mandia Mentis for her guidance, direction and support over the past two year

To my family who have supported me throughout this journey. To my pragmatic and humorous husband Doug who has encouraged me, supported me and made me laugh when I felt like crying "*aisle of view*". My daughters Laila and Sylvie thank you for sharing your Mum with her studies. I am so looking forward to having more time for cuddles and fun with you both. Finally to my parents John and Colleen who have lightened the load over the past four years, I am truly grateful.

A final acknowledgement for the financial support received from Massey University, Kate Edger Educational Charitable Trust and the Ministry of Education.

ABSTRACT

Literacy is essential to success in education and employment, and in the modern world plays an important role in our daily communication and social participation. The value of literacy is increasingly being recognised and prioritised by government and the business sector in New Zealand. For children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), literacy learning presents a unique set of challenges. Research suggests that children with ASD are at high risk of poor literacy outcomes, which has implications for their educational success, employment outcomes and social relationships. Given the limited research into the early years of literacy development for children with ASD, this study aimed to explore how children with ASD are engaging with emergent literacy, the strategies that teachers are using to facilitate emergent literacy and the perceived challenges teachers face in supporting emergent literacy development for this group of children.

A mixed methods research design was adopted using an online survey and face-to-face interviews with preschool teachers who had recent experience teaching a child with ASD. Five key findings emerged: (1) variability in teachers' understanding of emergent literacy with embedded literacy learning opportunities being more prevalent than explicit instruction; (2) wide variability in levels of student engagement with emergent literacy opportunities and activities (3) wide range of strategies employed by teachers to support children's emergent literacy learning with high levels of personalisation to children's individual strengths and interests; (4) children's interest level and attention were perceived as the biggest challenge to their literacy development and (5) low levels of professional learning and development (PL&D) in emergent literacy and ASD despite high levels of interest in PL&D in these areas. Participants also identified the need for greater collaboration between speech language therapists and teachers to support the communication skills and emergent literacy development of children with ASD. This study highlights the need for greater professional support for teachers to overcome the challenges identified. This support is essential in order to maximise the literacy learning for children with ASD.