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# How Does Play in Dramatic Play Centers Help Preschool Children Develop Oral Language and Literacy Skills?

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2016

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In the United States, early childhood educators are expected to follow the trend to enforce academic curriculum for preschoolers. This effort diminishes the value of play in the young developmental years of children. The purpose of this study was to explore the type of activities and strategies that promote development of language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory teaches that children acquire skills through play and discovery in a developmentally appropriate environment. The study was conducted within a qualitative framework using a case study approach. How parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during play were explored. The participants in this single site case study were 10 young children attending a university campus preschool, their parents, and their teacher. Data were collected through observations of the children and interviews with the parents and the preschool teacher. Video transcripts, field notes, and interviews were analyzed to understand the data collected. Modeling, asking questions, props, and books were identified activities and strategies that supported oral language development and literacy skills in young children. The parents and the preschool teacher supported the development of literacy skills through providing various experiences through play for children to build vocabulary by expressing themselves and understanding others. This study recommends and extends the understanding that play in dramatic play centers in preschools can support the development of oral language and literacy skills which could create positive social change in early childhood education programs.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

## Introduction

This study explored the language and literacy experiences of young children participating in dramatic play. Development of cognitive skills of young children can be meaningful and appropriate in a play-based preschool curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2011). In the United States, the trend to enforce academic curriculum for preschoolers diminishes the value of play in the young developmental years of children (Walston, 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Wood, 2013). These current trends toward standardized curriculum and test-based content have led to decreased play in early childhood classrooms (Walston, 2013). When play is lacking in the preschool curriculum, young children could be at risk of developing critical skills and construction of knowledge (Berk & Meyers, 2013). Early childhood educators need to feel confident in their efforts to use play in developmentally appropriate ways. A decrease in the inclusion of play in early childhood settings and a stronger focus on academic skills can cause conflicts of philosophy for early childhood educators (Walston, 2013). Currently, minimum research exists on dramatic play as a vehicle to develop literacy skills in preschool settings (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Walston, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013).

Whenever proactive or positive implementations of teaching strategies are developed, the benefits of social change can follow; social change benefits young children's potential for development. This study could be beneficial for young children developing language and literacy skills as well as assisting early childhood educators in

promoting optimal development of young children. Results of this study extend the data for early childhood educators to provide language and literacy environments for preschool children through dramatic play centers.

This chapter addresses the background to the study, the problem statement and purpose of the study, the conceptual framework, the proposed methodology for the study, the research limitations, and the significance of the research to social change.

## Background

In the United States, preschool programs range from a fully academic curriculum to a fully play-based curriculum (Brown & Lee, 2012; de Hann, Elbers, & Leseman, 2014; Lillard et al., 2013). Any well planned and thoughtful curriculum along the spectrum can be meaningful; however, curriculum developers often emphasize one approach or the other (Munn, 2010). Academic learning is often teacher-directed, has specific learning outcomes, and includes more behaviorist strategies (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). A play-based curriculum is child-centered, less predictable, and is more constructivist in nature (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Learning outcomes may be more varied depending on the experiential base of the children when they enter the program. Literacy skills can be learned in both curricula but may be more meaningful and appropriate in a play–based curriculum (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) stated, "play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition and social competence" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

### Vygotsky's theory

Boyle and Charles (2010) explained child's play is stimulating when it is stress-free and enjoyable. Their research showed that children may learn best at young ages when the environment provides learning opportunities which are fun and age-appropriate; play can support children's cognitive and social development. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory teaches that children acquire skills through play and discovery in a developmentally appropriate environment. Implementing Vygotsky's theory to encourage children to interact and learn through play supports early cognitive and social development. Siraj-Blatchford (2009) suggested using a Vygotskian approach in supporting children within a play environment or allowing support for development based on children's needs and ability; teaching should always be aimed at the child's ability and emerging skills. Kim (2011) studied how culturally and linguistically diverse young children attending a Korean School in Montreal, Canada became literate. Kim used a sociocultural framework to research the children's understanding of literacy skills. The study used a Vygotskian perspective to explore how young children create meaning during literacy-related experiences in the classroom. Kim found young children learn literacy skills in an interactive and collaborative play environment. Social relationships can assist young children in developing cognitive skills (Kim, 2011).

**Connection of Play and Literacy Skills**

Cognitive skills related to literacy skills can be developed through play. Liu (2008) studied the connection between play and literacy development. Liu's study implied play is central to a child's world and the stages of play coincide with the developmental stages the child is experiencing. Language and literacy skills are

identified as part of the developmental stages in early childhood. Liu (2008) stated, "The multi-dimensions of play correspond with the multi-dimensions of emergent literacy" (p.14). Early childhood educators should understand the value of play for the development of young children. Rushton, Rushton, and Larkin (2010) suggested that the field of neuroscience supports the important components of creating an active, stimulating, learning environment. Children actively engaged strengthen their neurological networks. Play-enhanced environments provide healthy support to young children (Rushton et al., 2010).

As young children learn about their world it becomes natural for them to role play and participate in imaginative play engaging them in the learning process. Sharp, Escalante, and Anderson (2012) reported play as a vehicle to promote oral language development and reading readiness skills. They suggested that a child's spontaneous play can be the teaching tool for literacy interactions (Sharp et al., 2012).

**Promoting Play in Early Childhood Programs**

Early childhood education programs can promote language development through the curriculum (Wasik, 2010). Vocabulary development during play can be emphasized in the preschool setting. Berkowitz (2011) studied the development of language skills through oral storytelling. Educators encouraged the children to act out the story during play time. Children are motivated to increase their imagination and communication skills (Berkowitz, 2011).

For many years, educators in preschool and kindergarten settings have been encouraged and expected to focus curriculum on standardized testing and to limit the

amount of curriculum time focusing on play and discovery (Wood, 2013). This approach may eliminate the opportunities for young children to learn and gain skills through play and exploration (Weisberg, et al., 2013). By limiting the amount of time for play and discovery, educators possibly disrupt developmentally appropriate practices for young children in these early learning settings.

My study builds on the previously stated research to support cognitive skills in young children, specifically language and literacy skills, through participation in dramatic play opportunities. Dramatic play centers have been researched less than general play in the preschool setting. My research contributes to decreasing the existing gap in the research related to benefits of literacy development through play in dramatic play centers. Results of the study can provide information for early childhood educators concerning the cognitive development of young children in dramatic play centers in preschool.

## Problem Statement

My study addressed the problem of early childhood educators in the United States being expected to implement academic style curriculum in the preschool years. As this trend continues, the value of play has been diminished in early childhood settings. Preschoolers develop in all domains through the process of play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Play is a natural process for young children to discover, learn, and develop cognitive skills (Walston, 2013). The value of how dramatic play experiences help young children develop oral language and literacy skills were explored in this study.

In the 1970's and 1980's research was conducted on the value of play for young children. Recently, Lillard et al. (2013) claimed the previous research "does not support

strong causal claims about the unique importance of pretend play for development and that much more and better research is essential for clarifying its possible role" (p.1). Other child development professionals disagree with Lillard et al., and argued the previous research is strong and offers solid evidence of the benefits of play; however, they all agreed further research in this area is needed (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013).

The results of the study could help early childhood educators, students in early childhood education programs, administrators, and parents understand the value of play in developing cognitive skills. Consequently, the value of child-initiated play and discovery could be valued and restored as a focus in preschool settings.

## Purpose of the Study

As trends in the United States expect early childhood educators to implement academic style curriculum in the preschool years, the value of play has been diminished. This study explored the type of activities and strategies related to play in a dramatic play center which is implemented to promote development of language and literacy skills of preschool children. In addition, the study explored how parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills through play. A case study approach was implemented to support the collection of data and results in a preschool setting at a university-based preschool. The outcome of this study could benefit early childhood education students in teacher preparation programs and early childhood professionals by developing a better understanding of how preschool age children develop oral language skills through participation in a dramatic play center. The study leads to a deeper

understanding of dramatic play so that students and professionals can implement valuable play strategies in their curriculum to increase the language and literacy skills of their young students.

## Research Questions

The following questions directed my study:

1. What are the types of activities and strategies related to play that are adopted in a dramatic play center to promote the development of oral language and literacy skills?
2. How do parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during dramatic play?

## Conceptual Framework for the Study

The conceptual framework for my study was based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory in addition to previous research to support the understanding of language and literacy development of preschoolers through play. Vygotsky's theory was utilized to support the understanding of how children develop cognitively in social situations as well as his understanding that play leads to development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory helped explain the influence of social interaction in encouraging cognitive development in young children. Literacy skills are a component of cognitive skill development in young children (Vygotsky, 1978).

Recent research supporting the purpose of my study is analyzed in the literature review, chapter 2. The key elements of the supporting research included the value of play during the developmental years and the oral language and literacy skills acquired in

the preschool setting. The combination of Vygotsky's theory and recent research was utilized to support the understanding of the noted research questions for this study.

The university-based preschool is considered a natural setting for young children. Creswell (2013) described the natural setting as the epistemological assumption. Since my observations were conducted in a natural setting preschool, the epistemological assumption would apply. I observed the preschoolers in dramatic play areas at the preschool site. I observed the children interacting with each other and the resources available in the dramatic play areas. I collected data related to literacy and language skills while I observed the children playing. The data collection in the play area addressed one of the research questions. As a non-participant researcher, I gathered first-hand information in a natural setting.

After collecting the data, I assumed the role of evaluating the data. I analyzed the data to the extent of answering the research questions. I used a computer program to assist in the analysis of the data. Through the analyzing process, themes emerged. The study results included how generalizations can be utilized in understanding the literacy development of preschoolers through dramatic play. The study results could provide further understanding and training to students in early childhood education programs.

## Nature of the Study

### Design

The study was conducted within the qualitative framework using a case study approach. Creswell (2013) explained that the case study approach typically explores a research question or issue within a real life setting for finding out the how and the why of

a phenomenon. I conducted my research by observing preschoolers during their opportunities to participate in dramatic play at a university preschool. Because the research location is bounded by the setting and the participants, it meets the case study criteria. In addition, the participants were relatively small in number and limited to the preschool enrollment, which is characteristic of the case study approach (Creswell, 2013). The narrow focus group provided an in depth understanding of the research problem. I explored individual oral language and literacy development through dramatic play. The university preschool contains a dramatic play center with specific props from dramatic play boxes. The dramatic play boxes included props related to the following scenarios: restaurant, grocery store, post office, birthday party, or explorer. My research questions were directed at individual development. My stated research problem and questions were conducive to a case study approach.

**Methodology**

The participants in my study are young children attending the university campus preschool. The children who attend the university preschool are generally four years old. Even though the children had varying degrees of ability, they did not have special needs. This was a single site case study. I established specific observation times for the study. I was a non-participant observer collecting data during playtime through observations, field notes, and audio visual methods. In order to avoid bias in the results, the video data was analyzed by another person not directly involved in the study. In addition, artifacts were collected such as drawings and mock writing samples, and analyzed in light of emergent writing skills (Schickadanz & Collins, 2012). Artifacts that are produced as a

result of the play time were identified and documented.

The sampling size of this case study research included ten children who participate in the university based preschool program. Ten children were enrolled in the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. The children's parents were notified of the study and given the opportunity to allow their children to participate. I asked for permission from the parents for their children as well as themselves pertaining to their willingness to participate in the study. I interviewed nine of the ten participant's parents. I also interviewed the university based preschool teacher. I included Creswell's (2013) following suggestions for a participant consent form: "the right of participants to voluntarily withdraw anytime, state the purpose of the study and procedures, protection of confidentiality, any known risk factors, and expected benefits to participants" (p.153).

In regards to the data collection strategy for the observations, I implemented what Patton (2015) suggested as the fixed-interval observations; the purpose of my research supports this strategy. Patton (2015) indicated the advantage to the fixed-interval sampling is the opportunity to gather information in a concise and timely manner. I utilized the preschool afternoon session scheduled on Mondays and Wednesdays. I gathered information during the playtime sessions for a three-week period. I had consistency observing the participants of the preschool since the same children attended the Monday and Wednesday afternoon sessions. A fixed-interval approach allowed me to gather the information I needed to complete my study. I gathered data for my research through a direct observation approach. I used direct observation in a naturalistic setting of the preschool. Patton (2015) described several advantages to the direct observation

approach which were used in my study; capturing behavior of the participants in the context of the setting, discovery oriented onsite, observe from a different perspective, and learn from firsthand experiences and observations. I compiled field notes and derived data through my observations as a non-participant observer. Video observations were used to increase accuracy and in-depth collecting and reporting of data.

A third source of data included interviews with parents and the preschool teacher regarding literacy and language development of the children involved. I informed the interviewees of the purpose of the research. I ensured confidentiality of their answers by using a number system to record and analyze the data. I used an interview guide for the parents and teacher which were formulated focusing on the research questions (see Appendices A and B for complete interview protocol). I encouraged the participants to include any further comments they felt were pertinent to the study.

In analyzing the data, I identified categories and themes and concluded with concepts learned through the research process (Creswell, 2013). I used a computer program to assist in the data collection and analysis process in my dissertation. Data were derived from the observations and videos, interviews, and field notes. The program was compatible for all three types of data. I implemented code development and analysis. For these specific needs, I used the NVivo computer program. This program had the necessary features which were used to analyze the data in my study.

## Definitions

*Developmentally Appropriate Practices*: The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promotes developmentally appropriate practices

in early childhood education programs. NAEYC encourages the following standards of developmentally appropriate practices to promote optimal development in young children:

- Educators need to know and understand the ability levels of children.
- Teaching strategies should accommodate children's level of development and be sensitive to social and cultural contexts.
- Teaching approaches should be challenging and engaging in order to help children progress in their development.
- Pedagogy in early childhood settings should be based on research knowledge and theories (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

*Dramatic Play*: Play that includes acting out specific roles and interacting with others. This type of play is symbolic and usually includes pretend or make-believe scenarios (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

*Early Childhood Education*: Understanding and promoting high-quality learning and developmental appropriate experiences for children birth to age 8 (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

*Literacy and Oral Language Skills*: Skills typically include language development, phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, drawing and writing letters, and access to environmental print and books. Language skills are learned through listening, talking, describing, and interacting with others (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011).

*Private Speech*: A term used by Vygotsky to explain how children talk to themselves out loud to make sense of their world. Private speech guides the child through complex cognitive functions; they converse with themselves as they mimic adults through play (Vygotsky, 1962).

*Zone of Proximal Development:* A term Vygotsky used to explain the strategies used by a more able peer or adult that brings a child to the higher levels of a challenging task (Vygotsky, 1978).

## Assumptions

I anticipated the following assumption with this study. During play time in the preschool, the children can choose where they would like to play. I assumed the children who were participating in the study would choose to play in the dramatic play center at the preschool. I observed several children in the play area.

## Scope and Delimitations

In this study I focused on the oral language and literacy experiences of preschool children while playing in the dramatic play center at a university based preschool. This study was limited to children between four and five years of age who were participants at a specific university based preschool. Data was collected from eight to ten of the children during their playtime in the preschool. This focus was chosen to explore how play in the dramatic play area in a preschool supports and promotes literacy and oral language skills.

It is possible due to the limited scope of the study, that transferability may be negligible. Other preschool settings may provide differing experiences. However it is

hoped there will be significant findings to inform other settings and the expectation is the results may also be valuable to students studying in early childhood education programs.

## Limitations

I am familiar with the preschool setting since it is located at my place of employment. My familiarity with the setting could have introduced bias to my research. I was diligent in ensuring my observations were thorough, complete, and not a result of invalid assumptions. I asked another person to assist in analyzing the data results to limit potential bias and ensure the credibility of the study.

Patton (2015) suggested that familiarity with the setting can add bias to the observation results. To guard against this possible bias, I disclosed my purpose and research related reasons for being in the preschool. Patton (2015) explained "disclosure and explanation of the observer's role to others" is an important guideline in avoiding bias in qualitative research (p. 416). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) agreed that bias stemming from the researcher effects on the site can be countered by clearly indicating the intentions of the researcher to those in the environment. Miles et al. (2014) suggested "co-opting a participant-asking that person to be attentive to your influence on the site and its inhabitants helps avoid bias" (p. 298). During my dissertation research I made that clarification to the preschool teacher to help me avoid influence on the site. In addition, triangulation of data collection helped avoid bias stemming from the effects of the site (Miles et al., 2014).

Patton (2015) suggested reactions from those being observed can influence research credibility and consequently be a limitation in observation research. The

preschool children are very familiar with college students, teachers, and parents being in the preschool area. However, I placed myself in a discrete location so I could maintain my nonparticipant role during the observation time. I needed to be careful to not affect their behavior, so I sat a distance away and out of the play pathways. An observation camera was placed in a discreet location near the play area of the classroom to avoid unnecessary attention from the children. The videotaping was a necessary method of data collection to ensure data accuracy and validity. The parent consent form specified the research data collection methods and informed the parents of the videotaping during the play time. I advised the parents of the high level of confidentiality and that their identities would be protected.

## Significance

This study reinforces the power of dramatic play as a conduit for supporting the development of oral language skills and literacy in preschool children. The results were evaluated through observing and recording the children's use of oral language and literacy skills during play. By evaluating the connection of oral language skills to different types of play within dramatic play, the results are beneficial for young children developing language and literacy skills as well as assisting early childhood educators in promoting optimal development of young children. Training educators to promote language and literacy development can lead to overall development in children (Wasik, 2010).

Activities that promote language and literacy development can be established in the curriculum. Including literacy related activities as part of dramatic play in the

preschool setting could help promote young children's development. Wasik (2010) reported "preschool programs may lack a component that is critical to developing language skills in young children" (p. 621). Vocabulary abilities during early childhood play are an important factor in a child's cognitive development (Collins, 2012). This study explored how literacy related activities in the dramatic play center can promote young children's skills.

This study built on previous research (Berkowitz, 2011; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Owocki, 2000) by focusing on the understanding of cognitive and social development of preschool children. The role of play has been extensively researched in early childhood settings (Munn, 2010; Rushton, Rushton, & Larkin 2010; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009) but there didn't appear to be abundant research addressing the connection between dramatic play and literacy skill development. A practical contribution of this study includes a better understanding of how preschool age children develop oral language and literacy skills through the implementation of dramatic play in the preschool setting. With this understanding, early childhood education students and professionals can implement dramatic play strategies with a focus on developing literacy skills in their curriculum.

Recommendations that could be applicable to other university preschool settings are a result of the study. This level of generalization is considered context specific and could be utilized only in similar settings or preschool programs. The information gathered reinforces and/or can improve the preschool program's support of oral language and literacy at the university preschool settings.

Whenever proactive or positive implementations of teaching strategies are developed, the benefits of social change can follow. In this effort, social change benefits young children's potential for development. These study benefits young children in how they develop language and literacy skills through play as well as assists early childhood educators to promote optimal development of young children. Study results may affect whether childhood educators provide language and literacy environments for preschool children through dramatic play centers.

## Summary

The goal of this qualitative case study was to explore the language and literacy experiences of young children participating in dramatic play. Literacy and language skills are critical aspects of cognitive development in young children (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The need for children to play in developmentally appropriate settings to acquire cognitive skills should be valued in early childhood settings (Weisberg, et al., 2013). Recent trends, however, favor a more academic curriculum in early childhood settings (Walston, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013; Wood, 2013). Vygotsky's theory, in addition to recent research, supports the understanding of literacy development through play (Berkowitz, 2011; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Munn, 2010; Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Vygotksy, 1978). This study focused on children approximately four years of age who are participants in a university based preschool. Language and literacy skill development were explored as the children participated in dramatic play experiences. Data were collected through observations, field notes, video-taping, artifacts, and interviews of teachers and the parents of the participating children.

Results could be applicable to other university based preschool settings, early childhood educators, and students in early childhood education programs. Chapter two includes a review of the literature related to this study. The combination of Vygotsky's theory and recent research supporting the value of play during the developmental years and the oral language and literacy skills acquired in the preschool setting are key elements of the literature review.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

The case study's purpose was to explore the language and literacy experiences of preschool children participating in dramatic play. In the United States, the trend to enforce academic curriculum for preschoolers diminishes the value of play in the young developmental years of children (Walston, 2013; Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Wood, 2013). Currently, minimum research exists on dramatic play as a vehicle to develop literacy skills in preschool settings (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013).

The literature review focuses on the concepts related to Vygotsky's cognitive social theory that explain the influence of play in fostering cognitive development in young children. Cognitive skills that support literacy development will be discussed. In addition, the literature review centers on recent research related to socio-dramatic play as a vehicle to develop literacy and oral language skills in young children. Socio-dramatic play involves symbolic representation, role-taking, language, imagination, creativity, enjoyment, and social interaction (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Previous studies exhibit a need for additional research as discussed in the literature review. This study could influence the understanding of educators and researchers on how to implement dramatic play in the preschool setting to enhance oral language and literacy skills in preschool age children.

## Literature Search Strategy

I conducted an extensive review of existing research on play and literacy skills in preschool age children. Several databases from the Walden University library yielded information: Academic Search Complete, Education Research Complete, ERIC, SAGE, ProQuest, and EBSCO. Research sources were limited to peer-reviewed journals and articles published within the last five years. The key words used in the database searches included: early childhood education, socio-dramatic play, preschool, literacy skills, oral language, and cognitive skills.

## Vygotsky's Cognitive Social Theory

Lev Vygotsky's (1896-1934) cognitive social theory postulates how social development and cognitive development are connected and influence each other (Vygotsky, 1978). Children develop cognitively through play and hands-on experiences in a developmentally appropriate environment. Vygotsky's cognitive social theory supports the following concepts: zone of proximal development, language development, scaffolding, and learning through play. Vygotsky's theory is reviewed in this chapter as the underlying source for my study.

### Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky explained the zone of proximal development as apprentice-type learning between children and adults. This nurture aspect of cognitive development assists children to accomplish a skill that is more difficult versus trying to learn the skill on their own. The tutor or teacher provides instruction or support to the unskilled child. This process can be informal and conducted through language, play, and other kinds of

social interaction. Vygotsky's research showed that children excel in an environment providing a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Culture and environment contribute to the child's development of cognitive skills. Vygotsky proposed that the complex process of cognitive development is accomplished through social interactions. Children learn to understand their world with the assistance of others. Vygotsky termed this complex process as internalization (Vygotsky, 1978). Children learn to understand other points of view concerning a problem or situation. The child internalizes the ideas from others to develop an understanding of a problem or situation.

The zone of proximal development creates an environment where children face a challenging task that they cannot perform independently but with help from others they can be successful. As the children internalize the process they continue to be successful with the task. Vygotsky found that without assistance the task may be too challenging for the child and consequently, cognitive development derives no benefit. The zone of proximal development is based on individual skills and needs. As the child's skills increase, the zone of proximal development decreases. A teacher or parent should observe and evaluate continually the amount of assistance that is needed in the proximal zone to benefit the child (Weisberg et al., 2013). Learning becomes an active process in the child's development. The learner's capabilities determine shifts in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky found children learn from peers as well as significant adults in their environment; this zone of proximal development heightens language development in children.

**Language Development**

According to Vygotsky, children learn language through conversations and shared experiences with adults (Vygtosky, 1962). Language skills promote cognitive development in young children as they learn, work, and play together. Children should be encouraged to talk to others about situations, conflicts, and challenges they experience. Vygotsky believed children learn language skills best through interactions with others. Talk, thought, and language provide differing functions (Vygotsky, 1962). Initially, children use language to communicate independent of expressing a thought. Eventually, children develop the ability to connect thoughts with language to express thoughts verbally.

Private speech is a concept integral to Vygotsky's theory. When children talk aloud to themselves, they are concentrating or learning new concepts. Children's outward speech helps them regulate their emotions, actions, or attention. Private speech occurs as they mimic adults through play. As children observe and listen to parents, they may imitate them in private speech. As the child develops, private speech becomes inward talk. This process is important as it encourages concentration and focus in the children's language processes (Vygotsky, 1962).

Vygotsky categorized language development in four stages: (1) the primitive or natural stage, (2) naïve psychology, (3) egocentric speech, and (4) the ingrowth stage (Vygotsky, 1962). The primitive or natural stage occurs in children from birth to age two. Children express emotions through sounds and reactions to familiar voices considered as thoughtless speech but leads to the children learning to identify objects in the naïve

psychology stage. From the age of two to five, children discover symbols, ask numerous questions, and their vocabulary increases significantly. At this stage, children connect thoughts with language. Egocentric speech takes place during the preschool years. Children use language during play, either individually or with others. Children use language to solve problems and to understand their world. In the final stage, the ingrowth stage, in the seventh or eighth year, children use language inwardly to direct their thoughts and actions. Logical memory helps the child to manipulate the cognitive processes. Vygotsky submitted that the language development stages help children develop cognitively during these early years (Vygotsky, 1962).

Cognitive development is associated with language development. Vygotsky claimed cognitive development occurs in stages simultaneously with language development. In the initial stage, children learn to cluster ideas which can be unorganized. As they develop, those ideas become organized and similar. Finally, mastering concepts follows the organization of ideas (Vygotsky, 1962). Learning becomes an individual experience because the learner's culture varies based on need and assistance. The context of the child's experiences, opportunities, and interactions with adults determines the learning environment. Therefore, the child's language skills reflect the learning and interaction that occurs in the environment.

**Scaffolding**

Scaffolding refers to the level of assistance given to a child within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding encompasses the measure of support given to children to ensure their success in completing a challenging task. The

harder the task is for the child may require more scaffolding. As the child practices the skill and less assistance is needed, the scaffold is removed. At this point, the child is able to accomplish the task independently. Scaffolding requires the teacher or parent to recognize the child's needs and abilities. Peers can help during the scaffolding process too. Cognitive skills become easier and automatic when less scaffolding is needed to accomplish a task.

**Learning through Play**

Vygotsky understood that when children discover and interact through play they develop cognitive skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Play involves imagination and practicing skills above children's typical abilities. The make-believe or pretend aspect of play is a leading source of development and can encourage role playing, social interactions, and communication with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's theory supports that children's thought processes are influenced through pretend-play (Vygotsky, 1978). Researchers have used Vygotsky's work to support recent related research explaining the value of play in the early years (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Kim, 2011; Konig, 2009; Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Lillard et al., 2013; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Roskos & Christie, 2011, 2013; Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

Recent studies support the development of cognitive skills in young children through play in preschools (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Davidson, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2011; Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Hatch, 2010; Massey, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Yelland, 2011). Cognitive skills that support literacy development include increased attention span, memory skills, and problem solving skills. Developmentally appropriate literacy

skills for young children include language skills, phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, drawing and writing alphabet letters, and interest in environmental print and books. Literacy skills can be developed in young children through a developmentally appropriate play environment that is supported by adults. Developmentally appropriate practices in preschool settings provide children the opportunity to direct their play as well as interact with adults and peers in a safe and nurturing environment.

## Cognitive Development in Young Children

Children's cognitive skills are developed as they increase their abilities in memory, thought, language, and understanding of concepts. The brain, of course, controls cognitive skills. At birth most of the neurons in the brain are in place. The neurons form connections as children have experiences. The connections continue to gain strength as they are used or if unused, they are eliminated. The brain continues to mature during early childhood. Specifically, the prefrontal cortex acts as the executive of the brain. As the prefrontal cortex develops in the early years, young children are more capable of thinking and planning.

Cognitive skills and social skills are interrelated as young children develop (Pellegrini, 2009). Preschoolers are able to be efficient in their thinking as they organize their thoughts into categories and use symbols in pretend play situations (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Social and language development can encourage cognitive skills such as memory skills, problem-solving strategies, increased attention span, creativity, and empathy (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Learning can occur in social interactions between children and adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Hatch (2010) agreed with Vygotsky and

explained that learning is not based solely on academic achievement and especially in the early childhood setting when academic standards can be imposed and ineffective. Hatch (2010) differentiated between learning and academic achievement by explaining that learning is the centerpiece of knowledge and skill development, not necessarily performance on standardized assessment instruments. Educators need to allow young children opportunities to learn and develop through social interactions with peers and adults.

Berk and Meyers (2013) suggested executive-function skills are an important aspect of cognitive development. The executive-function skills reference self-regulatory abilities such as attention skills, inhibiting inappropriate responses, and using working memory to influence behavior. Berk and Meyers (2013) advocated that the role of private speech, support of adults, and make-believe play support the development of the executive-function skills in young children. Berk and Meyers (2013) indicated that make-believe play may be one of several influences on these skills. The type of make-believe play may also be a factor of influence. Dramatic play could support developmental skills. More research is recommended to support their claim (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Lillard et al., 2012). Vygotsky's theory supports the use of private speech to help children regulate behaviors and concentrate on difficult tasks, but has been minimally tested (Berk & Meyers, 2013). As more preschools incorporate an academic approach and limit play in the curriculum, many children may enter kindergarten with fewer executive-function skills and threaten their success in school (Berk & Meyers, 2013). Learning activities that encourage children to play can support cognitive

development. As young children develop attention skills, memory skills, and problem solving skills their cognitive development improves.

**Attention Skills**

Attention skills lead to improved cognitive skills (Brown & Mowry, 2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Increased attention span helps children improve in language, problem solving, and memory skills (Brown & Mowry, 2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Attention influences what information the child uses to complete a task. As young children grow, brain development and experiences help this process continue. A stimulating environment that allows for movement and active engagement can be a key to helping preschoolers stay focused and interested in the activity.

Attention to tasks can be challenging for young children and require the teacher to plan appropriate activities. Teachers can plan reasonable time expectations on sedentary activities and break the day into segments that include movement and a change of environment. The change of setting and delivery style can support the development of the children's attention spans. As preschoolers develop they can be stimulated and engaged in activities for longer periods of time and their attention span improves.

Transitions from one activity to another can help children maintain attention to the task. Transitions are brief but can help children practice attending to a specific task. Teachers can also remind children to focus their attention to complete a task. This can be accomplished by helping children use private speech to direct their actions. With teacher direction, children can learn when to pay attention and how to remember what is important at the given time. Young children are easily distracted and often need to be

reminded to focus on the task. Minimizing potential distractions can help children stay focused.

**Memory Skills**

During the preschool years, children's memory abilities increase. Increased attention span and concentration skills help improve a child's memory. Children learn through practicing repetitive behaviors; the repetitions become scripts for routine events. Consequently, they understand and remember sequences for events that are repeated in their daily schedule. As children play and interact in a stimulating environment they can make connections with their play and real life situations. Meaningful, firsthand experiences encourage the development of memory skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Stagnitti et al., 2015).

Adults help children develop memory skills by conversing with them and encouraging them to answer open-ended questions and articulate experiences and events. Preschoolers are interested in "why" and "how" questions. When adults are patient and willing to give answers, young children broaden their knowledge and memory functions. As children learn to categorize and sort information, their memory skills improve. Adults can also provide prompts for learning. Prompts include questions, cues, or modeling to assist the young child in accomplishing the task.

Teachers assist young children in the development of memory skills by teaching simple songs, finger plays, rhymes, and counting numbers. These strategies can be incorporated into group time, play time, and transitions throughout the daily curriculum.

Actions associated with these strategies encourage the child to recall the activity and improve memory skills (Neuman, 2012).

**Problem Solving Skills**

Making connections between symbols and real world experiences increases a child's reasoning abilities. Children learn to think and reason before taking action. As children develop in the preschool years, they learn to understand other's perspectives and the consequences of their actions. As they practice separating thoughts from actions, their problem-solving skills improve; social and play interactions can enhance the development of these skills (Berk & Meyers, 2013). Through play, children can practice problem-solving strategies and be encouraged to use creativity in problem-solving. As they use their imaginations, their cognitive skills improve (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Dramatic play encourages negotiation and cooperative interactions with their peers; the preschool environment can provide opportunities for this type of engaging and meaningful play. Children can thrive cognitively when they are able to discover and try out new ideas and skills through play (Berk & Meyers, 2013). Their natural curiosity is a motivation to learn and explore their world. They are willing to experiment with the materials in their surroundings. Teachers can provide stimulating and changing environments to encourage and activate this natural curiosity (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

According to de Haan, Elbers, and Leseman (2014) adults can help young children learn how to solve problems by walking them through the following process:

1. Identify the problem.

2. Think of different solutions.
3. Select the best option.
4. Try the option.
5. If the option works, the problem is solved. If it does not, try another option.

As adults discuss these steps with young children and practice them, children become more competent at solving problems. Preschoolers are willing to vocalize and try their problem solving ideas when they feel safe in their environment.

## Developing Literacy Skills in Young Children

Literacy skills associated with early childhood typically include language development, phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, drawing and writing letters, and access to environmental print and books (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Children's early literacy experiences encourage cognitive skills and advance literacy development (Hayiou-Thomas et al., 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Davidson (2010) suggested cognitive and sociocultural theories can provide the framework for literacy development in young children. Vygotsky's theory explained the value of the cultural influence in learning literacy skills based on the social conditions (Davidson, 2010). For example, the cultural and social experiences a child can relate to at home can be part of the literacy experiences in the preschool. Davidson (2010) stated, "North America's increasingly diverse population demands that responsible educators acknowledge, respect, and draw on students' cultural and social experiences in respect to literacy learning, and that they adopt pedagogical perspectives that foster social and educational equity" (p. 255).

Morrow and Dougherty (2011) reported on federally based policies for literacy development for children in preschool and kindergarten through grade 3. The National Reading Panel Report and the National Early Literacy Report provided extensive research that identified the most critical skills in literacy development: "phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency" (p. 8). In addition, the following skills were found as crucial to reading development: "oral language development, alphabet code, print knowledge, and memory and visual perceptual abilities" (p. 8).

Early literacy related experiences can be a critical foundation to later academic success (Rohde, 2015; Stevenson & Hackett, 2009; Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Experiences can be varied at home as well as in a preschool classroom. Burgess (2011) found parents vary when they introduce literacy experiences such as reading to their child; the range of introducing literacy to children was from six months to as late as 12-24 months. The most common literacy activity reported was shared reading experiences with their young children (Burgess, 2011). Burgess reported that parents who enjoyed literacy experiences themselves seemed to be more involved with their children in literacy activities. Educators can encourage and support home literacy opportunities for children by teaching parents the value of their literacy experiences at home (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Both parents and educators can be cognizant of the children's abilities and adjust the experience to meet their developmental abilities (Burgess, 2011; Stevenson & Hackett, 2009). Young children benefit from early literacy related experiences in the home as well as in the preschool setting.

**Language skills**

Young children learn language skills through listening, talking, describing, and interacting with others. As children learn symbols and the names of objects, people, and parts of their environment they develop cognitively. Vygotsky suggested children understand symbols in the verbal mediation stage. Even though thought and language develop independently, young children connect them as they express their thoughts through language (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's explanation of private speech indicates young children are making sense of their world by talking to themselves. They talk out loud in order to concentrate or help understand their world. Private speech eventually becomes more internalized but is a natural process in language development (Vygotsky, 1978).

As children interact and converse with adults and peers their language is enhanced. The environment can encourage children to use new words and meaning in their communication with others (Rohde, 2015). Adults can engage children in meaningful conversations that stimulate their cognitive abilities (Neumann, Hood, Ford, & Neumann, 2011). Allowing children to play with others and interact with the environment motivates their use and meaning of words. Young children make sense of their communications with others as they hear and understand language (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Phonological awareness**

Phonological awareness is developed as young children become aware of sounds and relationships to letters. Young children begin to understand small sounds such as

syllables. They can recognize sound similarities, phonemes, and rhythms in speech. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development can be implemented to encourage young children to repeat sounds and words they hear from adults through the use of learning finger plays, songs, and listening to books. The child learns how to correctly pronounce words as well as increase vocabulary meaning which supports cognitive development (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Rhyming can encourage children to focus on sounds of language versus meaning. Children typically learn language as a communication before they attend to the sounds (Rohde, 2015). Music helps children be aware of phonological skills as they listen and participate to the rhythm and sounds in songs (Neuman, (2014). Phonological awareness can be a predictor of early reading success (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Rohde, 2015).

**Vocabulary knowledge**

Vocabulary knowledge can be increased by reading out loud to young children and asking them questions about the story to permit children to articulate their understanding of words. Adults can teach children the meaning of words by explaining and illustrating the words; children practice these skills when retelling or reenacting a story (Massey, 2013). Scaffolding benefits the child as adults assist to advance the child's development. The adult is aware of what the child understands and helps the child use words correctly in conversation. Using books or pictures with words enlarge vocabulary knowledge. Targeted questioning helps to engage children in the reading experience as they interact and converse with adults and peers (Massey, 2013, p. 129). Guided play

with adult supported scaffolding helps children learn new words and understand vocabulary meaning more efficiently (Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

Vocabulary knowledge can be developed through oral storytelling. Children learn through their cultural experiences the manner in which stories are organized and structured (Schick & Melzi, 2010). Young children learn narrative skills from their home environments and diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Educators can build on those previous literacy experiences by implementing interactions between children during play that produce opportunities for them to tell stories (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013). Children's collaboration to create stories encourages narrative and language development which leads to additional skills such as "diverse pragmatic and discursive skills essential to storytelling" (Schick & Melzi, 2010). Schick and Melzi (2010) found that these skills are foundational for more advanced literacy skill development; children with these skills may have an advantage academically. Specifically, vocabulary development promotes critical aspects in learning to read (Wasik, 2010). Support from teachers and parents enhance the development of vocabulary in young children.

**Drawing and writing alphabet letters**

Scribbling is usually the first form of developing writing skills (Hall, 2009). Children who learn their written marks can symbolize words. Hall (2009) suggested drawing is a positive approach in encouraging the development of writing skills. Children can learn to express themselves through drawing; they may verbalize their thoughts as they describe their drawings and representations in social settings (Kissel, 2011). Writing is a literacy skill that supports later reading achievement (Gerde, Bingham, & Wasik,

2012). Writing can be connected to children's experiences using alphabet charts, dictation of what they say, and as part of the dramatic play center activity. A young child's writing progresses from scribbles to consistent shapes to separate letter formation (Gerde et al., 2013). Kissel (2011) agreed with Vygotsky that culture influences young children's writing development as they interact with others and express themselves through written illustrations and words.

**Print rich environments**

A print rich environment includes non-continuous print that is functional and encourages the development of a young child's literacy skills (Neumann et al., 2011). Examples of print in the classroom include written messages, directions, names of materials and areas. Young children recognize environmental print through their sociocultural experiences. Parents and teachers use environmental print as a resource to develop young children's literacy skills. Children recognize and use environmental print as they explore and discover their surroundings. They learn print communicates meaning even if they can't read (Neumann et al., 2011; Rohde, 2015).

Children need easy access to an assortment of books with a variety of subject matter. For example, audio books provide young children active participation and motivation to follow along with the print. Books reinforce and introduce new vocabulary and concepts to children. Young children can learn writing and reading skills simultaneously; in fact, all literacy skills overlap in their use and understanding during the developmental years (Rohde, 2015).

## Developing through Play

The recent trend to enforce academic curriculum in preschools diminishes the value of play and the cognitive skills developed during play (Brown, 2010; Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2011; Waltson, 2013). Gopnik and Walker (2013) suggested the shift toward an academic emphasis in preschool is "due to a paucity of good recent research and also to the fact that earlier research has used a very general and broad definition of both play and learning" (p. 25). An academic enforced focus may lead to a reduced benefit from teacher-child interactions (Brown, 2010; Chien et al., 2010). Children learn and develop in all domains through the process of play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Play is a natural vehicle for children to learn and develop. As they interact with peers and adults in a play environment, they are stimulated to use language and cognitive skills (Roskos & Christie, 2013; Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009). Children make sense of their world as they interact with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Make-believe and pretend play allow children to discover abilities and overcome challenges; they can investigate and participate in various scenarios as they create and cooperate with their peers (Smith, 2010). Yelland (2011) used the term, "playful explorations" to explain the importance of young children learning in their environment (p. 6). Yelland agreed with Vygotsky that play can be educational and help children develop in a variety of ways. Yelland explained, "The teacher is able to scaffold this learning so that it is articulated and represented by the children in a variety of modes" (p. 8). Yelland's suggestions of multi-modal play for literacy include: written, visual, gestural, aural,

linguistic, and tactile activities. Literacy skills and knowledge in preschool are abilities that prepare young children to read and write (Roskos & Christie, 2011). Children find meaning in their play that furthers developmental change in their thought processes (Myck-Wayne, 2010; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

Leong and Bodrova (2012) advocated that play in many classrooms does not reach the level of imagination and skill development that could happen. When play is not supported by adults it does not reach the full potential for influencing young children's cognitive and social development. Play in the classroom should be as intentional as teaching literacy or math skills (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). Play should not be considered optional or eliminated to teach a more academic subject. Play should be a valued and beneficial activity to support development. The importance of scaffolding play in early childhood classrooms is emphasized in their work. Higher levels of play should focus on the following: "Planning, roles, props, extended time frame, language, and scenarios" (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). The teacher's role is to assess the level of play and determine the type of scaffolding needed to encourage development.

Axelrod (2015) promotes the idea of play as a cornerstone of early childhood education. The following three suggestions are elements that foster this philosophy:

1. Provide time and space for play. Long periods of play can be scheduled into the curriculum. Allowing children to move around the classroom and mix props from play areas encourages the children to value free play time. The children learn to flexibility in their creativity.

2. Listen to children. Educators need to incorporate the children's family and culture into the play areas. Current experiences can direct their play and learning. Listening to children's stories will give the teacher understanding and ideas to incorporate their lives into the preschool setting.
3. Join children in play. Teachers should be skillful players. They should follow the children's lead. As playing occurs, teachers can learn more about the children and consequently incorporate their interests into the play areas.

As research supports the inclusion of play into the preschool curriculum, educators of young children can include experiences for their students to develop. Play in the curriculum can be implemented in various ways when the teacher is cognizant of the students' needs and developmental abilities. Even though development through play can come through various avenues, educators need to skillfully provide opportunities for play activities.

**Definitions of Play**

Play can be defined in various ways but universally the criteria are similar even though various terms are used to reference play (Roskos & Christie, 2013; Smith, 2010; Weisberg et al., 2013). Burghardt (2011) defined play by the following criteria:

1. The behavior is not fully functional in the form or context in which it is expressed.
2. The behavior is spontaneous, voluntary, intentional, pleasurable, rewarding, reinforcing, or autotelic ("done for its own sake").

3. The behavior is incomplete, exaggerated, awkward, precocious, or involves behavior with patterns with modified form, sequencing, or targeting.
4. The behavior is performed repeatedly in a similar, but not rigidly stereotyped form.
5. The behavior is initiated when an animal (or person) is adequately fed, clothed, healthy, and not under stress. (pp. 13-16).

Pellegrini (2009) posited the definition of play can evolve as the child develops. At the earliest ages pretend play is repeating the roles they observe around them. As their "theory of mind" develops their style of play evolves as well. Through play interactions, children understand others having differing views. Social interactions and oral language allow children to discover and understand a variety of scenarios through substituting objects, self-regulation, and sequential events (Pellegrini, 2009).

Specifically, symbolic play is stimulated through dramatic play settings (Pellegrini, 2009). The child is allowed to substitute or separate from the object and develop imaginary situations (Pellegrini, 2009; Smith, 2010). Cooperative play helps children learn to take turns, share, and solve problems (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Leong and Bodrova (2012) suggested as children develop cognitively their style of play changes. They identified the following five stages of a child's make-believe play (p. 29):

1. First scripts – the child does not plan or have roles during play. The child plays with objects and explores but does not use scenarios. Little language is used; however, the child will follow simple directions.

2. Roles in action – the child does not plan during play but can implement simple roles. The child can create simple, short scenarios and use language to describe actions.
3. Roles - the child plans roles and rules. Props are needed for the role play. Scenarios are longer and usually familiar to the child.
4. Mature roles, planned scenarios, and symbolic props – the child plans scenarios in advance that are complex and include multiple roles. The props can be symbolic and pretend. The scenarios are longer and more involved.
5. Dramatization, multiple themes and roles – the child plans elaborate themes, scenarios, and complex roles. Roles can be social relationships or objects. The child can pretend without a prop. Language is a vital part of the play. The child can use themes from stories and literature.

Adults can misunderstand, however, the learning that takes place with play. Various definitions of play can produce some confusion in early childhood education. For example, Hayoiu-Thomas, Harlaar, Dale, and Plomin (2010) found four types of play included in their evaluation of current research: (1) play as a context, (2) play as a major role, (3) play related to intervention, and (4) play related to intervention and special children (p. 256). The definition of play is often based on the type of research conducted (Pellegrini, 2009). The understanding and value of play needs to be relevant to early childhood teachers. Play is a child's work and can be applied in various situations in the classroom (Myck-Wayne, 2010). Play extends language development and produces other

valuable cognitive skills in a preschool setting (Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Yelland, 2011).

**Benefits of Play**

Lillard et al. (2013) reviewed previous studies noting the benefits of pretend play for young children. Lillard et al. concluded more research is needed to "clarify pretend play's possible role in children's development" (p. 24). The researchers argued that pretend play does not cause development in the following domains: creativity, intelligence, reasoning, conversation, theory of mind, executive function, and social skills (p. 25). Lillard et al., however, acknowledged a possible causal relationship with pretend play in the domains of language, narrative, and emotion regulation. In response to Lillard et al. (2013), Harris and Jalloul, (2013) argued it is difficult to interpret which activities are crucial for development, but pretend play is beneficial for young children. Nicolopoulou and Ilgaz (2013) argued that a stronger connection between pretend play and narrative skills exists in the development of young children than Lillard et al., (2013) acknowledged in their review. They validated narrative skills as contributing to the development of literacy skills and the long-term academic success in young children (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013). The existing research is a starting point but more research is needed to fill the gaps, and answer questions of these topics with deeper exploration (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013). Nicolopoulou and Ilgaz (2013) suggested most of the previous research has focused on play involving adult support and yet there is a need to pay attention to more "independent and spontaneous forms of peer-group play" (p. 79).

Roskos and Christie (2013) found from their examination of previous studies a positive relationship between play and literacy in early childhood settings. They concluded that literacy objects and literacy enriched play areas support writing and reading behaviors. Social support, such as teacher involvement, strengthened the relationship between play and literacy.

Roskos and Christie's (2013) analysis indicated more research is warranted on the "effects of free play on cognitive related literacy skills in order to strengthen the case for more free play in early literacy education" (p. 94). Additional research is needed to examine the relationships between "free play (of a virtual kind) and the oral-language skills associated with literacy" (p. 94). Weisberg et al. (2013) suggested more research investigating the specific roles of play in the development of language skills and other cognitive abilities is needed.

Smith (2010) suggested three models indicating the varying degrees of importance of pretend play to development in young children: (p. 179)

- Model 1: Pretend play is a by-product of development – no specific benefits except enjoyment.
- Model 2: Pretend play is a facilitator of development but not essential if other pathways are present.
- Model 3: Pretend play is essential for development.

Smith (2010) concluded the evidence is not absolute and conclusive that play is essential but certainly contributes to development. Smith further suggested pretend play experiences provide opportunities for young children to develop in ways that may be

difficult to duplicate in other forms. The social and engaging characteristics of socio-dramatic play can be beneficial to a variety of developmental domains such as language, creativity, and theory or mind (Pellegrini, 2009).

Play allows children to express their ideas (Neuman, 2014). Teachers may plan a specific lesson but then encourage children to support the concepts through play. This can be accomplished through role-play, modeling, or free-play. As children expand on the concepts they understand and develop vocabulary.

## Literacy Skills

Definitions of early literacy skills encompass a variety of terms. The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) was assembled to summarize scientific evidence on early literacy development. The purpose was to help inform policy and practice for educators and families supporting young children's learning of literacy skills. Paciga, Hoffman, and Teale (2011) identified the following three key recommendations from the National Early Literacy Panel report that support quality early childhood education programs: (1) alphabet knowledge, (2) phonological awareness, and (3) oral language (p. 52). They found these three elements had a direct and positive impact on children's literacy development. However, they also caution the de-emphasizing of other important learning activities. In other words, young children need exposure to many experiences in order to develop literacy skills. Paciga et al. (2011) stated literacy concepts should be implemented in child-initiated play time instead of requiring children to rapidly name letters or direct lessons on phonological memory concepts.

The National Early Literacy Panel (2008) identified the following pre-reading and writing skills young children need to acquire in early childhood:

1. Alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, rapid automatic naming of letters and numbers, ability to write one's own name, and phonological memory.
2. Understanding concepts about print, print knowledge, oral language, and visual processing.

Several interventions that have a positive impact on children's development were also identified in the 2008 report. Age, socioeconomic status, and race did not appear to alter the effectiveness of various interventions. The following interventions and strategies support gains in knowledge and oral language:

1. Teach children letter-sound relationships.
2. Shared reading intervention by reading books to children and encourage adult-child interactions.
3. Home programs that teach parents instructional techniques to use with their children.

Interventions that produced the biggest effects were conducted one-on-one or in small group settings, were teacher directed, and help children learn skills by engaging in those skills. It is critical for early childhood educators to determine the most effective ways to implement these interventions. More research is needed to build a better understanding of how literacy skills can be best implemented in the preschool setting (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010).

**Developing Literacy Skills through Play**

Roskos and Christie (2011) used the play-literacy nexus to explain how play, language, and literacy skills interrelate. They proposed socio-dramatic play supports children's development of appropriate behavior and language consistent with narrative roles (2011). Previous research showed mixed results with the connection of play and literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2011). These authors further stated that

> Studies of the effects of play on specific early-literacy skills, such as phonological awareness or alphabet-letter knowledge, are few and far between. Positive links between play and literacy skills, however, are sparse, and there is almost a total lack of replication of the findings, making this an area in dire need of more research. (p. 215)

Play may have the strongest effect on language development when young children are learning the foundations of language (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Spybrook & Walker, 2012; Weisberg et al., 2013; Whitebread et al., 2009). Weisberg et al. (2013) identified the following four characteristics as strengthening the link between play and language skills: (1) symbolic thinking, (2) social interaction such as socio-dramatic play, (3) language input by adults and peers during play, and (4) engaging in an activity. Weisberg et al. (2013) explained that even though past research has been mostly correlational concerning the relationship between play and language skills, intervention studies indicated adult support as a key variable. Guided play is optimal when adults are attentive and responsive, allow the child to take the lead, and build on the child's interests (Weisberg et al., 2013).

Anderson, Spainhower, and Sharp (2014) proposed that since literacy is so plentiful in our environment and interactions with others, a literacy-enriched play center is a critical area in a preschool setting. Children should have easy access to writing materials, supplies, and props. If the tools for literacy are included in their play, children will naturally practice and include those skills. Teachers can accurately scaffold the context, skills, and literacy development during the play sessions (Anderson et al., 2014). Educators can organize experiences for young children to practice literacy skills in play areas of the preschool. Materials can be provided in dramatic play areas for the children. As the children play and interact with others, they can practice using the materials and consequently, have opportunities to develop literacy skills.

Stagnitti, Bailey, Stevenson, Reynolds, and Kidd (2015) found in their research a positive correlation between play-based curriculum and the development of play skills and oral language during the first six months of school. The children in the play-based school showed improvements in grammatical knowledge. The play-based curriculum included a child-focused curriculum and the physical environment provided play spaces for the children. Stagnitti et al. (2015) differentiated between free play and play-based curriculum. In play-based curriculum teachers facilitate play with guidance and purpose, yet the curriculum is not structured and academic-based. In their study, the children attending a mainstream school showed growth in only one aspect of play – object substitutions. Stagnitti et al. (2015) suggested play is essential for development. Oral language is a foundational skill that supports literacy and socio-cognitive development in the early years. As educators implement play-based curriculum in a dramatic play area,

children will have opportunities to practice oral language skills with their peers and teachers.

**Socio-dramatic Play**

Socio-dramatic play typically refers to a child role-playing with peers (Smith, 2010). Literacy skills are enhanced when children have opportunities to interact and pretend play with props in dramatic play centers. The props related to the storybook which was read in the classroom are available in the play area to expand the children's learning and encourage social interaction. Teachers scaffold literacy skills as the children interact with their peers and expand their learning through play with the props (Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R. M., 2015; Massey, 2013). Children can reenact the story, talk about the characters, portray characters, or creatively extend the story. Massey (2013) suggested using targeted comments and questions that support the storybook theme. This type of guided play and conversation can be effective and purposeful in the preschool classroom; children experience word development and concrete understanding of their world (Massey, 2013). Dickinson and Porche (2012) found in their research when preschool teachers use sophisticated vocabulary and allowed the children to talk more there was a positive relationship to better word recognition in kindergarten and 4$^{th}$ grade. Symbolic play contributes to the cognitive skills and self-regulatory behaviors of young children, especially if the play is child-directed (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Whitebread et al., 2009).

Socio-dramatic play with peers usually supports oral language development. Play and language seem to influence each other (Stagnitti et al., 2015). Pretend play involves

negotiating and interacting verbally. The child learns to use language in more sophisticated ways through these interactions (Pellegrini, 2009; Stagnitti et al., 2015).

**Strategies to Improve Classroom Environment**

The classroom environment can motivate young children to learn literacy skills. Mata (2011) identified factors impacting motivation for young children. Factors included: understanding the value of reading and writing, self-concept, and enjoyment. Although Mata reported girls showed a higher motivation in the enjoyment of reading, classroom environments can produce activities and experiences focused towards the interests of boys and girls. In a play environment, their interests can be highlighted to encourage skill development (Kim, 2011).

Activities that promote language and literacy development can be established in the curriculum. Wasik (2010) reported, "Preschool programs may lack a component that is critical to developing language skills in young children" (p. 621). The increase of vocabulary during early childhood play is an important factor in a child's cognitive development (Collins, 2012; Kim, 2011). Children with varying degrees of ability benefit from preschool programs supporting literacy development skills (Cunningham et al., 2009; What Works Clearinghouse, 2013). Berkowitz (2011) studied the development of language skills through oral storytelling. Play was incorporated in the storytelling experience. The teachers originated the oral storytelling experience and then encouraged the children to continue the story through play time. Berkowitz (2011) reported children were able to exercise their imagination, communication skills, and social literacy skills.

Owocki (2000) suggested teachable moments can occur when observing children during play and providing opportunities to extend their understanding of literacy skills.

Strategies for implementing literacy skills in early childhood education classrooms can be taught and reinforced in professional development settings (Kim, 2011; Wasik, 2010). Neuman and Wright (2010) found that on-site coaching was an effective intervention in helping teachers' implement literacy strategies in the classroom. Educators who used coaching were able to implement the literacy strategies immediately in the classroom and received relevant feedback. The teachers participating in the study learned through Vygotsky's zone of proximal development strategy to implement the practices in their own classroom. Demonstrating a variety of storytelling practices for early childhood educators could help children build on their previous experiences (Schick & Melzi, 2013). Educators can involve children in the story by encouraging them to participate in telling the story or share experiences related to the story. In dramatic play centers teachers can provide the props and encourage children to act out the story as they remember it.

Writing materials should be available to children in various centers of the preschool. Incorporating writing materials and opportunities in daily activities encourage and support young children in their writing development (Gerde et al., 2012). Content-rich classrooms allow children to be exposed to a wide variety of writing materials (Neuman, 2014). Opportunities for children to learn early literacy skills through appropriate resources and experiences support their development.

## Child-Centered Curriculum versus Academic-Skills Curriculum

In the United States, preschool programs range from a fully academic curriculum to a fully play-based curriculum. While both ends of the spectrum can be meaningful, curriculum developers often emphasize one approach or the other (Munn, 2010). As more children in the United States attend prekindergarten and states set academic standards for kindergarten, the curriculum is expected to become more academic and include less socialization, imagination and creativity (Cunningham et al., 2009; Gullo & Hughes, 2011). This emphasis may put pressure on teachers and children to meet inappropriate expectations. Early childhood educators are at times, pushed and pulled to each of the philosophical positions (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). "Play and learning are not antithetical, but are integrally connected" (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015, p. 2). The ways young children construct knowledge, socially interact, and problem solve have not changed and should be addressed in appropriate ways (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Pellegrini, 2011). Preschool classrooms are conducive to cross-curriculum learning. For example, children can learn new words and actions as they play with manipulatives and other children (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). Preschool children learn differently from elementary- age children. Preschool children have shorter attention spans and are at the beginning of intentional learning; academic expectations for elementary school students should not be pushed in preschool settings (Brown & Mowry, 2015).

### Child-Centered Curriculum

A child-centered curricular approach focuses on the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children. This is accomplished by an environment that is child-directed and allows for play and exploration. Vygotsky was a proponent of the child-centered approach. His theory and concepts of early childhood development were applicable in the child-centered environment (Vygotsky, 1978). According to researchers Gullo and Hughes (2011) among others (Roskos and Christie, 2011) it may be a serious mistake if child-directed play is eliminated completely or subjugated to more academic instruction, during this critical developmental period for young children. Child-centered experiences should engage the children in learning and discovering through play and their choice of involvement (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practices should focus on the experiences engaging children in the learning experience. This often happens in a classroom where the children are allowed time to choose, discover, and play (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Child-directed play can enrich skills in many domains of development such as: literacy, decision-making, and self-regulation. During child-directed play children find realistic purposes to apply cognitive skills such as literacy and math. They learn to problem solve and be active in making decisions during the play time. They gain positive self-efficacy as they learn how to self-regulate in their environment (Anderson, Spainhower, & Sharp, 2014). Child-directed curriculum can be purposeful and directed to learning goals (Callahan & Madalaine, 2012).

Smith (2010) argued even though a child-directed curriculum may be less efficient from the direct instruction approach; the advantage is it is enjoyable to the child.

Children may feel more motivated to learn and keep their attention on the task if the children are engaged in play.

**Academic-Skills Curriculum**

The academic-skills approach supports using direct instruction methods to teach reading readiness skills. Reading readiness skills can include the following: phonic awareness, letter recognition, and visual skills such as left to right eye movement (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). The skills are taught in a specific, organized, and repetitive way to all children in the classroom. Cognitive developmental skills are the main focus in an academic-skills approach with social, emotional, and physical skills emphasized to a lesser degree. As the focus to an academic model is encouraged, early childhood educators are expected to fit preschool into the overall school learning standards (Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Hatcher, Nuner, & Paulsel, 2012). This expectation can cause a conflict with the educator's understanding of best practices for young children (Gullo & Hughes, 2012; Myck-Wayne, 2010). Lecturing in group settings and seatwork that requires heavy use of pencil and paper type work are not best practices for teaching young children. Some group interaction can be beneficial in teaching children new skills and knowledge (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). de Haan, Elbers, and Leseman (2014) found positive associations of language-literacy development with the amount of teacher-managed activities in the classroom. However, they indicated when whole-group activities occur in preschool settings, the children are more likely to be passive and watching versus engaged in the activity. When teachers instruct in small groups, the effectiveness of learning is better than a large group setting (de Haan, et al., 2014).

**Implementing Literacy Skills in the Curriculum**

Strategies to teach literacy skills are a part of the controversy between implementing child-centered curriculum versus academic-skills curriculum (Morrow & Dougherty, 2011). Literacy skills can be learned in both types of curricula but may be more meaningful and appropriate in a play-based curriculum (Roskos & Christie, 2011; Stagnitti, et al., 2015). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) stated, "play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 14). Early literacy skills are typically milestones and expectations found in academic standards. These standards are often used by states and agencies in early childhood curriculum (Cunningham et al., 2009; Roskos & Christie, 2011). Developing age appropriate school readiness skills in young children is a primary focus of the revised Head Start Framework (Nemeth, 2011). The domains related to literacy skills include: phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, book appreciation and knowledge, print concepts and early writing. Roskos and Christie (2011) suggested the expectation for early childhood educators to focus on this achievement will likely increase. On the other hand, Roskos and Christie (2011) argued "play has become increasingly marginalized from the early childhood curriculum and faces an uncertain future in times of fiscal constraints and outcomes accountability" (p. 216). The connection of play and literacy in the preschool environment becomes valuable to the development of young children (Hayiou-Thomas et al., 2010; Liu, 2008; Roskos & Christie, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013; Yelland, 2011). Rohde (2015) posits:

> There is clearly a gap between research and practice of emergent literacy in ECE programs. This disparity may be due to a lack of resources or knowledge in providing high-quality emergent literacy learning opportunities in ECE classrooms. (p. 2)

Educators can understand appropriate literacy skill development and implement applicable activities and opportunities for young children in the preschool setting. Resources to support literacy development should be available and easily accessible for young children as they learn in the classroom. Purposeful play in a dramatic play center can provide these opportunities for learning and development.

Sandvik, van Daal, and Ader (2014) stated:

> To best prepare children for future literacy success, a high-quality literacy environment in preschool is essential. If the goal is to improve literacy in schools, it is necessary to start at the root of literacy development – in preschool. (p. 44)

Boyle and Charles (2010) explained child's play is stimulating when it is stress-free and enjoyable. Their research found that children learn best at young ages when the environment provides learning opportunities which are fun and age-appropriate. Play can support children's cognitive and social development (Boyle & Charles, 2010). Siraj-Blatchford (2009) suggested using a Vygotskian approach in supporting children within a play environment or allowing support for development based on children's needs and ability; teaching should always be aimed at the child's ability and emerging skills. Weisberg et al. (2013) suggested child-directed exploration-type play should override adult-controlled play-like activities and testing the children; an often practiced

educational approach in the United States. When educators allow child-directed play, the children have opportunities to explore, discover, and interact with each other. The children are expected to choose the type of activity they are interested in. The teacher facilitates the learning environment with a variety of play options. Hatcher et al. (2012) stated, "recognition of the demands children will face in kindergarten may further reinforce preschool teachers' beliefs that preschools must provide the types of play experiences children need that may be disappearing from kindergartens" (p. 17).

Liu (2008) studied the connection between play and literacy development. Liu's study results suggested play is central to a child's world and the stages of play coincide with the developmental stages of the child. The study identified language and literacy skills as part of the developmental stages in early childhood. Liu (2008) stated, "The multi-dimensions of play correspond with the multi-dimensions of emergent literacy" (p. 14). Early childhood educators should understand the value of play for the development of young children. Rushton, Rushton, and Larkin (2010) suggested that the field of neuroscience supports the important components of creating an active, stimulating, learning environment. Children actively engaged strengthen their neurological networks. Play-enhanced environments provide healthy support to young children.

As young children learn about their world it becomes natural for them to role play and participate in imaginative play engaging them in the learning process (Gopnik & Walker, 2013). Sharp, Escalante, and Anderson (2012) reported that play is a vehicle to promote oral language development and reading readiness skills. They submitted a child's spontaneous play can be the teaching tool for literacy interactions (Sharp et al.,

2012). These literacy interactions can involve dramatic play, role playing, and creative play.

## Developmentally Appropriate Practices

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) promotes developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood education programs. The NAEYC position statement supports the development and learning for all young children in quality care and education programs. NAEYC encourages the following standards of developmentally appropriate practices to promote optimal development in young children:

- Educators need to know and understand the ability levels of children;
- Teaching strategies should accommodate children's level of development and be sensitive to social and cultural contexts;
- Teaching approaches should be challenging and engaging in order to help children progress in their development; and
- Pedagogy in an early childhood setting should be based on research knowledge and theories (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. xii).

### Preschool Settings

Developmentally appropriate practices focusing on play and literacy can be implemented in the preschool setting. Roskos and Christie (2011) used the term "play-literacy nexus" to describe a preschool classroom that includes opportunities and activities that intersect the play and literacy goals to foster development of young children. Play activities in a preschool setting can be planned, organized, and productive

for young children (Hatcher et al., 2012). Developmentally appropriate approaches include: a print rich environment, specific play areas that include literacy opportunities, a variety of literacy resources, guided play with the teacher, reenacting story time, and scaffolding the needs of children (Roskos & Christie, 2011).

Developmentally appropriate practices in preschool classrooms support school readiness programs (Brown, 2010; Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Chien et al., 2010; Hatcher et al., 2012; Shanahan & Lonigan, 2010). Vocabulary development is a factor associated with school success (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). When early childhood educators understand the children's abilities and provide opportunities for purposeful play, children can develop school readiness skills such as vocabulary development (Brown, 2010; Gilbert, Harte, & Patrick, 2011). Teachers can engage the children in collaborative interactions and conversations. Providing play resources for children to interact with their peers motivate their ability to construct information about their world (Chien et al., 2010; Gilbert et al., 2011). Developmentally appropriate environments give children opportunities to engage in play through spontaneity, pleasure, and motivation (Wood, 2014). The children can explore, ask questions, and learn how to understand concepts--verbal interactions become a natural process. Consequently, children understand how to use words to express their feelings, solve problems, and ask questions. The environment becomes a support system for their long-term understanding and development (Gilbert et al., 2011; Wood, 2014).

Gerde et al. (2012) recommended developmentally appropriate practices for incorporating writing into early childhood classrooms:

> Building writing into the daily schedule, accept all forms of writing, explicitly model writing, scaffold children's writing, encourage children to read what they write, encourage invented spelling, make writing opportunities meaningful, have writing materials in all centers, display theme-related words in the writing center, engage in group writing experiences, make writing a way to connect with families, and use technology to support writing. (pp. 353-357)

When children have meaningful opportunities to write daily and use emergent literacy skills their cognitive and pre-reading skills may improve.

Brown and Mowry (2015) suggested the following acronym to support learning in preschool settings: Rigorous DAP (Reaching all children; Integrating content areas; Growing as a community; Offering choices; Revisiting new content; Offering challenges; Understanding each learner; See the whole child; Differentiating instruction; Assessing constantly; Pushing every child forward). This framework for early childhood instruction encourages intentional learning by providing experiences and variety for all children. This active approach allows children to choose activities and build upon their skill set (Brown & Mowry, 2015).

In all preschool settings, educators and parents should understand why certain activities are developmentally appropriate. The impact of appropriate activities is consistent and has positive effects on literacy development (Paciga et al., 2011). Understanding how to implement developmentally appropriate practices is also essential to children's progression. Paciga et al. (2011) cautioned against replacing rich experiences that impact the whole development of the child with skill and drill

approaches to learning. The inclusion of building literacy skills through the use of authentic play as part of the curriculum can be developmentally appropriate (Paciga, et al., 2011).

**Ability Levels of Children**

Developmentally appropriate practices involve understanding the ability levels of children in the preschool classroom. Early childhood educators need to know through observation and assessment each of the children in the classroom environment. At the young ages of preschool, the levels of development can vary extensively due to many factors. For instance, low socio-economic status can be related to low literacy skills (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2009). Children may vary in domains, strengths, interests, preferences, learning styles, family situations, and special needs (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Educators practicing developmentally appropriate practices respond to children in an individual way. Decisions regarding curriculum and teaching strategies can be individualized in a preschool setting to accommodate the variety of needs and expectations for all children as individuals (Brown & Mowry, 2015). Preschool children are capable of gaining knowledge in their own way when the environment is created to allow for physical manipulation, play, observation, asking questions, and formulating answers. The environment can be organized to support the various levels of children's development. Brown and Lee (2012) suggested early childhood educators need to "foster a pre-K disposition, become a resilient professional, and develop a cultural competence" (p. 331). Fostering a pre-K disposition comes with a passion for teaching young children and a willingness to continually work to understand

the children as individuals (Brown & Lee, 2012). Creating meaningful learning opportunities fosters their development in all domains.

**Sensitivity to Cultural and Social Contexts**

Developmentally appropriate practices include understanding diversity and helping the preschool children feel safe in the environment (Gullo & Hughes, 2011). Cultural and linguistic diversity continues to grow among preschoolers in the United States (Brown & Lee, 2012). Unity between parents, teachers, and children provides consistency and positive caring relationships for young children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Sensitivity to the context of a child's life involves understanding the child's home experiences, conditions, differences, and opportunities. The links between culture, community and demographics that children receive will influence their support to learn early literacy skills (Rohde, 2015). Brown and Lee (2012) suggested early childhood development should be understood through the social world in which children exist. For example, children growing up in a low-income family have fewer literacy experiences leading to lower vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, they may enter school with lower foundational skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The national policy, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was put in place to try to eliminate learning gaps between different groups of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Early childhood educators have a responsibility to close any learning gap for all children through developmentally appropriate practices. Closing the learning gap requires educators to understand and be sensitive to the culture and experiences of their students. Involving parents in discussions and learning experiences can also be helpful in closing the learning gap.

Reaching out to families within the school community can create a culturally safe environment for young children. Allowing parents to truly understand what is happening in the classroom will assist the parents at home as well as help prepare the children for success in the school setting (Clarkin-Phillips & Carr, 2012). Culturally relevant practices support the individual development and success of young children learning in a preschool setting (Summer & Summer, 2014). The teacher must consider, "looking at the child as an individual and within the context of family, community, culture, linguistic norms, social group, past experience (including learning and behavior), and current circumstances in order to understand each child as they are and make decisions that are developmentally appropriate for each of them" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 10). Educators have a critical responsibility to understand how to incorporate their students' culture into the classroom setting. Students benefit when teachers reach out to parents and involve them in the learning process.

**Pedagogy Based on Research and Theories**

Even though we understand individuality exists in young children's growth patterns, research suggests a relatively stable, typical, and predictable sequence of growth in the early years (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Rohde, 2015). Certainly, the way these stages of growth occur can be influenced by the context of the child's life. Understanding typical developmental expectations based on research and theories can provide a framework to developmentally appropriate practices. Understanding how children learn and typical sequences in development can direct curriculum and teaching practices. Developmentally appropriate practices consist of a curriculum that is

knowledge and skill-based. Learning goals that are well-defined and understood can help individual children make progress in appropriate developmental abilities. The research-based curriculum directs the activities and learning experiences in the classroom (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gullo & Hughes, 2011; Rohde, 2015). Learning experiences need to be integrated and sequenced within the curriculum.

Teachers need to be aware of the interests of young children and adapt the curriculum to be age and developmentally appropriate. Diversity is respected and appreciated in the curriculum and environment (Brown & Mowry, 2015; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Young children need professional teachers who are able to provide high-quality learning opportunities during the early years of schooling (LaParo et al., 2009).

The high-quality experiences that are developmentally appropriate can be learned through professional development and teacher education programs focusing on early childhood pedagogy, research and theories (Sandvik, van Daal, Ader, 2014). Further, these programs can support early childhood teachers in understanding best practices to support young children's literacy development (Cunningham et al., 2009; Rohde, 2015; Spybrook & Walker, 2012). Teacher educational levels influence teachers' understandings of best practices in pedagogy for early childhood settings (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2010).

Assessment is ongoing as the teacher evaluates children on an individual and group basis. The teacher may observe, ask questions, listen, and scaffold abilities during interactions with the children. Assessments are appropriate for the age and development

of specific children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Spybrook & Walker, 2012). Gullo and Hughes (2011) suggested the following assessment guidelines that support positive teaching strategies: "(1) assessment should be a continuous process; (2) assessment should be a comprehensive process; and (3) assessment should be an integrative process" (p. 327). Assessment is used to inform and adjust the curriculum and learning experiences in preschools. As teachers interact with the children during play and child-directed activities, they can assess and evaluate their students' needs and abilities. Developmentally appropriate strategies for integrating literacy skill development can be planned and integrated into the preschool curriculum and setting.

## Conclusion

Recent literature indicated the trend in the United States to enforce academic curriculum in preschools and to diminish the value of play (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Waltson, 2013). Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory supported the premise that children develop cognitive skills during play and interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978).

Research by Copple and Bredekamp (2009) as well as other researchers such as Berk and Myers (2013) indicated the process of play helps children develop higher level cognitive function in an age appropriate manner. Children's social interactions with adults and peers during play encourage cognitive skills that facilitate the acquirement of language and literacy skills of children to boost their success in school (Berk & Meyers, 2013).

According to Lillard et al. (2013) more research is necessary to understand the relationship between socio-dramatic play and literacy skill development in young children (Lillard et al., 2013; Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2011, 2013). In this study I provided a better understanding and increased knowledge related to the development of oral language and literacy skills of children through the use of dramatic play in a preschool setting. This study extends the present body of literature concerning the use of dramatic play in the preschool setting to enhance the language and literacy skills of young students. Chapter three sets forth the research methodology for this qualitative case study.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## Introduction

In this study I explored the types of activities and strategies related to play that promote language and literacy skills of young children participating in socio-dramatic play in a preschool setting. Socio-dramatic play involves symbolic representation, role taking, imagination and social interaction (Roskos & Christie, 2011). The recent trend in the United States to enforce academic curriculum in preschools diminishes the value of play in the development of young children (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Walston, 2013). I furthered the understanding and extended the knowledge related to oral language and literacy development through the vehicle of socio-dramatic play in a preschool setting. The results of this study are beneficial to early childhood educators as they support, plan, and implement dramatic play opportunities to support the language and literacy development of young children. It was my belief more research was needed to deepen this understanding and support the value of play in developing skills in young children (Lillard et al., 2013; Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Roskos & Christie, 2013). This chapter contains a description of the research methods that were used to explore the research questions directing this study. The location, population, researcher's role, data collection, and trustworthiness strategies are discussed in this chapter.

## Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research is an accepted and preferred methodology in the social sciences and education for understanding phenomena from the participants' point of view

(Patton, 2015; McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Qualitative researchers can choose among differing approaches. The similarities among the approaches can include researching in a natural setting, exploring problems or issues, the researcher participates in the data collection and interpretation, and many methods of gathering information can be used (Creswell, 2013). Understanding the differences of the varying approaches helped me to determine that a qualitative case study was the most appropriate approach for this particular research as I was trying to find out the why and how of a certain phenomenon. I gathered my data through observations which is a qualitative strategy. Since my research questions did not support a cause and effect approach for understanding and the participants were small in number, a quantitative or mixed methods approach was not applicable to this study. However, the four qualitative approaches listed below were considered but then rejected for the various reasons that follow.

**Narrative Analysis**

The narrative approach requires the participants who have experienced an event or problem to be involved in collecting the stories or experiences related to the research problem. Creswell (2013) suggested the following four types of narrative research can be implemented: biographical, auto ethnography, life, history, and oral history. The research questions directing this study were not suitable to the types of narrative research.

**Grounded Theory**

The grounded theory approach involves developing a theory to explain a process or action. Prior to the research a theory has not been identified to explain the problem.

The developed theory is created based on the data collected through the research process (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of this study was not to develop a theory but to build on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) in understanding literacy skill development in young children through dramatic play.

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research is used to explain how participants experience a particular phenomenon or universal experience (Creswell, 2013). The researcher identifies what and how all of the participants experiencing the phenomenon have in common. An emphasis is placed on the philosophical factors associated with the phenomenon. This study did not propose to look at how participants experience a specific phenomenon.

**Ethnology**

Ethnographic research starts with a theory and then looks for patterns or behaviors that explain the theory. The ethnographic qualitative method studies issues of a culture sharing group that has similarities in patterns of behavior, language, and beliefs (Creswell, 2013). Since I researched a preschool population, they may have common or similar language, development, and/or behavior characteristics. There may be a common culture within the group. However, my research was exploring individual development versus a collected group.

**Rationale for Case Study Approach**

Creswell (2013) explained the case study approach typically explores a research question or issue within a real life setting for finding out the how and why of a

phenomenon. I completed my research by observing preschoolers during their participation in dramatic play at a university preschool. I specifically observed how preschoolers use oral language and literacy skills in a dramatic play center. Through the use of email interviews, I garnered information about how adults support the development of literacy skills during dramatic play.

I collected data in the natural setting of a single site preschool dramatic play area. The university preschool is considered a natural setting for young children. Creswell (2013) explained the natural setting as the epistemological assumption. Since my observations were conducted in a natural setting preschool, the epistemological assumption would apply. Because the research location was bound by the setting and participants, it met the case study criteria (Creswell, 2013).

Woodside (2010) defined case study research as "an inquiry that focuses on describing, understanding, predicting, and/or controlling the individual (i.e. process, animal, person, household, organization, group, industry, culture, or nationality)" (p.1). The researcher places importance on the data collected to describe and understand the case or in other words, "sensemaking" (Woodside, 2010). Woodside explained the principle objective of case study research is the deep understanding of the research problem. Making sense of the data involves focusing on what is perceived and the interpretation of the data. Triangulation involves the use of multiple approaches to data collection and supports the objective in case study research. I incorporated the concept of multiple approaches during the data collection process. The data in this research was analyzed and reported with a "sensemaking" approach.

According to Woodside (2010) the description involved in case study research can answer the questions related to who, when, where, what, and how. The why question in case study research is answered in the explanation of the data collection analysis. Prediction can be implemented as an explanation of related or similar cases (Woodside, 2010). This research provides valuable information for future early childhood educators in their efforts to build opportunities for young children to learn literacy skills through play.

In this study, the participants were relatively small in number and limited to the preschool enrollment, which is characteristic of the case study approach (Creswell, 2013). The narrow focus group provided the opportunity to gather an in-depth understanding of the research problem. I observed and attempted to understand individual oral language and literacy development through dramatic play. I used an observational protocol (Appendix C) to record my descriptive notes and reflective notes while observing the children. The descriptive notes included a description of the activities summarized in chronological order. The reflective notes included information about my reflections on activities and summary conclusions about the activities (Creswell, 2013). I observed children playing in a dramatic play center with specific props from dramatic play boxes. Examples of the dramatic play boxes included props related to the following scenarios: restaurant, grocery store, post office, birthday party, explorer, etc. My research questions directed my attention to individual development. My stated research problem and questions were conducive to a case study approach.

## Research Questions

The following research questions directed the study:

1. What are the types of activities and strategies related to play that are adopted in a dramatic play center to promote the development of oral language and literacy skills?
2. How do parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during dramatic play?

## Participant Selection

### Participant Selection Logic

The participants in the study were young children attending a university campus preschool, their parents, and teacher. The children who attended the preschool are generally four years old. Even though the children had varying degrees of ability, they did not have identified special needs. The development of the children could be classified as typical for their age. The naturalistic inquiry is one of Patton's identified strategies in qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The naturalistic inquiry is considered a profile of a typical situation or setting. The university campus preschool is a naturalistic environment and can be considered a typical preschool setting. Because the research location was defined with boundaries of specific times and location it met the case study criteria (Creswell, 2013).

Maxwell (2013) suggested a purposeful selection process when determining participants for a qualitative study. Purposeful selection consists of determining specific settings and people to address the research purpose and questions. Focusing on the purpose of the research is an important consideration in all aspects of qualitative study.

Maxwell (2010) identified the following five possible goals to direct purposeful selection: (1) "achieving typical representativeness; (2) ensure representation provides adequate variation; (3) deliberately select participants that are critical to the theory used as the basis for the research; (4) establish particular comparisons; and (5) selection based on ability to answer research questions" (pp. 98-99).

A case study approach typically indicates few participants (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) explained there are no specific rules for sample size in qualitative research. The size can be determined by the setting as well as the research purpose. The sample size needs to support the research design. Maxwell (2013) indicated the setting of the study will influence the selection decisions. Maxwell (2013) suggested the participants be typical and represent the group as a whole. This study involved three different groups of participants that consisted of ten children, nine parents, and one preschool teacher.

**Preschool Children Participants**

I recruited children who attended the Monday and Wednesday afternoon sessions of preschool. Approximately, ten children were enrolled in the afternoon session and attend the preschool for 2 ½ hours twice a week. The participants in the study were generated from the afternoon preschool session. I observed the children as participants in this study. The narrow focus group provided an opportunity to gather enough information, which contributed to an in-depth understanding of the research problem and questions. I studied individual literacy activities and experiences through dramatic play. My research questions directed my attention to individual development. Specifically,

research question number one was addressed through the observations of the preschool children.

### Parent Participants

Participants in the study included parents whose children attend the university preschool. Parents of the preschool children who were observed were asked to participate in the study. The parents completed an email interview answering seven questions noted in the following section (also see Appendix A). The responses of the parents were used to address research question number two.

### Teacher Participant

The preschool teacher at the university was asked to participate in the study. The teacher was interviewed and asked the seven questions noted in the following section (also see Appendix B). The responses of the teacher were used to address research question number two.

## Procedures for Recruitment

After obtaining IRB approval from both the university where the preschool is located and Walden University, the preschool children's parents and teacher were notified of the study. An invitation to participate was sent to the parents and the preschool teacher. The letter included the purpose of the study and my affiliation with the university as a full time professor. A description of how the data would be collected through video-taping, observations, artifacts, and interviews was explained in the letter. A data collection time line was included, along with confirmation of confidentiality for all participants. The parents had the opportunity to allow their children to participate.

The parents were also asked to volunteer to participate in an email or phone interview. I asked the university based preschool teacher to participate in an interview. This was a voluntary interview regarding the teacher's perception of literacy development during dramatic play in the preschool.

**Procedures for Participation**

Once the participants had been confirmed, a consent form was given to all parents and the teacher for approval and signature. In the consent forms for the children, parents, and teacher, I included Creswell's (2013) following suggestions: "the right of participants to voluntarily withdraw anytime, state the purpose of the study and procedures, protection of confidentiality, any known risk factors, and expected benefits to participants" (p. 153). A signed consent form was provided for the participants to keep. I used a number system to protect the participants' anonymity on all documents related to the study (Creswell, 2013).

## Role of the Researcher

According to Creswell (2013) the role of the researcher in qualitative study is collecting and evaluating data. In this study the data was collected in the forms of observation, field notes, audio visual methods, and interviews. In addition, any artifacts related to the research were collected. Examples of artifacts included the children's drawings or mock writing samples completed in the dramatic play center. I received approval from the university Internal Review Board (IRB) and Walden University IRB before conducting research in the preschool. I provided written permission consent forms to the parents of the preschool children and the preschool teacher. The consent forms to

the parents and the teacher invited them to participate and provided a full disclosure of my research study and affiliation with the university. I assured confidentiality of the information gathered by protecting and storing the collected data and results in a locked file cabinet. Upon approval with the signed consent forms and Internal Review Boards, I planned and scheduled observation times in the preschool.

**Observations**

I was a nonparticipant observer in the preschool classroom. I used direct observation. Patton (2015) described several advantages to the direct observation approach. The following advantages strengthened my research: "capturing behavior of the participants in the context of the setting, discovery oriented on site, observe from a different perspective, and learn from first hand experiences and observations" (Patton, 2015, pp. 331-333). Woodside (2010) proposed collecting data through observations in a natural field setting is a powerful method in case study research. I gathered field notes during the observations. Video observation increased accuracy for in-depth collecting and reporting the data.

I am familiar with the preschool setting since it is located in my place of employment. Patton (2015) suggested that familiarity with the setting can add bias to the observation results. Patton (2015) explained "Disclosure and explanation of the observer's role to others" is an important guideline to avoid bias in qualitative research (p. 416). Since I am a professor at the university, the teacher and students working in the preschool are familiar with me being in that setting. To reduce bias and avoid confusion, I always clarified to the preschool teacher and students when I was in the preschool for

research related reasons. I did not supervise the university students working in the preschool. I do not directly teach the children and did not change or influence their behavior. As an observer in the preschool, I was careful to avoid any chance to influence the children's behavior during the data collecting process. Fortunately, no unforeseen occurrence happened and I did not intercede or accidentally influence behaviors.

Patton (2015) suggested reactions from those being observed can influence research credibility. In the setting for this study, the preschool children are very familiar with university students, teachers, and parents being in the preschool area. It is an open environment where people are coming and going on a regular basis during the preschool session. Therefore, the children rarely show any different behavior based on observers in the preschool. Because I was a nonparticipant observer, I placed myself in a fairly discrete location out of the play pathways during the observation times.

**Interviews**

Interviews of the parents and the preschool teacher were conducted through email. The interviewees had the opportunity to verify their answers as a means to validate the interview process. I provided open-ended questions in an interview guide to the parents and the teacher. The interview protocol is included in appendix A and B.

**Evaluating the Data**

After collecting the data, I assumed the role of evaluating the data. I analyzed the data to the extent of answering the research questions. In analyzing the data, I identified categories and themes as a result of the study and concluded with concepts learned

through the research process (Creswell, 2013). I used a computer program to assist in the data collection and analysis which is further addressed later in this chapter.

## Instrumentation

I implemented four instruments as a means to collect data. Typically in qualitative research triangulation is the strategy of analyzing information through the findings gathered by multiple sources. Triangulation of methods can confirm and deepen the information gathered from the study (Woodside, 2010). Using multiple sources in gathering data can reduce the possible risk of bias in the study. Triangulation in qualitative research strengthens validity and reliability of the study (Maxwell, 2013; Woodside, 2010). The use of multiple instruments to collect data for this study included: (a) direct observation through video-tapes, (b) field notes, (c) artifacts from the children, and (d) interviews of parents and the teacher.

### Observations

Instruments during observation times included video-taping, field notes, and collection of artifacts. Video-taping occurred during play time in the dramatic play area of the preschool. I took field notes of what I heard and saw the children doing during the video-taping episodes. I collected artifacts of the children's drawings and writing samples as they played in the dramatic play area. Artifacts that were produced during the play time were identified and documented as part of the study. I completed these observations during the Monday and Wednesday afternoon preschool sessions for a three week period or six sessions.

### Interview Guide

I conducted email interviews with the parents of the children and the preschool teacher. The parents and the preschool teacher were made aware of the purpose of the study and guaranteed confidentiality of their answers. The interview protocol for the parents and teacher are provided in Appendices A and B. The interviews with the parents and preschool teacher addressed research question number two.

**Data Collection from Observations**

I gathered data from the observations of the preschool children, field notes, interviews, and artifacts. I implemented fixed-interval observations of the children's play time in the preschool. Patton (2015) stated the advantage to the fixed-interval approach is the opportunity to gather information in a concise and timely manner. During the afternoon preschool sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays, I observed and video-taped the children for a three-week period. A fixed-interval approach allowed for consistency and the opportunity to gather the needed data through video-taping and field notes for my study. In my observations of the children, I used a direct observation approach as I collected the data for my study. The following advantages of the direct observation approach were implemented: capturing behavior of the participants in the context of the setting, discovery oriented onsite, and learn from firsthand experiences and observations (Patton, 2015). The combination of video-taping and field notes of the observations increased accuracy and in-depth data in exploring my research questions.

Artifacts were collected during the observation time in the preschool. Artifacts can include drawings and mock writing samples (Schickadanz & Collins, 2012; Patton,

2015; Woodside, 2010). The artifacts that were produced as a result of the play time were identified and documented as part of the data collected.

Analytic memoing is a valid data source in qualitative research. The researcher records what is seen, heard, and experienced during the data collection process. A reflection is included as a way to synthesize the observation material (Miles & Huberman, 2014). I included detailed field notes in the form of analytic memoing during the data collection of the study. Analytic memoing was useful during coding and analyzing the results of the data gathered.

**Data Collection from Interviews**

Data were collected from interviews with parents of the preschool children and the preschool teacher. An open-ended interview is one of several types of interviewing strategies in collecting data during qualitative research (Patton, 2015). The open-ended interview approach provides questions for the participants that are specifically worded and in a certain order. The questions are standardized and therefore conducive to email or phone interviews (Patton, 2015). An advantage to the email interviews is it allows the participant to be thoughtful and constructive in their answers. Patton (2015) suggested the purpose of the interview is to understand the person's perspective. The participants in this study were allowed to consider and respond to the questions in an efficient format. In addition, the open-ended approach encouraged interviewees to review their answers and include any comments they feel are pertinent to the study. Each participant was afforded an opportunity to review their responses for accuracy and to ensure validity.

## Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan for this study involved two coding cycles. The first coding cycle was used to summarize segments of the data and identify codes and categories from the information gathered. The second coding cycle is pattern coding or grouping the first cycle into smaller categories and themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I created themes to explain the data.

### Observation Analysis

The video data collected from the observations were transcribed and coded through a computer program. Nvivo is a qualitative data analysis program. This computer program can assist in organizing data collection through video observations. Creswell (2013) suggested the analysis plan should: "organize the files for data, form initial codes, establish themes, interpret and develop naturalistic generalization of what was learned and present an in-depth picture of the case" (pp. 190-191). In order to avoid bias in the results and any discrepancy of the video data, it was also analyzed by another person not directly involved in the study.

### Interview Analysis

The interviewees were afforded an opportunity to review their answers for accuracy and to ensure validity. The data collected from the interviews with the parents were organized into codes and themes. The teacher's interview answers were also analyzed with the parents' information in an effort to answer research question 2. The two code cycles described above were implemented with the data collected from the interviews.

## Results

The identified themes that resulted from the study were part of the conclusion of concepts learned through the research process (Creswell, 2013). The analysis and results addressed the research questions. Research question one referencing the types of activities and strategies related to play that are adopted in a dramatic play center that promote children's literacy skills was analyzed through the video, observations, and field notes. Research question two referencing how parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during dramatic play was analyzed through the interviews.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Patton (2015) there are several strategies that can be implemented to ensure quality, trustworthiness, and credibility in qualitative research. The researcher has the responsibility to ensure these aspects of their research in order to provide reliability and validity to the study. By implementing triangulation in the data collection process, credibility, trustworthiness, and quality can be achieved. This process helps the researcher avoid inconsistencies and bias in the research (Patton, 2015). My sampling consisted of several children within the preschool setting. I am familiar with the preschool setting since it is located at my place of employment. Being familiar with the setting could have brought bias to my research. Patton (2015) suggested it is important to explain the observer's role to those in the observation environment. I clarified my research purpose to all in the preschool setting. As a nonparticipant observer, I placed myself in a discrete location so that I did not affect the children's behavior. Video-taping

was in a discrete location in order to avoid interference. In order to avoid bias in the results, the video data was analyzed by another person not directly involved in the study.

## Ethical Procedures

I requested approval to conduct the research from the university where the preschool is located and Walden University for IRB approval. I did not begin the study until approvals from both institutions are granted. This approval was essential in ensuring ethical procedures were in place for the study. Ethical procedures were implemented during the observations and interviews.

### Observations

Because minors were part of my research, I detailed the procedures of my study and ensured that my plan would not change the behavior of the children in the preschool. I observed and noted their behavior during play in the dramatic play center versus influencing or changing their behavior. When research involves a vulnerable population such as children, care must always be taken to protect them (Creswell, 2013). I protected the children by obtaining properly signed consent from the parents of the children who were observed prior to engaging in the study. The parents were informed of the purpose of the study and procedures, protection of confidentiality, and that they could withdraw their children from the study at any time for any reason (Creswell, 2013). Using a number system to identify the children, parents, and teacher adhered to participant anonymity.

### Interviews

I obtained properly signed consent forms from the parents and the preschool teacher before the interviewing process. They were informed of the procedures and ensured confidentiality. The parents and preschool teacher had the opportunity to review their answers to the interview questions for any errors or misinterpretations. These strategies ensured that participants' responses reflected what they said.

**Data Security**

The data, the signed consent forms, and any documents collected from this study are well protected and stored in a locked file cabinet accessible only to me. Any related information on the computer is password protected and stored securely on a USB drive. This approach assures confidentiality for all participants.

## Summary

This chapter has described the information on the research design and methodology for the study. The rationale for implementing a case study approach has been included. The role of the researcher, explanations of participant selection, and participation has been outlined in the chapter. Furthermore, data collection methods, instruments, and data analysis procedures have been discussed. Also included are trustworthiness strategies and ethical procedures that were implemented in the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the language and literacy experiences of young children participating in dramatic play. As trends in the United States expect early childhood educators to implement academic style curriculums in preschools, the value of play has been diminished (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Gopnik & Walker, 2013; Myck-Wayne, 2010; Walston, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013). Using a qualitative case study approach, data was collected through observations and interviews. Ten children in a university-based preschool were observed during dramatic playtime. The type of activities and strategies related to play in a dramatic play center were explored. In addition, the study explored how parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills through play. Nine parents and one teacher responded to the email questionnaire. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the types of activities and strategies related to play that are adopted in a dramatic play center to promote the development of oral language and literacy skills?

2. How do parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during dramatic play?

The data were analyzed to provide further understanding of how preschool age children develop oral language and literacy skills through participation in a dramatic play center. In this chapter I will describe the setting for the study, the demographics of the participants, the process of data collection, and the analysis of data in relation to the research questions. Evidence of trustworthiness will also be discussed.

## Setting

The setting for the observations of the children was at a university-based preschool. The study was conducted during the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. The preschool is located on the campus of a university in the Southwest United States. The preschool classroom area is a large, open spaced room with natural divisions of play areas. The areas in the preschool room include the following: art and painting easels, blocks, reading loft, dramatic play with dress ups and kitchen related furniture, computer table with chairs, two sensory tables, and four round tables with chairs. The room also has a rug area with colored squares for large group activities. A sink and drinking fountain are located near the entrance to the outside playground. The teacher's office, supply room, and the restroom are adjacent to the preschool room. A one-way observation booth is adjacent to the preschool classroom. The preschool room has a door to an outside play area with grass, cement walkways, sand area, two playhouses, slides, and swings. The outside area is fenced. When the children arrive at the preschool they hang up their coats, backpacks, and find their name on a chart. The cards with their names have a picture of them on the back side. They are asked to identify their name and turn the card over on the chart to indicate they have arrived at preschool.

## Demographics

The target preschool is located on a university campus. The preschool has an open enrollment to children of university faculty, staff, and the community. The participants in my study were 10 four-year-old children attending the preschool. The children had varying degrees of ability but they did not have special needs. There were

four boys and six girls enrolled in the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. On the six observation days, there were between eight and ten children in attendance. The children's parents were asked to participate in an interview as part of the study. One parent was a university faculty member, one parent was a university staff member, and the other parents were community members. All of the parents chose to respond to the interview questions through email. The university employs one preschool teacher. She was asked to participate in the interview and responded to the questions through email.

The preschool is located at the university where I am employed. I disclosed my purpose and research related reasons for being in the preschool to the teacher, students, and parents. Because the preschool is a lab on campus, the children are familiar with the presence of college students, professors, and parents being in the preschool area.

## Data Collection

I received confirmation from the university site Institutional Review Board (IRB) with approval number QA-004-201540 on January 19, 2016. The site's IRB agreed to serve as the IRB of record for the data collection. Walden IRB approved supervising the data analysis and reporting on March 8, 2016; approval number 03-08-16-0230780. After the IRB approvals (Appendix D) had been received, informed consent forms were given to the parents and preschool teacher of the children attending the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. The consent form (Appendix E) invited the parents and the preschool teacher to participate in the research study. The consent form included an explanation of the purpose of the study, the procedures for the observations, the interviews, the voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits of their child's

participation in the study, a description of privacy, a statement indicating there would not be any payment associated with the study, and contact information. All of the parents and the preschool teacher voluntarily signed the consent form.

**Observations**

I was a nonparticipant observer in the preschool classroom during six preschool sessions for a three week period. I placed myself in a fairly discrete location in the preschool, out of the play pathways, during the observation times. I was not involved in the children's interactions and therefore did not influence their behavior during the data collection process. I used direct observation and gathered field notes during the observation times. Video observation was also collected to ensure validity and reliability. I transcribed and analyzed the video recordings. In addition, another person analyzed the video recordings to avoid bias in the results. The six observation sessions were between 20 and 30 minutes in length. I observed all of the children who participated in the dramatic play area for each session. I took field notes as I observed the children playing in the dramatic play center. I noted what I heard the children saying and what I saw them doing during the dramatic play time. I collected artifacts of the children's drawings and writing samples as they played in the dramatic play area. The children were coded by number to ensure confidentiality. I stored the video and paper data in a locked file cabinet and electronic data on a password protected computer that is used by me exclusively.

**Interviews**

I emailed to each parent of the preschool children an open-ended interview guide (Appendix A) with seven questions. The questions were standardized and focused on how they value play and literacy skill development. Nine of the ten parents completed the interview and returned their answers to me through email or in person at the preschool. The parents were asked to review their answers for accuracy and to ensure validity. None of the participants made changes to their answers.

The preschool teacher was invited to answer the questions on the open-ended interview guide (Appendix B) with seven questions. The questions focused on the value of play and development of literacy skills in the preschool setting. The preschool teacher responded to each question and sent the answers by email. The preschool teacher was afforded the opportunity to review the answers for accuracy but did not make any changes. All of the participants' answers were secured in a locked file cabinet and stored on a password protected computer that is used by me exclusively.

## Data Analysis

The first step of analysis involved watching each videotape. I transcribed what I heard and saw during the dramatic play sessions. I included my field notes of the observations as the second step of analysis. I identified activities and strategies during my transcription of the videotapes and field notes that were implemented and related to oral language and literacy development. I made a list of the activities and strategies I observed during the dramatic playtime. I then categorized the activities and strategies that occurred in the preschool during the observation times. The videotapes and field notes were analyzed by another person who identified categories related to the activities

and strategies during the dramatic play time. The following themes related to oral language development emerged from the identified categories: modeling, asking questions, props, and books. I implemented the same process of identifying categories related to literacy skills that were observed during the observation times. The themes related to the development of literacy skills that emerged included: writing experiences, interpreting pictures, and interacting with the preschool teacher.

The parents' and preschool teacher's answers to the interview questions were collected and analyzed in an effort to address research question two. I used the software NVivo to support the coding of data collected from the interviews with the parents and the preschool teacher. The answers to the interview questions by the parents and the preschool teacher were combined for each question. Common responses were identified in the coding process through the software program, NVivo. Nodes and text queries within NVivo were conducted to support the finding of the themes. This step provided a deeper connection and understanding of the participants' responses to the interview guide. The following themes emerged from the interviews: experiences and environment.

During the data collection and analysis there were no unusual circumstances or discrepant cases. The children enrolled in the preschool session participated in the dramatic play activities. All ten parents agreed to participate in the interviews; however nine responded. The nine parents and preschool teacher answered the interview questions.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the type of activities and strategies that promote development of language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. Several strategies were used to provide evidence of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. A purposeful selection process was used to identify the participants. The specific setting of the university preschool and the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session were identified to address the research purpose and questions. The university preschool was a typical and naturalistic setting. Ten children were enrolled in the afternoon session which provided a narrow focus group. The observations and field notes were consistently collected during the same preschool session.

I developed the specific interview questions for the parents of the children who attend the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. The interview questions were similar for the preschool teacher. The parents and preschool teacher chose to answer the questions through email. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their answers for any errors or misinterpretations. None of the participants corrected or changed their responses. Collecting data from the videotapes, field notes, and interviews provided multiple sources of information and an opportunity for triangulation of data. These strategies help to provide evidence of quality and credibility of the data collected during the study.

The process of triangulation in the data collection helped me avoid inconsistencies and bias in the research. Since the preschool is located at my place of

employment, I am familiar with the preschool setting. I was careful to clarify my research purpose to those in the preschool. I was a nonparticipant observer and placed myself in a fairly discrete location so that I would not affect the children's behavior. The children are acclimated to having adults in the preschool and rarely make reference to them being there. During the observation times, the children did not ask me to interact with their activities. I did not influence the children's behavior during the observation times. The video data were analyzed by another person, in addition to me, to avoid bias in the results. The sources of data collected could be replicated and therefore support the dependability of the study.

Even though this study is relatively small, the results could be transferable. It is possible that other preschool settings may provide differing experiences; however this preschool is typical in that the children do not have special needs and a university preschool is considered a natural setting for young children. It is probable that the results could provide understanding and training to students at other university early childhood education programs. These students could make connections and find support to include experiences and enhance the environment to promote the development of literacy skills during dramatic play.

The process of conducting the study, collecting, and analyzing the data occurred as proposed in Chapter 3. I followed all of the proposed procedures. I used the videotapes and field notes during the observations to support research question one. I used the interview responses from the parents and the preschool teacher to support research question two. I used the qualitative research software, NVivo to organize and

analyze the data. The program was used to identify the themes that were developed in answering the research questions. This process supported the confirmability of the study.

## Results

Preschool classroom observations and interviews with parents and the preschool teacher provided the data for exploring this study's research questions. This section of findings will include discussion of the two research questions. The first research question is addressed through the data collected during the observations. The second research question is addressed through the data collected from the interviews.

### Observations - Research Question 1

The first research question was: What are the types of activities and strategies related to play that are adopted in a dramatic play center to promote the development of oral language and literacy skills?

During the six observation days in the preschool, the preschool teacher had developed and implemented the theme of community helpers. The first day of observations the preschool teacher planned an introduction to community helpers. Each day after that introduction focused on a different community helper which included the following: dentist, fireman, veterinarian, mailman, and chef. According to the data collected there were a variety of strategies and activities that promoted oral language development during the six observations.

### Oral Language Development

Several strategies and activities were observed that supported oral language development: modeling, asking questions, props, and books. The preschool teacher implemented these strategies and activities in a small group as well as individually.

**Modeling**

As the preschool teacher talked with the children, she modeled tasks of the community helpers. On the veterinarian day, she used a stuffed animal and modeled with the tools how to check the animal's health. She had a stethoscope, a flashlight, a syringe, and a Popsicle stick. The children had been invited to bring their favorite stuffed animal to preschool. The tools she had demonstrated with were in the dramatic play center and the children could choose to check their animal's health. The children played independently in the center. I heard most of the children use private speech. They spoke to their animal or to themselves as they used the veterinarian tools. I heard the following comments as they examined their stuffed animal:

> One ear looks good, but the other one is not.
>
> Something is wrong with his teeth.
>
> He's healthy.
>
> He seems a little stuffy.
>
> I hear a cough. Oh, he has a sticker and I will have to get it out.
>
> My bear needs a shot.
>
> I can check his eyes; they are hurting him.
>
> I can hear her heart so I think she is ok.

The children showed interest in checking their animal's health. The language they used seemed to imitate what they had heard the preschool teacher say during the demonstration of the tools. Because the children were checking their stuffed animal they seemed to be more engaged and interested in using the tools during the dramatic play time.

During the observation day focusing on firemen, the preschool teacher showed the children realistic pictures from the book, *What Do Firefighters Do?* The pictures included: the firemen in their coats and hats, their firetrucks, and their hoses. The preschool teacher invited the children to role play as if they were firemen and holding a large hose spraying the fire with water. The dramatic play center was outside. There were firemen coats, hats, long, plastic tubes, two playhouses, and trikes. The children who chose to play in the dramatic play center engaged in cooperative play. They wore the coats and hats and took turns using the pipes to spray the houses with water. They used the trikes as firetrucks. The children pretended the playhouses were on fire and they were getting the fire out as well as rescuing people. I heard the children say the following during the observation:

"We need to rescue them."

"Let's get out guys."

"Let's go in and rescue them."

"There is a fire over there."

"Rescue me!"

"There is more fire in the windows."

"I'm the lady in the house; it's still on fire. Help! Help!"

"Get the hoses so we can spray water."

"Can I dig a ditch to help stop the fire?"

Making water sounds: "shshshsh"

"We need water over here."

"The fire is coming out of the windows."

"Oh no, the fire is on top of the house!"

"There is someone in there."

"The hose is heavy."

"Let's go in."

"We are rescuing people."

"There is one more fire in there."

"Now there is a fire over there."

"I want to be the lady and get rescued."

"Ok, I will be the fireman and spray the water."

"Let's get on the firetruck and go back to the station."

"I know, let's follow each other to the station."

The children creatively expressed themselves as they pretended to be fire fighters. They collectively participated in the storyline they created. The children were very enthusiastic about wearing the coats and hats. When a couple of the boys decided the trikes were the firetrucks, the other children joined in and pretended as well. The cooperative dramatic play was enhanced through the use of the outside area.

**Asking Questions**

A strategy to encourage oral language development involved asking the children questions. On the day focusing on firemen, the preschool teacher asked the children the following questions:

> "I will give you clues and you see if you can guess who our community helper is today. This helper drives a big truck?" The children guessed garbage man, farmer, and builder.
>
> "This helper keeps us safe." The children guessed policeman, mom and dad, sister.
>
> "This helper is strong and sprays water out of a hose." The children guessed firemen.

On the veterinarian day, the teacher asked if anyone had heard of a veterinarian. One of the children said "yes, that is where we take our dog." Another child said, "It starts with a v." The preschool teacher held a large bag with tools in it that the veterinarian might use. She invited children to come and select an item and explain how the veterinarian would use the tool.

On the day focusing on dentists, the preschool teacher asked the children, "What happens when you go to the dentist?" The day the preschool teacher introduced the community helpers, she had a variety of pictures on the board and asked the children the names of the community helpers, what they wore, and what they did in their job? I observed the preschool teacher asking questions of the children during one-on-one interaction throughout the dramatic playtimes.

**Props**

Props were utilized during all six dramatic playtime observations. During the observations, I believe the props influenced the children to play more and become more vocal during the playtime. The props stimulated the children to stay engaged in the activity. I noticed that the props provided something for the children to talk about. I noted that the props encouraged oral development during each of the observation days.

As an introduction to community helpers, the preschool teacher used pictures and asked questions to help the children identify and name community helpers. The children also learned the words and sang the following song:

*Who are the People in your Neighborhood (Sesame Street)*

Oh, who are the people in your neighborhood?

In your neighborhood?

In your neighborhood?

Say, who are the people in your neighborhood?

The people that you meet each day.

A dentist is a person in your neighborhood

In your neighborhood

He's in your neighborhood

A dentist is a person in your neighborhood

A person that you meet each day.

Each verse of the song added a different community helper.

The repetition of the words in the song encouraged the children to learn the words quickly and participate in singing the song. On this day, the dramatic play area had eight puppets representing the following community helpers: police officer, army person, nurse, postal worker, construction worker, firefighter, chef, and doctor. I observed the children interacting with the preschool teacher and with each other using the puppets to talk about the community helpers. The children talked about the community helper based on the puppet they chose to play with. Once the preschool teacher started the conversation, the children were able to continue the pretend play with the puppets. I observed the children making personal connections with the community helper puppet they chose. For example, one child chose the doctor puppet and quickly explained, "I can be a doctor, my papa had 30 broken bones and the doctor helped him. Now he can walk ten steps without his crutches." Another child made a personal connection to the army puppet, stating, "I know someone in the army. He lives in California, which is far away. I like the army puppet."

The props encouraged the children to stay involved in the dramatic play by taking turns using the props. During the observation that focused on the dentist, the dramatic play center had props related to a dentist office: a sign in sheet, a chair for the patient with a napkin to put under the chin, a Popsicle stick for checking teeth, a dentist chart with questions to ask the patient, and a go home bag with a toothbrush. The children took turns being the receptionist helping the patient check in and sign their name; the patient sitting in the chair and answering the questions; the dentist's assistant helping the dentist; and the dentist checking the teeth and asking the questions. The children chose

which part they wanted to be, but stayed engaged with the activity as they changed positions. The children easily followed the dentist's checklist of questions (see figure #1). While playing the dentist, the children asked the following questions: "Do you brush your teeth? Do you floss your teeth? Do you eat healthy food?" The children answered the questions during the dramatic playtime:

"I didn't brush my teeth, so I have cavities."

"No cavities."

"I always forget to brush my teeth; I don't like cavities."

"You need to brush your teeth."

"I don't use toothpaste."

"She should brush her teeth."

"You're lucky you don't have cavities."

"I see two cavities."

"Sometimes I eat good food."

"My mom helps me floss my teeth."

"I don't floss my teeth."

The children seemed to be familiar with the procedures at a dentist's office. The variety of props available made the dramatic play time more interesting and real. They seemed familiar with the questions that were asked and easily responded. One child initially did not want to be the patient but after watching other children she asked if she could try being the patient. I observed one child teaching another child how to use the props associated with the dentist.

The children took turns with props during the sandwich shop dramatic playtime. The sandwich shop was set up in the kitchen area of the preschool. Food props included plastic bread, cheese, tomatoes, lunch meat, peanut butter, and jelly. There were plastic ketchup and mustard bottles, napkins, food baskets, and menus. The children took turns pretending to be the chef, waiter, and customer. I observed the children staying engaged with this activity as they chose what part to participate in. Most of the children traded roles and continued playing. I observed the following oral language as they interacted with each other:

"I want to be the chef."

"I want to take the order."

"I'll be the customer."

"I want lettuce and cheese, pickles, and brown bread."

"I want ketchup."

"What do you want on your sandwich?

"I will have peanut butter and jelly."

"A customer is coming!"

"You need to sit here."

"What do you want to eat?"

"You can choose what you want to eat?"

"Can we have two chefs?"

"Yes, ok, I'll make this sandwich."

"We have more customers!"

"I will order a sandwich."

"We have to serve it to you. You can't make it yourself. We have to make the food for you in this restaurant."

"We need lettuce."

"I'll make sandwiches now."

"I can eat big sandwiches."

"Sorry, we don't have any more cheese."

"I want everything on my sandwich."

It was obvious the children had experienced being in a restaurant. They easily pretended to take on the roles of the waiter and the customer. The variety of props stimulated their participation. The sandwich menu helped direct their interactions with each other.

**Books**

The preschool teacher implemented the use of books as a strategy with the dramatic play. The following observation days' books were incorporated into the group activity to help the children learn about the community helper and support their play time: introduction to community helpers, dentist, veterinarian, and firefighters. In addition, other books were in the reading loft area of the preschool that supported the learning about community helpers. A list of the books is provided in Appendix F. The preschool teacher used the books to identify the community helper and explain what the community helper does. For example, during the observation day focusing on dentists the teacher read the book, *Little Critter Goes to the Dentist* to the children. Using the pictures in the book she asked the children what happens at the dentist office. This

approach supported the children's dramatic playtime as they pretended to be various roles at the dentist's office.

On the firefighter day, the preschool teacher read from a book with realistic pictures of firefighters and their equipment. The children looked at the pictures in the book and they described what they saw. This strategy supported the children's play during the dramatic playtime outside as they pretended to be firefighters putting out fires in two playhouses.

**Literacy Skills Development**

According to the data collected during the six observations, literacy skills were implemented into the dramatic playtime through the following strategies and activities: writing tools and experiences, interpreting pictures, and interacting with a teacher.

**Writing Tools and Experiences**

During four of the six observation sessions, the children practiced writing skills during the dramatic playtime. The children used various writing tools and materials depending on the activity. During the dentist day, the children could use the sign in sheet to write their name. When they pretended to be the dentist they could fill out a chart on a clip board making a check mark next to the questions. The chart included lines to make notes. The children pretended to write notes by scribbling on the lines. During the veterinarian playtime the children were provided with a medical chart where they could write the name of their stuffed animal. The postal worker dramatic playtime involved the most writing experiences. The children were invited to write a letter to anyone they chose to. The children also filled out the envelope with their name in the upper left hand

corner and in the middle wrote who the letter was being sent to. Some of the children also drew their own stamp in the upper right hand corner of the envelope. Writing markers, pens, pencils, paper, and envelopes were available to use in the dramatic play center. After completing their letter and addressing the envelope, they could put their letter in a mailbox. (Appendix G: Artifacts 1 – 4)

**Interpreting Pictures**

During two observation sessions, the children practiced literacy skills by interpreting pictures during the dramatic playtime. The sandwich shop had menus for the children to use as they pretended to be the waiter or customer. The menus had pictures of the foods they could choose from. They would check the box next to the picture indicating the type of bread and ingredients they wanted on their sandwich. (Appendix G: Artifact 5)

The children had a picture check-up list for the veterinarian day. They could use the tools as they examined their stuffed animals and then circle the smiley face or sad face next to the picture indicating the animal's eyes, ears, nose, mouth, feet, and heart. Then the children could determine if their pet needed a Band-Aid, medications, shot, or x-ray and circle their choice of treatment. (Appendix G: Artifact 6)

**Interactions with the Preschool Teacher**

A strategy that was identified in four of the six observation sessions that supported literacy skill development during the dramatic play time was interaction between the preschool teacher and the children. I have listed below the four observation

days and examples of interactions between the preschool teacher and children that supported literacy skill development.

Dentist: The preschool teacher showed the children how to use the sign-in sheet and the check list. The preschool teacher encouraged the children to talk with each other and use the writing tools as they participated in the dramatic play.

Veterinarian: The preschool teacher answered any questions the children asked about the check-up list for their animals and reviewed the pictures with the children.

Chef: The preschool teacher showed the children how to use the menus and then let them continue in their own play. I observed one child teaching another child how to mark the menu when taking someone's order.

Postal Worker: The preschool teacher worked one-on-one with the children who wanted to write a letter. Some of the children chose to draw a picture. One child wanted to write a letter and asked the preschool teacher for help writing the letters in the words. The child wanted the preschool teacher to demonstrate how to write each letter and then the child wrote the words. The preschool teacher provided support and instruction based on the skill level and the children's request.

The six preschool observations in the dramatic play centers produced data to support the types of activities and strategies promoting oral development and literacy skills in young children. Even though these activities and strategies were varied, the children participated and practiced critical cognitive and social skills during the dramatic playtime.

**Interviews -Research Question 2**

The second research question was: "How do parents and teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in preschoolers during dramatic play?"

The data collected from the interviews with the parents and the preschool teacher were analyzed to provide insight on how parents and teachers support literacy development through play. This discussion of the findings will include the results from the seven interview questions given to the parents and the themes that emerged from the data. In addition, the discussion will address the preschool teacher's responses to the interview questions and themes identified in the data collected and analyzed.

**Parents' Interview**

Interview Question #1. "Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so why/why not?" All participants stated play activities are important to young children. The most common answer in response to "why" came from six of the parents indicating play helps children learn. One parent said, "I think my child learns to problem solve when playing." A parent said, "Playing helps with problem solving and working out problems among their peers." Another parent said, "I know playing is the best way they learn. It is how they relate and make sense of the world around them."

Another common response to why play is important came from three parents. They valued the connection between play and developing imagination and creativity. Social benefits from play were expressed by three parents. A parent wrote, "My child is happier when he has opportunities to play." One parent said, "I feel play helps my child to express himself and understand others." Only one parent associated the value of play with exercise.

Interview Question #2. "Do you think play can contribute to a child's development? If so, how?" All of the participants agreed that play contributes to a child's development. The most common explanation related to the development of life skills: "Play can expose them to new situations, " "Play helps my child learn rules, consequences, and how to interact with others," "Play is their way of figuring out life in their own minds," "Play can help children learn daily living skills that they will need in their life for proper development," "Play teaches a child how to treat other children and learn more about real life," and finally, "play is important to help children practice life skills." A common thread through all of the parents' responses related to the value of play engendering social skills in children.

Several parents identified vocabulary development as a benefit from play. "Play can contribute to vocabulary building." "Children learn more words as they express themselves through play." "I think play helps build language skills as they communicate with other children."

Parents identified physical skills as contributors to children's development through play. As summarized by a parent, "Physical play is important in developing motor control, exercise and sensory development."

Interview Question #3. "In your opinion what are the appropriate language and literacy skills for preschoolers?" Five of the participants stated preschoolers should be able to express themselves and speak in full sentences. One parent explained being able to state how they feel allows the child to "use words to express what they need and want." Four parents suggested the value of recognizing letters and sounds as pre-reading

skills is appropriate for this age. A parent said, "I think it is important for children to learn their basic letters and sounds as a preschooler in preparation for Kindergarten." Expectations for being able to read were not indicated by the participants. However, two of the parents indicated their child is interested in reading and can read a few words or simple books. A parent stated,

> I think literacy skill development depends completely on the individual child. Some preschoolers enjoy reading and wish to learn to read, while many preschoolers are content being read to without learning to read themselves. I think it is important not to pressure kids to read too soon, but present reading often in a fun and encouraging way.

Three parents referenced the importance of their child not only recognizing his or her name but also being able to write it. One parent expressed appreciation for the preschool teacher asking the children to write their name on their projects as practice.

Interview Question #4. "What type of play activities does your child participate in?" Seven parents said their child prefers to participate in pretend play. Their examples of this type of play included: imaginary friends, "dress-up with friends and siblings," action figures, role playing, and general pretend play with toys. A parent said, "My child loves to pretend he is a builder, an astronaut, and a professional athlete." Another parent stated, "My daughter loves to pretend play with everything imaginable." One parent wrote, "In our house we do a lot of role playing. Mostly through puppets or toys set up in elaborate scenarios. She enjoys tea parties."

Six parents stated their child prefers to be outside playing on trikes, scooters, t-ball, tag, "active play outside, bike rides, jumping, walks, playing in the dirt." One parent stated, "My child loves running outside, playing in the sand and river."

Three parents have enrolled their child in organized group activities such as karate, ballet, and dance. Four of the parents stated their child likes to play with Legos and "build things." Only one parent said the child preferred to play computer games.

Interview Question #5. "What is your opinion about your child's literacy and language skills?" Six of the parents reported their child has good oral language skills. The language skills noted were: speaking clearly, using words correctly, asking good questions, and expressing themselves. A parent reported,

> She does well with telling us what she needs and wants. Right now we are working on appropriate ways to ask and what to say in response to others. She is an only child and I have found it to be difficult to keep her from feeling entitled. (And acting as so.)"

Four parents indicated their child is interested in recognizing words. A parent said "my child is reading two and three letter words by herself." Another parent stated,

> He's learning to read little three letter words. We practice sounding them out and listening to the sounds in the words. He'll come up and ask me how to spell something and we'll work on sounding out the word together.

One parent said their child "needs more help learning letters, sounds, and writing but at this time is not interested in those activities. I think he will have time to learn all that he needs to when he starts grade school."

Two of the children were reported having good handwriting skills. A parent reported her child can write using a combination of upper and lower case letters.

Interview Question #6. "In your opinion what are the activities which you feel have influenced your child's literacy skills?" Five parents agreed that involvement in activities with books influenced their literacy skills. Several parents indicated their child enjoys being read to on a daily basis. Going to the library and letting children choose the books has been a positive influence. Parents' examples of reading were mentioned as an influence for their child liking to look at books. One of the parents mentioned learning songs helped her child with language development.

Preschool was reported as a positive influence on literacy development by four parents. The social interactions with their peers at preschool as well as the activities they participate in at preschool were referenced as influential. Four parents also said they believe their child has learned literacy skills through computer games.

Interview Question #7. "Please add any comments you would like to this subject area." A parent responded, "All my son needs is somebody to play with and talk to and he's good."

The second research question addressed how parents encourage and support the development of literacy skills during play. The data collected through interviews of the parents of the preschool children provided information of how this is accomplished. Parents of the preschool children value play as a vehicle for learning and developing literacy skills. The parents recognized their child enjoys play activities and learns from their interactions with peers and others. In analyzing the data, I recognized two themes

of how parents encourage and support literacy development during play. The following two themes, experiences and environment, emerged from the data collected and were identified as contributing to the development of literacy skills in young children.

**Experiences**

The parents provided experiences for their child to learn literacy skills through play. Examples of experiences included reading books, talking with their children, singing with them, and answering questions. Books provided experiences for the parents and the child to talk about different subjects. Parents stated they recognized their child choosing roles to play based on their favorite books. One parent gave the example of Star Wars. A parent said her son loves books related to Star Wars and he will listen and repeat the storylines. The parent noticed the child also loves to use dramatic play to act out the storylines of the Star Wars books. Another parent said their child loves to sing while playing and can easily remember words to songs. Another parent said their child asks lots of questions while playing and prefers to play with others. Parents identified social interactions with peers and parents during play encouraged oral language development.

**Environment**

The parents described the environment as a substantial way to encourage and support literacy skills during play. Every parent indicated they allow free time at home for the children to engage in play. They mentioned their child enjoys the opportunity to choose activities during the playtime. Playtime activities that were recorded as supporting literacy development were books and social interactions. One parent

indicated both parents are avid readers and have many books in their home. The parent feels their example encourages their child's interest in books.

The parents interviewed appreciated and supported the university preschool's emphasis on play. The preschool provides time for the children to choose their play preferences. During this free choice time, many of the children engage in dramatic play. The parents said their child will often talk about that part of their day at preschool. The parents stated they felt their child had not only learned social skills but also cognitive skills such as problem solving, creativity, and oral language development through the opportunities to play with their peers at preschool.

**Preschool Teacher's Interview**

The preschool teacher's interview consisted of seven questions that were similar to the parents' interview questions. The purpose of the preschool teacher's interview was to understand how activities and strategies in dramatic play centers promote oral language and literacy skills. The university preschool employs one preschool teacher who directs the curriculum and activities in the classroom. University students participate in the preschool. The students complete practicum hours that involve observations, assisting with projects and children, and teaching lessons in the preschool. The teacher responded to the interview questions through email.

Interview question #1: Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so, why/why not? The preschool teacher believes play is the most important activity for young children. The preschool teacher identified reasons for the importance

of play, “They can express themselves, make sense of their world, create, and explore.” The preschool teacher noted:

> It helps them learn new abilities, at their own pace, and then continue on to new challenges. Through play, children practice decision-making, learn about social roles, acquire interests and learn to make friends. Play teaches cooperation and social skills, imagination, problem-solving, emotional expression, fine and gross motor skills, and language development.

Interview question #2: Do you think play can contribute to a child’s development? If so, how? The preschool teacher described how play can develop the whole child- emotional, physical, cognitive, and social and opined that the “social aspect possibly being the most critical for this young age of a child.”

Interview question #3: In your opinion what are the appropriate language and literacy skills for preschoolers? The preschool teacher stated, “If a child can communicate his wants and needs, it is appropriate language skills. A child needs language to develop friendships and sustain conversations.

Interview question #4: As a preschool teacher do you incorporate language and literacy skills during dramatic play time? If so, how? The preschool teacher focused on props as valuable tools to incorporate language and literacy skills in the dramatic play center in the preschool. Examples included: mailboxes with writing tools, envelopes, paper, postcards, and markers and doctor kits with pretend prescriptions.

Interview question #5: How do you see your students practicing literacy and language skills during play time? The preschool teacher stated a focus in the preschool is

social interaction. Most of the activities revolve around the social aspects of play. The preschool teacher hears the children converse with each other as they pretend play whether it is in the dress-ups, building the tallest tower with blocks, or work together to build a marble maze.

Interview question #6: In your opinion what are the best activities which you feel influences preschoolers' literacy skills? The preschool teacher stated, "Reading! We read to the children every day. We have very high-quality children's books at the preschool. The story line provides topics of interest to the children and promotes thinking and listening skills along with literacy development."

Interview question #7: Please add any comments you would like to this subject. The teacher did not choose to add any additional comments.

In summary, the preschool teacher encourages the development of literacy skills during play through providing experiences and a supportive environment for the preschoolers. Even though the teacher's emphasis was on preschool, the interview responses had some similarities with the parents' responses. Experiences and environment emerged as important ways the preschool teacher encourages literacy skills through play. Experiences in the preschool are provided through a variety of activities the children can choose from. Some of the time in preschool is child directed play. There are changes in the various centers of the preschool to provide experiences. For example, different books are provided in the reading area daily. In the writing center they may choose from different activities such as writing and sending a letter to a friend or writing a grocery list. The teacher establishes a positive environment for learning by

providing a variety of props for the children to play with and interact with each other. At times, the play is directed toward the props that are provided. For example, there may be props available for a pretend birthday party. They might engage in planning the party, baking the cake, making cards, and singing happy birthday. The props change in the preschool on a regular basis to encourage the children's interest and interaction with each other.

The results of this research found dramatic play centers can benefit the social and cognitive development of young children. Children were observed practicing oral language and literacy skills as they interacted in a variety of activities in the dramatic play center of the preschool. A stimulating environment with new experiences supports the development of literacy skills in young children. Early childhood educators should feel confident in including dramatic play as a critical aspect of the preschool setting.

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the results of the data collected from the observations of children in a university preschool and interviews from their parents and preschool teacher about oral language and literacy skill development during dramatic play. The data collected from the observations answered research question one. The types of activities and strategies related to play that promoted oral language development in dramatic play centers included: modeling, asking questions, props, and books. Literacy skill development was encouraged through writing tools and experiences, interpreting pictures, and interactions with the teacher.

Research question two was answered through the interviews of the parents and preschool teacher of the children. The experiences and environment were the common ways parents and the preschool teacher encourages and supports the development of literacy skills in young children during dramatic play. All of the parents and the preschool teacher indicated they recognized the value of play in developing children's skills. In addition, this chapter included the strategies that were implemented to ensure the quality of the study. The discussion in Chapter 5 will interpret these findings as well as provide recommendations, and address the implications for social change.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the type of activities and strategies that promote development of language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. The study investigated how parents and preschool teachers encourage and support the development of literacy skills in young children during dramatic play. The trend in the United States to enforce academic curriculum for preschoolers diminishes the value of play in the preschool years (Walston, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013). Minimal research existed on the merits of dramatic play to develop children's literacy skills in preschool settings (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013). This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, and recommendations concerning dramatic play in a preschool setting.

## Overview of the Study

The intended outcome of this qualitative case study was to provide information to support early childhood educators in promoting dramatic play as a vehicle for young children to develop oral language and literacy skills. The findings from this study confirm and extend this knowledge in Early Childhood Education. Educators, students, and administrators in Early Childhood Education can benefit from the findings of this study. Through this qualitative study, four themes were identified through Research Question 1, and two themes emerged from Research Question 2. The four themes related to activities and strategies that supported oral language development were: modeling,

asking questions, the use of props, and books. Experiences and the environment were the common themes identified through the interviews with the preschool teacher and parents that provided opportunities for young children to develop literacy skills.

A qualitative research design was selected to explore the research questions within a real life setting (Creswell, 2013). Data were collected in the natural setting of a single site university preschool in the Southwest United States. The participants were small in number and limited to the preschool enrollment; ten children enrolled in the Monday and Wednesday afternoon sessions of the preschool. I observed and took field notes of what I saw and I heard at the preschool as a nonparticipant observer during six sessions. The six sessions were videotaped to ensure accuracy. The transcripts and notes were analyzed to understand the data collected. Ten parents and the preschool teacher consented to be participants in this research study. Nine parents responded to the interview questions regarding their understanding of dramatic play and their child's development. The preschool teacher responded to interview questions focusing on how dramatic play is implemented into the classroom curriculum and setting. The interviews were conducted through email, checked, and then analyzed. Coding was implemented to understand patterns and themes that emerged from the collected data.

## Interpretation of Findings

### Vygotsky's Theory

Vygotsky's cognitive social theory was used as a conceptual framework for this study to understand how social and cognitive development are connected and influence each other (Vygotsky, 1978). In this study, I observed that several of Vygotsky's

concepts were implemented in the preschool. Vygotsky (1962) explained that children's private speech occurs when the children are talking aloud to themselves and concentrating on a specific task. At times this private speech can regulate their actions or even mimic adults as they play. This study confirmed these concepts of Vygotsky's theory. I observed children using private speech during the veterinarian day. The children interacted independently with their stuffed animal. They talked aloud to themselves as they used the tools to check their animal's health. I observed them mimicking the preschool teacher after watching her model the process of using the tools. The children used private speech as they wrote their name and alphabet letters on notes to their families during the postal worker day. I heard them spell their name as they concentrated on each letter. Vygotsky identified private speech as one of four stages of language development which normally occurs during the preschool years (Vygotsky, 1962).

Vygotsky understood that cognitive development is associated with language development. According to Vygotsky (1962) children learn language best through their interactions with others. Scaffolding, the amount of support given to children in helping them complete a task, can happen during play. The data from this study provided several examples of scaffolding in the preschool that support Vygotsky's theory. This style of interaction between the preschool teacher and the children was observed during four of the six observation days. The preschool teacher was available to help the children use the veterinarian tools, the food menus, the dentist checklist, and writing letters. On the chef

day, I observed one child teaching another child how to use the menu and mark the appropriate boxes as a form of scaffolding.

Vygotsky (1978) understood that play can support the development of cognitive skills in children. This study confirmed that children can practice cognitive skills while playing in a dramatic play center in a preschool setting. Cognitive skills can promote literacy development during play (Sukhram & Hsu, 2012). Literacy skills observed during dramatic play in this study included language skills, vocabulary knowledge, drawing, writing alphabet letters, and interest in environmental print and books. These literacy skills are typically associated with early childhood preschool settings (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

## Interpretation of Research Question 1

The study found that a variety of types of activities and strategies related to play in a dramatic play center promote the development of oral language and literacy skills. This is consistent with current research. Roskos and Christie (2013) reported that as children interact with peers and adults in a play environment they are stimulated to use language and develop cognitive skills. The data analyzed from this study confirmed children were motivated to use oral language with their peers and preschool teacher during the dramatic playtime. This study extended the knowledge in this field by identifying four types of activities and strategies observed in the preschool dramatic play center that support oral language development in young children: modeling, asking questions, props, and books.

### Oral Language Development

This study found that the preschool teacher encouraged oral language development through child-centered strategies and activities. During the six observation days, the preschool children were allowed to choose their activities and level of participation. Allowing the children to engage in learning and discover through play of their choice is characteristic of child-centered curriculum (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Each day the children were invited to choose which activities they wanted to participate in. All of the children chose to play in the dramatic play center at some point during their playtime. During the six observation days in the preschool, the preschool teacher implemented the theme of community helpers. The preschool teacher introduced a variety of community helpers on the first observation day. Each of the following five observation sessions a specific community helper was emphasized: dentist, firefighter, veterinarian, postal worker, and chef. Oral language development was observed through the following strategies and activities: modeling, asking questions, props, and books.

**Modeling**

On four of the observation days, the preschool teacher provided introductions to the dramatic play topics in a group setting. During the group time, the preschool teacher modeled the props related to the community helper. Even though the group time was used to model the tools and props provided in the dramatic play time, the children could play in their own way. Some of the play in the dramatic play center was collaborative and at other times the children played independently. For example, the preschool teacher modeled how to use the veterinarian tools. I observed the children using the tools in ways similar to the preschool teacher's demonstration as they played with their stuffed

animal. Modeling was a strategy observed that encouraged the children to pretend they were a veterinarian and checking their animals' health. Children are learning language processes as they concentrate and talk through outward, egocentric speech (Vygotsky, 1962). Berk and Meyers (2013) advocated the role of private speech and support of adults as an integral aspect of executive-function skills such as language development. This study found activities that were modeled encouraged the participation and interest of the children. Even though the children could implement the behaviors in their own way, they had confidence to interact and participate in the dramatic play. The preschool teacher's modeling and interactions with the children stimulated interest in the activity.

**Asking Questions**

In this research I found the preschool teacher encouraged oral language development through the strategy of asking questions. The preschool teacher used questions to help the children identify community helpers and their duties. In child directed play, the teacher can support children in conversation with their peers which provides vocabulary knowledge (Neumann et al., 2011).

The preschool teacher played with the children during the puppet dramatic play time. The children chose the puppets they wanted to play with. The preschool teacher selected a puppet and started the play by asking the children questions about their puppet. I found the children staying engaged in the conversation as the preschool teacher made personal connections to the puppets. For example, one of the children chose the doctor puppet. The preschool teacher asked the child, "How does your doctor puppet help people?" The preschool child responded that she fixed her Papa's bones so he could walk

without his crutches. The other children showed an interest in being part of the playtime and added to the conversation and play. A child described being a firefighter and helping save his family in the fire. As the teacher continued to ask questions about the children's puppets, the children responded but continued the dialog with other children. In a short time the children were talking with each other using their puppets as the center of the conversations. Current research has suggested questioning strategies can help children stay engaged in activities. Massey (2013) suggested targeting questioning can support interactions between the preschool teacher and the children. In this case, the preschool teacher's targeted questioning supported the interactions between the children too.

**Books**

This study found that the use of books and pictures supported vocabulary knowledge. The children were observed answering questions posed by the teacher related to the books available to the children. The books in the preschool focused on various community helpers. During the "firefighter" dramatic play, I observed the children building on the conversation they had when the preschool teacher showed them pictures of firefighters and their equipment. The children collaborated together to create dramatic play about rescuing a lady in a burning house. As the children took on the role of firefighter, they used the terminology related to fires. The children talked with each other about using the fire hose, spraying the fire with water, digging a ditch to stop the fire, and how far the water can spray. All of these characteristics of firefighting were illustrated in the pictures books that were shared with the children. Weisberg et al., (2013) found children learned vocabulary meaning more efficiently when interactions

between the teacher and child are supported with pictures or books. Schick and Melzi (2010) found story telling skills can promote vocabulary building and provide foundation for more advanced literacy skill development such as reading. On the firefighter day, I found the children quickly coalesced on a storyline related to being firefighters and rescuing others from the burning house. While the picture books provided ideas for their dramatic play, as the children continued to play they created their own story using some of the vocabulary the preschool teacher used while showing the picture books.

**Props**

Another finding in this study indicated the props in the dramatic play center stimulated oral language between peers during dramatic playtime. I observed the children using vocabulary they heard their preschool teacher say during group time. For instance, I heard a child say, "I need to use the stethoscope to check my dog's heart." The stethoscope was a prop modeled by the teacher during group time. The children's use of vocabulary heard from the preschool teacher is consistent with previous research indicating the play environment can encourage children to use new words as they communicate with others (Rohde, 2015).

The preschool was set-up differently on the observation days focusing on the chef and on the postal worker. When the children arrived at the preschool, the dramatic play centers were set-up with the props. The children could choose to play in any of the areas of the preschool. On the chef day, the kitchen area resembled a restaurant with food props and menus. The first children to arrive noticed the different classroom arrangement and asked if they could play. The teacher explained they could choose how they wanted

to play – being a chef, a server, or a customer. During the playtime, all of the children participated in the dramatic play for various periods of time. Three children chose to play in the restaurant area the entire playtime but they changed roles. I heard the children discuss how to play each role and shared their experiences being in a restaurant. Several children collaborated together as they played the various roles in the restaurant. The menus and food props encouraged the children to talk with each other and discuss their food preferences. Nicolopoulou and Ilgaz (2013) stated educators can build on children's experiences by implementing opportunities for them to interact and talk with each other. The children were motivated through various activities to use oral language skills as they interacted with others during the six observation playtimes in the dramatic play center.

**Literacy Skill Development**

The study's findings include support for literacy skill development on the postal worker day at the preschool. As the children arrived at preschool on an observation day they saw that an area of the preschool was set-up for writing letters or notes to family members, addressing envelopes, and mailing the letters for delivery. The children who chose to could sit at the table with the preschool teacher and use the writing tools to create their letter. Some children chose to write a note and others chose to draw a picture. Not all of the children participated in the dramatic play center. I observed the preschool teacher using the strategy of scaffolding to help the children write their letters and address the envelopes. One of the children wanted help with each alphabet letter. Another child preferred to draw a picture and just write his name. He knew the letters in his name but used private speech to write his name on the picture for his dad.

Drawing and writing alphabet letters are literacy skills that support later reading achievement (Gerde, Bingham & Wasik, 2012). In this research study, when given the opportunity to write, some of the children scribbled, but would write their name on the paper. Scribbling is one of the first forms of developing writing skills (Hall, 2009). Children can learn to express themselves through scribbling, drawing, and written representations of their thoughts. I observed the children scribbling in two of the dramatic play centers. During the dentist and veterinarian days the children were provided with writing materials. Three children used scribbling to write on the dentist form. On the veterinarian health check-up form, two children scribbled versus writing alphabet letters. I observed, however, all of the children write the letters in their name. The children used memory skills to remember the letters and order of letters in their name (Gerde et al., 2013). The preschool teacher encouraged the children to write their name on various projects. Repetition helps support cognitive skill development (Rohde, 2015).

This study confirmed previous research supporting the value of a print rich environment in preschool settings to encourage literacy development. I observed the children's interest in books related to the dramatic play centers. Books were incorporated into the group activities as well as during individual playtime. The preschool teacher provided books and pictures to support an understanding of the community helpers' work. Pictures can be valuable resources for children to develop reading skills. When children cannot read, they learn pictures and print communicate meaning (Neumann et al., 2011; Rohde, 2015). I observed the children interpreting pictures during dramatic playtime. During the chef observation day, menus contained pictures of the different

foods that the children could order. On the veterinarian observation day, the children used a picture check-up form as they examined their stuff animals. The children were able to interpret the smiley face or sad face and the areas they needed to check for with their stuffed animals. These experiences can reinforce literacy skill development in young children.

**Dramatic Play Centers**

This research found dramatic play centers can benefit the social and the cognitive development of young children. Children can learn and practice oral language and literacy skills in dramatic play centers. A variety of props in the dramatic play center stimulated oral language development as the children practiced new vocabulary and interacted with peers and the preschool teacher. Children were observed talking with other children and the preschool teacher on each of the observation days as they played in the dramatic play center. A variety of props stimulated the oral language of the young children playing together. Preschool teachers can facilitate and scaffold literacy skills as children interact with their peers and expand their learning through play with the props (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Massey, 2013). I observed the preschool teacher encouraging the children to interact with others by asking questions and modeling skills in the dramatic play center during playtime. Consequently, children reenacted stories, portrayed community helpers, and created storylines. The children were observed relating their conversations during play to their experiences with the various community helpers. This type of child-directed play in dramatic play centers contributes to the social and cognitive skills of young children.

## Interpretation of Research Question 2

Findings in this research revealed that parents and the preschool teacher involved in this study all believed play benefits young children. Connections were identified between play and a variety of developmental skills in young children.

### Benefits of Play

The parents and the preschool teacher in this study identified connections between play and development of social skills. Parents recognized play can help children express themselves and understand others. Parents stated their child has learned rules and life skills through play activities with other children. These findings confirm and extend current research. Yelland (2011) suggested young children learn best while being involved in playful exploration with their peers. Smith (2010) argued play allows children to discover abilities and overcome challenges as they participate in various scenarios and cooperate with peers. The preschool teacher stated "play helps children develop in every aspect but possibly the social aspects being the most critical and influential."

In this study, several parents identified vocabulary development as a benefit from play. They noticed their child can learn more words as they express themselves through play. As children communicate with peers and adults their language skills improve. Neuman (2014) suggested play allows children to express their ideas which can expand vocabulary. Vocabulary building is a valued literacy skill that supports future reading skills.

The majority of parents stated they expect their preschoolers to be able to recognize letters, words, and write their names. The findings from this research supported their expectation. All of the children were able to write their name. Dramatic play centers can provide opportunities for children to develop and use writing skills. The children were exposed to printed words and books. Several of the observation days included these types of literacy activities. Anderson et al., (2014) proposed that a literacy-enriched play area is a critical area in a preschool setting. Literacy tools can be included in the dramatic play area and provide natural practice for skill development.

Parents interviewed in this study stated their children enjoy pretend play. Pretend play keeps a child's attention and interest. As children stay engaged in an activity they are more likely to practice oral language skills. Parents realized that pretend play is a valued use of time in the preschool classroom. Dramatic play centers can be easily altered by props to spike the interest of young children.

**Literacy Development**

The parents' and preschool teacher's interview responses drew on common themes of experiences and the environment that supported literacy development. Experiences such as reading to children and letting them be involved in stories provided opportunities for the children to interact and develop oral language skills.

Reading to children on a daily basis is foundational to literacy skill development. The parents and preschool teacher explained that their children and students enjoyed participating in activities related to stories. Dramatic play centers can be an area in the preschool room that encourages children to create storylines as they play and interact

together. Play space and free choice opportunities encourage young children to participate. The preschool environment can encourage dramatic play by providing props, books, and materials to practice skills (Stagnitti et al, 2015). The preschool teacher incorporated in her program the necessity of changing the environment often to provide new and challenging experiences for the children. The findings in this research supported the advantages of a stimulating environment with new experiences to support literacy development.

## Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted at a single university-based preschool in the Southwest United States. The number of participants was small; ten preschool aged children, their parents and a preschool teacher participated in the study. As a result of the narrow scope and number of participants, transferability may be somewhat limited. Other preschool settings may provide differing experiences and therefore it may be difficult to completely generalize the information. Recommendations, however, could be applicable to other university preschool settings and early childhood education programs.

The university preschool is open to children of faculty, staff, and community members. A limitation of this study could be related to the specific enrollment population of this preschool. Participants in this study were enrolled in the Monday and Wednesday afternoon session. This preschool session had the lowest enrollment of the four available sessions. One parent was a university faculty member, one parent was a university staff member, and the other parents were community members. This unique combination of participants could differ from other preschool demographics.

My employment at the university could constitute another limitation when considering the study's findings. To avoid bias based on my familiarity with the research setting, I disclosed my purpose and research related reasons for being in the preschool to the teacher, students, and parents. The preschool children have become familiarized with the presence of college students, professors, and parents present in the preschool area. I placed myself at a fairly discrete location so I could maintain my nonparticipant role during my observations. I stood outside of the play pathways and I did not notice through my personal observation or reviewing the video that I affected the children's behavior during the data collection process of this study.

## Implications for Social Change

This study's intended audiences are early childhood educators and students in early childhood education programs. In the United States, early childhood educators are expected to follow the trend to implement an academic curriculum for preschoolers (Waltson, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013). Standardized curriculum and test-based content can diminish the value of play in the young developmental years of children (Walston, 2013). A decrease in play experiences can cause conflicts of philosophy for early childhood educators. This study confirms and adds to the literature to reinforce and/or improve an early childhood education program's support of oral language and literacy experiences in dramatic play centers. Minimum research existed on dramatic play as a vehicle to develop literacy skills in preschool settings (Nicolopoulou & Ilgaz, 2013; Walston, 2013; Weisberg, et al., 2013). The data collected from this study provides important evidence supporting the value of dramatic play in preschools.

Whenever positive implementations of teaching strategies are developed, the benefits of social change can follow. This study reinforces the function of dramatic play as a conduit for supporting the development of oral language and literacy skills in preschool children. This study's findings can provide support to early childhood educators to be confident of the value in implementing dramatic play centers in preschool settings.

Activities and strategies in dramatic play centers that promote oral language and literacy skills can be established as part of the preschool curriculum. Literacy related activities in dramatic play centers can stimulate young children's development. Roskos and Christie (2011) identified literacy and language skills as critical aspects of cognitive development in young children. This study was built on previous research (Berkowitz, 2011; Morrow & Dougherty, 2011; Owocki, 2000) by focusing on the role of dramatic play in understanding the social and cognitive development of young children. The connection of dramatic play and literacy development strengthens previous research by providing more understanding of how strategies and activities in a dramatic play center can help children develop oral language and literacy skills.

This study augments the perspective of those parents and teachers of the value of play in helping young children develop oral language and literacy skills. Others can misunderstand the value of play and diminish its importance in the preschool curriculum and setting. The value of play needs to be understood to be relevant to early childhood educators, parents, and policymakers. This research explains how play can be applied in dramatic play centers to develop children's oral language and literacy skills. The study's

interview questions targeted and emphasized parents' and the preschool teacher's understanding of the value of play.

A more thorough understanding of the value of dramatic play in helping young children develop oral language and literacy skills provided by this study could create positive social change as early childhood educators and students implement activities and strategies for dramatic play into their programs. The findings of this study provided a variety of activities and strategies that support oral language and literacy skill develop in dramatic play centers. This could lead to educators feeling confident in including dramatic play as a critical aspect of their preschool setting. Consequently, this study's findings may promote developmentally appropriate practices related to dramatic play in preschool classrooms.

## Recommendations

Recommendations are based on the results and findings of this qualitative case study. Educators, parents, and policymakers need to be confident in their curriculum choices and strategies to help preschoolers develop skills in appropriate ways (Walston, 2013). This case study's findings support the implementation of dramatic play in preschool settings as a viable vehicle for oral language and literacy skill development in young children. It is recommended that the study's findings be disseminated to parents, early childhood educators, and to students in early childhood education programs.

It is recommended that these findings be provided to early childhood educators through presentations at national and state early childhood education conferences. Another recommendation would be to disseminate the findings through articles in a

publication such as *Teaching Young Children/Preschool NAEYC Journal*. Dissemination of this material could provide a better understanding of the value of dramatic play centers in helping preschool children develop oral language and literacy skills through a variety of teaching strategies and activities. With this understanding, early childhood professionals and students can confidently implement dramatic play strategies with a focus on developing literacy skills in their curriculum.

It is recommended that these findings be disseminated to parents through educational workshops. Educating parents regarding the value of dramatic play to promote the development of oral language and literacy skills could provide them with confidence to enroll their child in a preschool that implements play through child-directed curriculum.

Further research supporting the implementation of play as a vehicle to develop cognitive skills in preschool settings could be helpful to educators and early childhood education programs. A replication of this study could include how oral language and literacy skill development can be encouraged and implemented during play in other areas of the preschool classroom. For example, the focus of this research could be extended to the art area of the preschool classroom. As educators and students recognize the value of play in helping young children develop cognitive skills, they can implement curriculum applications through the conduit of play.

## Conclusion

Early childhood educators and students need have credible support to include dramatic play to develop their students' cognitive skills in preschool settings. When play

is lacking in the preschool curriculum, young children could be at risk of developing critical skills and construction of knowledge (Berk & Meyers, 2013). A decrease in the inclusion of play in early childhood settings and an increased focus on academic skills can cause conflicts of philosophy for early childhood educators (Walston, 2013). This study confirms and extends the understanding that through a variety of strategies and activities, play in dramatic play centers in preschools can support the development of oral language and literacy skills.

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# Appendix A: Interview Guide for Parents

Interview Protocol: Please respond to the following questions through email. The questions are open-ended which allows you to provide as much information as you are able. The purpose of the study is to understand how activities and strategies in dramatic play centers promote oral language and literacy skills. Confidentiality of your answers will be maintained. I will record and report your answers through a number system versus by name. The interview guide below will direct you through the questions.

1. Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so why/why not?
2. Do you think play can contribute to a child's development? If so, how?
3. In your opinion what are the appropriate language and literacy skills for preschoolers?
4. What type of play activities does your child participate in?
5. What is your opinion about your child's literacy and language skills?
6. In your opinion what are the activities which you feel have influenced your child's literacy skills?
7. Please add any comments you would like to this subject area.

Thank you for participating in this interview.

## Appendix B: Interview Guide for Preschool Teacher

Interview Protocol: Please respond to the following questions through email. The questions are open-ended which allows you to provide as much information as you are able. The purpose of the study is to understand how activities and strategies in dramatic play centers promote oral language and literacy skills. Confidentiality of your answers will be maintained. I will record and report your answers through a number system versus by name. The interview guide below will direct you through the questions

1. Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so why/why not?
2. Do you think play can contribute to a child's development? If so, how?
3. In your opinion what are the appropriate language and literacy skills for preschoolers?
4. As a preschool teacher do you incorporate language and literacy skills during dramatic play time? If so, how?
5. How do you see your students practicing literacy and language skills during play time?
6. In your opinion what are the best activities which you feel influences preschoolers' literacy skills?
7. Please add any comments you would like to this subject area.

Thank you for participating in this interview.

**Appendix C: Observational Protocol**

| Descriptive Notes | Reflective Notes |
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Appendix D: IRB Approvals

**Institutional Research IRB Official Letter**


Date: Jan. 19th, 2016
Mailing Address: 20 N 600 E
St George, UT 84770
IRB Case#: QA-004-201540
TITLE OF PROPOSAL: "How does play in dramatic play centers help preschool children develop oral language and literacy skills?"
Dear Linda:
This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your research by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects by Dixie State University. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate protection for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study. This approval will expire in 12 months from the date of this letter and continuation approval will be required if you research extends beyond the date.
If you make any changes to your survey, questionnaire, and/or methodology will need to go through IRO/IRB again.
Please make sure you handout or read the Informed Consent Form to participants. You can pick up the original form from our office, or create a new one, whichever you prefer.
Please feel free to contact us at 435-652-7598 if you have any questions.
Sincerely
Song Gao
Institutional Research Analyst
IRB office
Dixie State University


**IRB <irb@waldenu.edu>** Mar 8

to me, Grace

Dear Ms. Wright,

This email is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) confirms that your study entitled, "How Does Play in Dramatic Play Centers Help Preschool Children Develop Oral Language and Literacy Skills?" meets Walden University's ethical standards. Our records indicate that the site's IRB agreed to serve as the IRB of record for this data collection. Since this study will serve as a Walden doctoral capstone, the Walden IRB will oversee your capstone data analysis and results reporting. The IRB approval number for this study is 03-08-16-0230780.

This confirmation is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the final version of the documents that have been submitted to IRB@waldenu.edu as of this date. This includes maintaining your current status with the university and the oversight relationship is only valid while you are an actively enrolled student at Walden University. If you need to take a leave of absence or are otherwise unable to remain actively enrolled, this is suspended.

If you need to make any changes to your research staff or procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive confirmation with a status update of the request within 1 week of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for research activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research.

When you submitted your IRB materials, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the researcher.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained at the IRB section of the Walden website: http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec

Researchers are expected to keep detailed records of their research activities (i.e., participant log sheets, completed consent forms, etc.) for the same period of time they retain the original data. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:

**http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d**

Sincerely,

Libby Munson

Research Ethics Support Specialist

Office of Research Ethics and Compliance

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Information about the Walden University Institutional Review Board, including instructions for application, may be found at this link:
http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec

Appendix E: Informed Consent Forms Parents/Teacher

INFORMED CONSENT
How Does Play in Dramatic Play Centers Help Preschool Children Develop Oral Language and Literacy Skills?

You and your child are invited to take part in a research study about the types of activities that promote language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. The researcher is inviting the teacher and parents of preschool children who attend the Monday and Wednesday afternoon sessions of preschool at Dixie State University to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Linda Wright, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You might already know the researcher as a professor at Dixie State University, but this study is separate from that role.

**Background Information**:

The purpose of this study is to explore the type of activities and strategies that promote development of oral language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. This study will involve approximately 6 to 10 children, their parents, and the preschool teacher.

**Procedures:**

Your participation is voluntary. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Allow your child to be observed while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool for three weeks.
- Allow your child to be video-taped while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool for three weeks.
- Allow the researcher to collect any artifacts (children's drawings and writing samples) produced by your child while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool during the observation times.
- Complete an open-ended interview guide answering seven questions through email or phone conversation.
- Review your answers for accuracy.

Here are some sample questions:

Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so why/ why not?

In your opinion what are the activities which you feel have influenced your child's literacy skills?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I will be videotaping your child's interactions and activities in the dramatic play center at the university preschool. I will be videotaping 6 times over a 3 weeks period. Each taping session will be approximately 30 minutes.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Dixie State University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time without consequence.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. Being in this study would not pose risk to your child's safety or wellbeing. The researcher will not influence or change your child's behavior.

The benefits of this study could provide parents, early childhood educators, students in early childhood education programs, and administrators understanding of the value of play in developing literacy skills. Consequently, the value of child-initiated play and discovery could be restored as a focus in preschool settings.

**Payment:**

There will not be any payment associated with this study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you or your child provides will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept protected and stored in a lock file cabinet accessible only to the researcher. Any information on the computer will be password protected and stored securely on a USB drive. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years (Spring, 2021) as required by the university, and then destroyed. The videotapes will be broken and the documents will be shredded.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email: linda.wright@waldenu.edu, lwright@dixie.edu, or

phone: 435-229-3504. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Dixie State University IRB directly at 435-652-7598.

The researcher will give you a copy of this Informed Consent for your records.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by signing below

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Printed Name of Child

_____

Date of Consent

_____

Participant's Signature

_____

Researcher's Signature

_____

How Does Play in Dramatic Play Centers Help Preschool Children Develop Oral Language and Literacy Skills?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the types of activities that promote language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. The researcher is inviting the teacher and parents of preschool children who attend the Monday and Wednesday afternoon sessions of preschool at Dixie State University to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Linda Wright, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You might already know the researcher as a professor at Dixie State University, but this study is separate from that role.

**Background Information**:

The purpose of this study is to explore the type of activities and strategies that promote development of oral language and literacy skills of preschool children while playing in a dramatic play center. This study will involve approximately 6 to 10 children, their parents, and the preschool teacher.

**Procedures:**

Your participation is voluntary. If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Allow your students to be observed while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool for three weeks.
- Allow your students to be video-taped while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool for three weeks.
- Allow the researcher to collect any artifacts (children's drawings and writing samples) produced by your students while playing in the dramatic play area of the preschool during the observation times.
- Complete an open-ended interview guide answering seven questions through email or phone conversation.
- Review your answers for accuracy.

Here are some sample questions:

Do you think play activities are important to young children? If so why/ why not?

In your opinion what are the activities which you feel have influenced your child's literacy skills?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Dixie State University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time without consequence.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**
Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

The benefits of this study could provide parents, early childhood educators, students in early childhood education programs, and administrators understanding of the value of play in developing literacy skills. Consequently, the value of child-initiated play and discovery could be restored as a focus in preschool settings.

**Payment:**

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**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept protected and stored in a lock file cabinet accessible only to the researcher. Any information on the computer will be password protected and stored securely on a USB drive. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university and then destroyed.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email: linda.wright@waldenu.edu, lwright@dixie.edu, or phone: 435-229-3504. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Dixie State University IRB directly at 435-652-7598.

The researcher will give you a copy of this Informed Consent to keep for your records.

**Obtaining Your Consent**

If you feel you understand the study well enough to make a decision about it, please indicate your consent by signing below

Printed Name of Participant

_____

Date of Consent

_____

Participant's Signature

_____

Researcher's Signature

_____

# Appendix F: List of Community Helper Books

Books used and available during the dramatic playtime in the preschool:

Barron's Education Series, Inc. *A Little People Shape Book.*
- *Policeman's Safety Hints*
- *Fireman's Safety Hints*
- *Veterinarian*
- *Farmer*
- *Builder*
- *Nurse*

Berenstain, S., J., & M. (2010) *The Berenstain Bears: Jobs around town*. Berenstain Publishing, Inc.

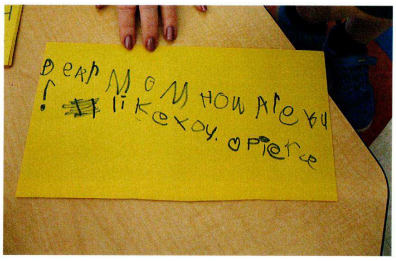
Hoena, B. A. (2004) *A Visit to the Supermarket.* Pebble Plus: Capstone Press
- *A Visit to the Doctor's Office*
- *A Visit to the Zoo*
- *A Visit to the Farm*
- *A Visit to the Library*
- *A Visit to the Fire Station*

Mayer, M. *When I Grow Up.* Random House: NY

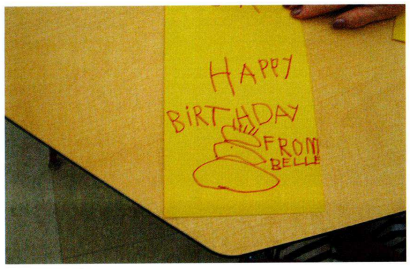
Rentta, S. (2011). *A Day with the Animal Doctors*. Scholastic Children's Books: NY

# Appendix G: Artifacts

Artifact 1: Child's letter written during the postal worker day.



Artifact 2: Child's letter written during the postal worker day.

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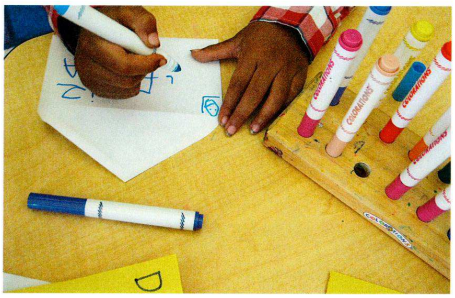
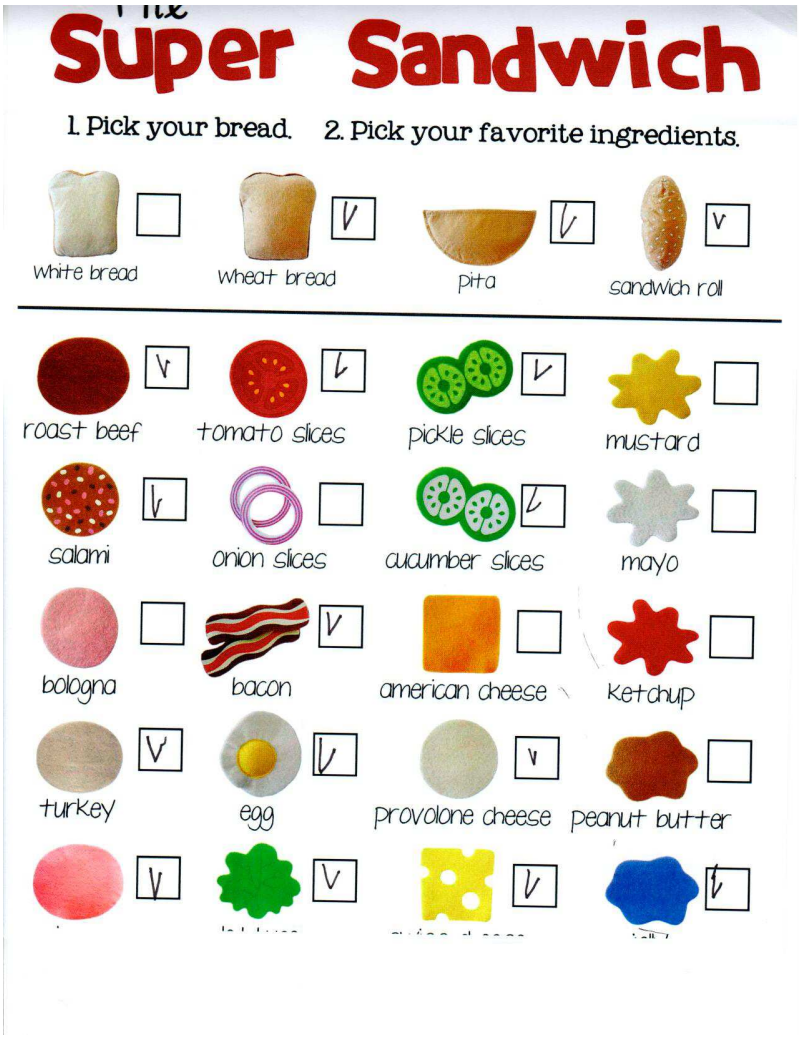
Artifact 3: Child's drawing during the postal worker day.

Artifact 4:  Child's addressed envelope; created during the postal worker day.



Artifact 5: Sample of menu completed by a child during the chef day.



Artifact 6: Sample of a child's use of the health check-up form on the veterinarian day.