

LITERACY AND DRAMATIC PLAY: STORYTELLING
WITH PROPS INCREASES PRESCHOOL
CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS
DURING PLAY

by

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ABSTRACT

Literacy and play are two of the greatest influences to children's social and cognitive growth. To examine how literacy influences play, research on the impact of children's literature on dramatic play is reviewed followed by a study that examined how aspects of children's environment may affect children's play. In the current study, classrooms of preschool children were randomly assigned to an adult reading a novel story with props (experimental group), or to the same adult reading the novel story without props (control group). Subsequent to the story telling, the children were videotaped and coded for dramatic play. Children were also interviewed. Parents and teachers were asked to complete surveys about children's exposure to literature in the home or classroom environment, respectively. Analyses conducted revealed that, children in the prop condition used more story language to describe their roles in action than the children in the control group. Gender difference analyses revealed that parents reported girls to be more engaged with literacy at home, and to use more imagination. Both parents and teachers may want to use the tools and findings presented in this study as a way of assessing their interactions with their children, their understanding of how children play and learn, as well as how they can be more informed facilitators of positive play and literacy relationships.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me and guided me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, my family, friends and advisor who stood by me throughout the time taken to complete this project.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

- df*** Degrees of freedom: number of values free to vary after certain restrictions have been placed on the data
- F*** *F* ratio: A ratio of two variances
- M*** Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
- SD*** Standard deviation
- p*** Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value
- r*** Pearson product-moment correlation
- < Less than
- = Equal to

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Play is essential to learning. Research shows that children, who engage in play, benefit in areas such as developing social interactions, exposure to literacy and abstract thought (Bodrova and Leong, 2003). Vygotsky (1966) mentions that play has purpose. That purpose being to allow children to form connections between their own actions and realizations, and the objects to which they give significant meaning. Dramatic play is a form of play that may be encouraged through emerging literacy and helps children give meaning to events that they experience in their daily lives, such as parents feeding their children or going to the grocery store.

Dramatic play facilitates children's ability to improve and acquire literacy schemes and language skills, such as by labeling through abstract thought, role assignment, developing conversation skills, and imaginative story-telling. Imaginative and make-believe play are concepts that develop gradually as children grow (Bodrova & Leong, 2003).

Classic Play Theories, Literacy and Development

Classic developmentalists like Piaget and Vygotsky argued that play facilitates learning. For example, Piaget (1962) emphasized that children learn by forming connections with literacy and play materials. In the early stages of play, there is evidence of symbolic and pretend play through concepts such as drama or poetry (Piaget, 1962). Piaget (1962) expressed that play is a pleasurable experience for young children, and often comes with a certain air of spontaneity

surrounding it. In addition to Piaget, Vygotsky (1966) also developed theories on play and the young child's development.

Vygotsky (1966) discussed how play helps children imagine beyond what is obvious and develop their own ideas and symbols. He defined play as imaginative, transitional in nature, and illusory in the sense that children are able to recognize desires and concepts that are not always at the forefront of their thoughts. Additionally, Vygotsky (1966) claimed that play has much purpose and in its basic nature, is more of an expression of recalling and portraying already experienced situations than imagining or creating new scenarios. This is beneficial to young children as the process of recalling, imagining, and creating situations through play helps develop their ability to think abstractly (Vygotsky, 1966). Overall, Vygotsky (1966) explained the importance of play by designating it as the core of development and creating the zone of proximal development, making it the most important aspect of development in the preschool years. The zone of proximal development is simply tasks that are too complicated for a child to do by him or herself. With the assistance and guidance of an adult or a more advanced peer, these tasks become manageable. Children make significant strides in learning within the zone of proximal development.

Dramatic Play and Literacy

Children begin to transfer their attention from playing with a mere object to playing and creating the characters who use these objects in social settings (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Dramatic play is commonly seen as a way for children to portray various imaginative roles and create make-believe transformations as a way of representing stories (Christie, 1990). These

transformative skills begin taking place in infancy and continue through the stages of a young child's development.

Developed and mature forms of dramatic play abilities are not sudden changes within a child. The beginning stages can be traced to skills acquired in infancy, like a baby learning to imitate actions and creating gestures and vocal noises as ways of communicating (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). As children move into the toddler period, they begin to advance from simple actions (like dressing themselves) to more sophisticated actions (like dressing up toys) (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). Toddlers begin to translate their own everyday experiences into play time experiences. When children reach the preschool age of 3-5 years old, they become better at understanding their environments, creating ideas, learning new concepts, and developing new skills through their play (Williams & Rask, 2003). Dramatic play can facilitate a safe environment for creativity and imagination and an opportunity for children to learn from mistakes (Williams & Rask, 2003).

Morrow and Rand (1991) describe play as an avenue for young children to expand, create, and experience new literacy abilities. Dramatic play improves children's concepts of story recollection, production, and comprehension, as they are able to recreate story structures and events, such as by playing out familiar fairy tales during pretend play (Morrow, 1990).

Emerging literacy is the concept of how children are exposed to and remember examples of reading, writing, and language early in life, and how these experiences inform how they understand various types of print in their world (Einarsdottir, 1996). One way in which children acquire literacy meaning and an understanding of print (words turned into pictures and actions) is through their play experiences (Saracho, 2004). As children are exposed to literature or become

aware of the existence of literature, they begin to incorporate literature material in their play (Morrow, 1990). According to Neuman and Roskos (1989), when children navigate their world, participate with other peers and adults, use self-expression, and interact with literature text, they discover the purposes of literature and build the skills to apply literacy into multiple aspects of their lives.

Dramatic play can be used to explain the play of either an individual child or the interactive play among a group of children. In individual play, a child clearly has less social interaction and therefore may take part in more self-talk and less overall dramatic presentation. In group play, children have the benefit of engaging in social interactions with peers, via role assignment and verbal conversational exchange. Thus, they may exhibit more play behaviors in relation to stories that they have been exposed to, than they would just playing by themselves. Imagination, creation of a play setting and the recall and recognition of literature information is more likely to be elicited through group dramatic play than through individual play.

Research has shown that collaborative efforts are prevalent among preschool aged children during play (Neuman & Roskos, 1991). The use of children's literature, namely picture books, should be encouraged to implement literacy skill development (Strasser & Seplocha, 2007). Exposing children to literature at a very young age can inspire children to learn about books and recognize literacy. Young children can interact with literature in many ways, whether it is by pretending to read a story previously read by a teacher, developing new details for classic stories, creating their own stories based off of one familiar to them, or even just by being introduced to a new story book (Strasser & Seplocha, 2007).

Regardless of the type of text, or what content it covers, any story that is identifiable and relatable to children can open up the doors for them to develop ideas, learn and maybe even create new words, and ask questions (Strasser & Seplocha, 2007). For example, a story book may contribute to children gaining knowledge about letters and their sounds (Connor, 2006). As children learn the value of literacy, they may begin to understand and appreciate literature. Children's language and what they know about literature has been shown to crossover into their play or daily functioning (McGill-Franzen & Lanford, 1994).

Much of the research conducted on literacy and play focuses on how to set up classroom environments in a manner that would benefit children's opportunities to incorporate literacy elements into their everyday play sessions. Many studies have demonstrated ways to set-up specific play areas filled with literacy props as well tips and tricks on how to be the most effective in providing literacy demonstrations (Leong & Bodrova, 2012; Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Saracho, 2004). However, research varies in amounts dedicated to identifying how the concepts of understanding literature and play come together to inform a child's capacity to develop and build valuable cognitive and social skills.

Using Literature in the Play Environment

Children's literature can be used as a play prop itself. Preschool children are growing in to the prime of their imaginations, and thus depend on play props to help express their ideas and intentions. Providing play props in a child's dramatic play environment is critical so that they have the necessary materials and freedom to engage in a range of scenarios and increase their positive interactions with their peers (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Some children have a very specific attachment to realistic props, but most children by age four are able to incorporate

various roles and symbols into their play as well as work together to problem solve (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Neuman & Roskos, 1991). One practical method, used by many researchers and teachers in preschool classrooms, is to place literature props related to a specific theme in dramatic play areas. These props may include items like notebooks, books, magazines, cookbooks, paper, pencils, drawing boards, etc. (Bodrova & Leong, 2003). Strategically placing props in the child's environment may help children explore their thoughts through a literacy based activity, and further promote literacy development.

In one study on play-centered curriculum and literacy development, the research team aimed to make literature more available and to link play and its important role in the process of developing children's knowledge and understanding of literature (Einarsdottir, 1996). In addition, they also took steps to aid preschoolers in understanding what literature is about and providing them with ways to incorporate literature through play. This was accomplished by placing an abundance of books throughout the classroom libraries as well as displaying literature related posters and other related materials. All the materials were made readily available to the children at any time. However, teachers typically presented new books to the children, before setting them out for use in the classroom environment. Following the introduction of new literature, children had time to explore the content on their own, allowing for their own methods of interpretation to follow. Some of the children, created stories of their own, documenting the effects literacy can have on play and vice versa. While the finding is encouraging that some children created their own stories, the lack of a control group hinders concluding that making literature more available to young children facilitates learning, such as increasing language or social skills.

Another benefit to literacy and play may be the opportunity for children to create imaginative settings using characters, themes and settings that they create and ones from stories they may be familiar with. The incorporation of story characters and themes in play shows positive progress in a child's cognitive development (Wright, 2008). Benefiting from repeatedly interacting with familiar stories, children can expand their knowledge into play (Hargrave & Senechal, 2000). Familiarity of a favored story book usually represents itself through a child's tendency to remember and act out the events and phrases in both their day-to-day conversations and their dramatic play sessions (Rosenquest, 2002). Within the play setting, they can combine both imagination and reality and express their ideas using both regular props and literacy tools. When children have the ability to access play areas set up with literature materials (those that aid in reading and writing), they are likely to participate in dramatizations that incorporate some form of literacy (Christie, 1990). This may further enhance their vocabulary building skills, narrative competence and social dialogue. However, the current studies in the literature have design flaws, such as lacking control groups. Thus, better controlled studies are needed to examine the effects of literacy on children's cognitive development.

Research shows that the relationship between play and developing literacy skills facilitate a deeper understanding of language. Often times, during dramatic play or pretend play sessions children create stories and imagine ideas and events greater than those in the present (Roskos, 1988). Children perform well when they are the authors of their own pretend play and participate actively (Roskos, 1988). Using stories, whether created by them or not, adds a greater amount of meaning to their play (Roskos, 1988). Acting out these concepts and participating in dramatic

play has great value for children. Wright (2008) suggests that playing out stories motivates children and increases their sophisticated thinking abilities.

In addition to developing narrative competence, play encourages social behavior. Ideally, children adapt what they know and what they imagine into social conversations, negotiations, and interactions with their peers. Socializing through play also provides insight to outside perspectives (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). Much of this occurs during dramatic play. The child's comprehension of a piece of literature (usually, a story from a story or picture book) is likely to be expressed through the child's own story telling patterns and expressions, including language and gestures (Pellegrini, 1985). A study conducted on storytelling suggests that retelling a story, or even parts of a story, allows children to develop common interests among their peer groups, build vocabulary, and integrate valuable content into their conversations and play times (Wright, Bacigalupa, Black & Burton, 2008). These conclusions were made after researchers had reviewed almost 1,000 stories created by preschool children, ages 2-6 (Wright et. al., 2008). The stories were created by each child, led only by opening and closing prompts from a classroom teacher. This allowed for each child to control the formation of the stories while engaging in story telling activities (Wright et. al., 2008)

According to Bodrova and Leong (2003), children incorporate language into several areas of life: during play, role negotiation, when pretending, and even when addressing rules. Through play children can develop a healthy, fun, and exciting relationship with literature. Such a relationship should increase their interest in reading, writing, and speaking.

Gender Differences and Play

Play has an impact on how children grow. Play also has the ability to affect boys and girls differently at some levels. A study conducted by Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez & McDermott (2000) found that boys engage in less positive play interactions and more disconnected play in comparison to girls. Additionally, the education that children receive in their classrooms may influence their development of play skills and behaviors, and may result in different reactions in boys and girls (Johnson & Ershler, 1981). A longitudinal study done by Johnson and Ershler (1981) evaluated the cognitive and social aspects of play behavior. They used two groups of preschool children. One group participated in formal education, while the other participated in “discovery” education (Johnson & Ershler, 1981). They found that over the course of time that dramatic play increased as constructive play decreased among all classrooms (Johnson & Ershler, 1981). Boys in the discovery classrooms were found to participate in more dramatic play interactions than the girls (Johnson & Ershler, 1981). Thus, boys and girls may differ in how they respond to education style and choose to engage in dramatic play.

The Current Study

The current study adds to the literature and fills a gap by assessing how props specifically and directly contribute to a child’s cognitive development, literacy skill building abilities, and language. This study is different in comparison to several others for a few reasons: 1) it has a control group, which allows documentation of the effects of props on enhancing children’s play, and 2) the relationships of literacy exposure at home and in the classroom are measured by children’s learning outcomes (e.g. testing for greater vocabulary, better recall and recognition, more advanced make believe play, etc.) This study discusses more than just setting up a classroom or incorporating literacy elements into a classroom setting, as many other studies do.

In this study, I examined how story telling with props versus without props in the classroom affects preschool age children's make believe play. Children who are often exposed to literature may be able to translate story elements into their play. Children often imitate things they have observed in everyday life, into their play. The ability to implement these observations, will allow them to identify events, characters and themes from stories. Thus, literature is a great way to engage children's imagination and dramatic play efforts. Additionally, props contribute to the play environment in a positive way. Props in this study provide physical representations of items seen and used by characters within the literature. When it comes to participating, children are then able to use the props as support for their actions during pretend play. Some of the props will connect to key phrases and events of the story, thus encouraging children to use story vocabulary in addition to the props. Enhanced vocabulary is a byproduct of engaging literature and play experiences.

The premise of the study was that within an interactive setting, children would be able to translate and recall information from a piece of children's literature (i.e., a story theme, setting, character role, etc.) and incorporate that information into their own dramatic play. By understanding the literature they were exposed to, children were expected to demonstrate a greater connection to literacy through their own story-telling, language use (e.g., story-related vocabulary) and play (e.g., make believe play related to the story characters or themes). This connection was examined in relation to their language production, their memory for aspects of the story, and the complexity of their play following the story telling.

In addition, exposure to literacy materials at home were examined in relation to children's pretend play in the classroom. Often times children are exposed to literature materials

in their classrooms. They are engaged in play with peers and are participants in literacy related activities. This exposure greatly affects and benefits their play. However, some children do not always receive literature exposure at home. Parents may not know how to incorporate the materials, or may not want to. For those children less engaged in these activities at home, their maturity in play may be affected. They may not be as advanced in their vocabulary, communication, and play skills as their peers. This gives a foundation for research to compare the relationship between home, school, literature exposure, and play. Thus, in the current study, literature exposure, at home and in the classroom, were examined and related to children's play and language skills.

An experimental study was conducted in which preschool classrooms were randomly assigned to a storybook reading or a storybook reading with props condition. After the story with or without props was read, the children were videotaped during a free play session and the videotapes were coded for their play behaviors to examine the presence of roles, prop usage, language, and scenario formations.

The story

The storybook uniquely developed for this study is titled *Connor and the Super Duper Pancakes*. The story line follows a young boy (Connor) as he and his grandmother (Grandma) experience a trip to the grocery store, search for recipe ingredients, learn about and count money, and eventually recreate Grandma's famous pancakes in a home kitchen. The activities in the story purposely provided practical everyday life events that were familiar to children (e.g., going to the grocery store, cooking at home, etc.) and/or could be recreated in their play. Preschool children tend to comprehend more concrete details and events, and thus identify with the things

they know. Dramatic play allows them to engage in play influenced by both concrete concepts and abstract concepts (via their imaginations and creativity). Additionally, the characters, Connor and Grandma, were easily identifiable and relatable. The vocabulary included in the story consisted of both familiar (e.g., grocery store) and potentially novel terms (e.g., spatula, whisk). The story vocabulary was meant to encourage language development during the play session.

In addition, after the story reading and after the children had an opportunity to engage in dramatic play, the children were interviewed one at a time. The child interview was videotaped and coded for recollection of story and accuracy to examine if children in the prop condition showed greater literacy comprehension than children in the no-prop control condition.

Parents were also given a survey to complete to examine the quantity and quality of literature exposure children have at home and relate these to children's play in the current study. The preschool teachers were given a similar survey to examine their use of literature in the classroom.

Overall, we hypothesized that:

- 1) children who are read a story that includes props will show more advanced make-believe play than children in the story telling condition without props;
- 2) children in the story telling condition with props will display greater memory for the story and greater comprehension than the children in the story only condition;
- 3) irrespective of condition, greater literacy exposure at home will positively correlate with more complex make-believe play; and,
- 4) irrespective of condition, greater literacy exposure in the classroom will positively correlate with more complex make-believe play.

The findings from this study were expected to be a first step in informing the literature on the relationship between literacy exposure and play using a controlled-experimental design. Additionally, discovering the frequency of literature being incorporated in both school and home settings through the parent and teacher surveys will help identify its important role in children's play and cognitive development, given that more complex play may enhance children's memory for literacy details. Research on appropriate pre-school activities implemented at the home is small in existence, but carries much value in its evaluation of the levels of reading development represented in children (Wood, 2002). The regularity or lack thereof, that parents incorporate activities at home may relate to children developing an interest in reading and literacy (Wood,

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CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Participants

Twenty-seven preschool children ($M= 50.6$ months, $SD= 5.36$) between the ages of 3 and 5-years participated. The children were of mixed ethnicities (Caucasian, $n=23$, African American, $n=3$, Hispanic, $n=1$), but mostly Caucasian, and from middle-class families. The children were recruited from a university preschool program that was NAEYC accredited, and thus of high quality. The curriculum and staff run an English speaking center, as all of the children are English speaking as well. In addition to the 3- to 5-year old children, their parents and teachers participated in a short survey.

Groups

Four preschool classrooms participated in the study. In two classrooms, children experienced a session with a novel story and no props (control trial) (n=12). The other two classrooms experienced a session with a novel story and related props (experimental trial) (n=15). The literacy materials used were the same in both groups, with the exception of the props.

Procedures

A researcher read a novel story book to the children in each group; the story contained enough content for the children to identify and imitate or play out character roles or story themes. Research demonstrates that children comprehend, relate, and respond the best to stories that represent scenarios they may see in their daily lives and provide illustrations and characters that can be recreated (Rosenquest, 2002). The children in the control group were allowed to listen to the story and follow along with the pictures. The children in the experimental group were read the same story as the control group, but were allowed to see and touch story props and demonstrate story themes along with the storyteller.

After the storytelling, all children were allowed to play in the dramatic play area of their classroom, which contained the typical items they see every day in this area (e.g., dress up clothes, kitchen area and utensils, baby doll, etc.). However, for the experimental group, the story props were also placed in the dramatic play area of the classroom for the children to use if they wish.

The props

The props used for the study were physical representations of items referred to throughout the story, whether just present in a picture, or specifically used by one of the characters. Children in the prop condition witnessed the use of each prop while the story was read. During the story telling in the prop condition, the researcher reading the story used props to demonstrate the appropriate book scenario (e.g., used the spatula when discussing the flipping of the pancakes, etc.). The props available for the children to use were: (2) flat pancake spatulas, (2) mixing spatulas, (2) sets of measuring cups, (2) whisks, (2) mixing bowls, (2) play skillets, (2) grocery baskets, (4) grocery bags, (2) aprons, (2) money trays with play money, (2) bottles of syrup, (2) boxes of sugar, (1) bag of flour, (1) bag of chocolate chips, and (6) pancakes, which were constructed out of felt material.

Measures

The Make Believe Play Scale (MBP; Leong & Bodrova, 2012).

Children were videotaped for approximately 10 minutes in their classroom. The videotapes were then coded by observers blind to the study hypotheses using the Make-Believe Play Scale (Leong & Bodrova, 2012), which uses a five-point scale that tracks the stages of play as well as the prevalence of a child's literacy behavior during play (see Appendix A). A higher score on the scale indicated more complex play. The PROPELS method of observation (known as the Make-Believe Play Scale (MBP) for this study) was originally developed as an approach to teach preschool teachers how to assess and scaffold play, using the most critical components of a child's play (P- Plan, RO- Roles, P- Props, E- Extended Time Frame, L- Language, S- Scenario) (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). Using the method to observe children's play informs the

teacher about the maturity of play in their classroom and then provides a starting point to plan scaffolding and facilitation of more complex play (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). The MPB scale was used to code the children's play styles following the storytelling session, because the scale had operational definitions of children's play that were clearly identifiable and related to children's role playing, use of props, language and scenarios. Each sub-section of the scale had 5 categories: An overall average score of 1 indicates First Scripts; An overall average score of 2, indicates Roles in Action; An overall average score of 3 indicates Roles with Rules and Beginning Scenarios; An overall average score of 4 indicates Mature Roles, Planned Scenarios, and Symbolic Props; and an overall average score of 5 indicates Dramatization, Multiple Themes, Multiple Roles, and Director's Play. Again, the higher the average score for each sub-scale section, the more complex the play is considered to be for the participant.

The children in the dramatic play area were coded from the videotape in one minute intervals for roles, props, language and scenarios (see MBP scale). Pilot testing revealed one minute intervals to be sufficient time to examine the different types of play styles and behaviors relevant for the study. An overall score was computed for each child to define the most frequent level of make-believe play. In addition, the children's scores on the sub-scales of the MBP (roles, props, language, scenarios) were also computed for the highest and in each category to examine if more than one style/behavior in each category predominated. Finally, due to children displaying more than one play styles or some scores being tied, the second highest overall score in each category was calculated. Due to only marginal results, the second highest scores are not reported here.

Child Interviews

After the videotaping of the dramatic play, each child was interviewed separately and asked the following three questions. The interviews were later coded for accuracy and memory.

- What can you remember about the story we read today?*
- What was your favorite part of the story?*
- Tell me about play time. What were you doing? Who were you pretending to be?*

In addition to these questions, each child was also asked 10 questions about the story directly. Half of them were recall questions, and half of them were recognition questions (see Appendix D). Children were then scored on the number correct out of ten. More items remembered and greater accuracy were expected to be revealed for the children in the story plus prop condition.

Parent Survey: Exposing Children to Literature at Home (Barton, 2012).

The parents were asked to complete a survey specifically designed for this study to measure literature exposure at home, children's pretend play and play behaviors (see Appendix B). The survey consisted of eight questions that were coded in terms of optimality and included a mix of yes/no, Likert scale, and qualitative free writing answers. Questions 1-4 on the parent survey assess literature exposure, while questions 5-8 assess play and play behaviors. Question 1 asked about the child's desire to have someone read to him/her at home. If the child does ask to be read to, a follow up question asked how often that occurs. Question 2 and 3 asked parents if they encourage reading, and then to rate how often they read to the child at home. Question 4 asks parents about the child's overall interest in books. For the play segment, question 5 asks parents if they play with the child at home. This is followed by questions 6 and 7, which ask if the child uses his/her imagination in play, as well as how often does this behavior occur. Question 8 asks parents to explain how the child demonstrates imagination in his/her play.

Lastly, parents were given a list of 15 literacy related play items and were asked to check off which of these items at home were both available to, and used by, the child. Higher scores on the survey were viewed as more optimal.

Teacher Survey: Exposing Children to Literature in the Classroom (Barton, 2012).

The teachers were asked to complete a survey specifically designed for this study to measure literature exposure in the classroom, and children's interest in literature (see Appendix C). The survey, very similar to the parent survey, consisted of eight questions that were coded in terms of optimality and totaled. The survey questions offer answers that are a mix of yes/no, Likert scale, and qualitative free writing answers. Questions 1-5 on the teacher survey assess literature exposure, while questions 6-8 assess play and play behaviors. The survey begins (question 1) by asking teachers if they encourage the use of books in their classrooms, and if so, how? Questions 2 and 3 ask teachers to record if the children are interested in books, and then to individually rate each child's interest on a scale from 1 to 5; varying from "not at all" to "very much". Question 4 asks how often children ask the teacher to read, followed by question 5 which asks how often this occurs.

Question 6 asks if the teacher encourages and participates in literature directed play in the classroom (e.g., using children's books as a facilitator of play), and if so, how? Question 7 is an open ended question that asks the teacher to describe how she facilitates literacy development and dramatic play in the classroom. Question 8 asks how much time is allowed for dramatic play each day. Lastly, teachers were given a list of 15 literacy related play items and asked to check off which of these items were both available to and used by children in the classroom. Higher scores on the survey were viewed as more optimal (see Appendix C).

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Did children in the story with prop condition show more advanced make-believe play than children in the story telling condition without props?

An ANOVA was conducted to examine if children in the prop condition showed more advanced make-believe play than children in the story telling condition without props (control group). The total score on the Make-Believe Play (MBP) Scale and the sub-scale scores served as the dependent variables.

The ANOVA revealed differences between the prop and control group scores on the MBP total score, $F(1,24) = 4.84, p < .05$. Further analysis revealed the difference to lie in the MBP language sub-scale, $F(1,24) = 3.51, p = .07$. Children in the prop condition scored higher in story language use to describe their roles in action ($M = 1.96, SD = .97$) than children in the control group ($M = 1.36, SD = .50$). The prop condition's score of 1.96, is closest to a 2 on the MBP scale which indicates that the group participated in more Roles In Action level play than

the control group. The control group had a score of 1.36, which indicates that they uses little language and performed at a level closer to a 1 (or First Scripts) on the MBP scale.

Do children in the story telling condition with props display greater memory for the story and greater comprehension than the children in the story only (control) condition?

An ANOVA was conducted to examine if children in the story telling condition with props, versus children in the control group (i.e., without props), displayed greater memory for the story. The total number of correct responses, the total number of items recalled and the total number of items recognized about the story served as the dependent variables. The ANOVA revealed no significant differences between the two groups on these measures.

In order to measure comprehension, qualitative analysis were conducted. In response to the children's favorite part (event) of the story, the boy (Connor) stacking the pancakes into a tower was the most reported. This was then followed by Grandma and Conner making pancakes together, and Grandma and Connor going to the grocery store. When children were asked what they were doing or pretending to be during the play session, making pancakes was the most reported activity. This was followed by pretending to be at the store and playing with money. In all, children in the prop condition (n=15) reported more details and events on their favorite parts of the story than children in the control group (n=12). Being as there were more children in the prop condition, it may not be fair to say that this represents a greater comprehension level, but merely more children to report details. Both groups equally reported making/baking/cooking pancakes as their chosen activity during the play session. The representation of reenacted events from the literature lends great support for children's identification and relatability to the presented story.

Does greater literacy exposure in the home or school environment correlate with more complex make-believe play and/or memory for the story?

Correlations were computed among the literacy exposure measures (i.e., parent and teacher survey), the MBP scale scores and the children's recall and recognition responses. The findings revealed that 1) higher teacher survey scores indicating greater literature exposure in the classroom correlated with lower scores on MBP Roles, $r = -.418$, $p = .034$.

Qualitative analysis was also conducted on the literacy exposure at home and literacy exposure in the classroom (e.g. parent and teacher survey) measures. In regards to parent reports about how and what they play with their children, outside activities and sports ranked highest. This was followed by the use of board games, reading books, and engaging in art activities like coloring, drawing, painting and crafts.

When parents were asked to report on how their children demonstrate using their imagination, the personification, identification/naming and repurposing of objects, and engaging in role play/character play and dress up were both ranked highest. These activities were closely followed by reports of their children using their imaginations to narrate and create stories and characters. When parents were asked about the literacy items both available and used by their child in the home, picture books were most commonly reported, closely followed by drawing/writing materials, activity books, and letter and number puzzles.

Teachers also filled out surveys which provided reports of how children's interactions in the classroom rank in terms of most favored and most prevalent. Being as there were fewer teachers than parents, the reports were not as large as on the parent surveys. Nonetheless, when teachers were asked to share how they encourage the use of books in their classroom, the most

reported use was placing and using books throughout various centers. Teachers reported acting out stories in activities as the main avenue for encouraging and participating in play directed by literature. In response as to how they facilitate literacy development and dramatic play in their classrooms, teachers most frequently answered by putting cookbooks and thematic books in the home living centers. When teachers were asked about the literacy items both available and used by children in their classroom, picture books, drawing/writing materials, letter and number blocks, legos, puzzles, and board games were all equally most reported.

Secondary Analyses

Are children's role style, prop use, language and creation of scenarios related?

Correlational analysis examined the relationships among the four categories on the MBP scale (roles, props, language and scenarios). The findings revealed that; 1) higher scores for scenarios related to more optimal role playing scores, $r = .51, p = .008$; 2) greater language use during dramatic play related to more optimal role playing scores, $r = .36, p = .07$; 3) higher prop use during play related to lower scores in developing scenarios, $r = -.33, p = .09$; and 4) lower language scores during dramatic play related to higher use of props, $r = -.41, p = .04$; 5) a greater number of items recalled about the story related to more items recognized about the story, $r = .657, p = .001$.

Age differences

Given that older preschool age children may engage in more complex play than younger preschool age children, we examined potential difference between age groups (i.e., younger vs. older) on all measures. No significant differences were found between younger children (36-48 months) and older children (49-60+ months) on any measure (all $p > .05$).

Gender differences

Although not hypothesized, an ANOVA was conducted to examine potential gender differences, in parent and teacher survey reports, in terms of children's literature exposure as well as gender differences in terms of pretend play. An ANOVA was conducted with gender (boys, girls) as the between subjects factor on the Parent Survey total score, Teacher Survey total score, and the MBP scale as the dependent measures. The ANOVA revealed that parents reported girls ($M = 35.7$) to be more engaged in literature at home than boys ($M = 33.5$), $F(1, 26) = 5.18$, $p = .032$. The results also revealed that parents reported that girls ($M = 4.36$) used their imagination during play more than boys ($M = 3.7$), $F(1, 26) = 5.33$, $p = .03$.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how literacy influenced preschool children's dramatic play. In this study, literacy in play was examined by how storytelling influenced preschool age children's language skills (i.e., receptive and expressive language) and how children engaged in play and interacted following an adult reading a storybook. Hearing stories read aloud helps children learn that books have meaning (Heath, 1983). Additionally, when children hear stories read aloud and then translate them into themes and play experiences, they start learning critical concepts like how to use words and actions to explain events (Holdaway, 1979). The story reading was supplemented by the availability (or lack) of props and/or manipulatives related to the story. The effects the props have on the children's play were observed in an experimental design.

The use of props during play had a significant effect on how children scored according to their ratings on the Make Believe Play Scale. Better language scores on the scale were achieved by children in the experimental (prop) group, as opposed to children in the control (non-prop) group. This suggests that using props as a support for storytelling encourages children to more closely identify with the language that is presented and carry it into their play. In their benefit, the vocabulary that was presented in the story was a mix of familiar and novel words. During play, children were recorded using both types of terms. An identification with vocabulary from

the story acted as a means by which children could remember events, phrases, and characters and reenact those memories into their dramatic play.

When evaluated on memory and comprehension of the story, there were no significant differences between groups. Children in the experimental (prop) group were expected to display greater memory of the story, when interviewed and tested on their recall and recognition of story events. Seeing as there were no differences, each group seemed to perform similarly in their interviews. While the use of props encouraged more complex language, it did not affect the number of items remembered about the story. Perhaps, the props are not the only factor that contribute to memory and comprehension. Other concepts such as focused attention, may also play into how much a child is able to remember about a story. Assessing attention, and possibly even individual learning behaviors for participants, would add valuable insight to this study. Additionally, a future study might examine children's long-term memory for story events such as interviewing them a week or a month later.

In addition to children being tested, parents and teachers were asked to complete surveys assessing literature exposure in the home and in the classroom, respectively. Children tend to demonstrate more mature, complex behaviors and development when they are encouraged through multiple avenues. It was hypothesized, for this study, that children who were exposed to more literature materials and engagements at home and/or at school would show more complex play and/or greater memory of the story. Relationships were examined among literacy exposure measures, their level of complex play, and the children's recall and recognition of story aspects. Adversely, greater report of literature exposure in the classroom, as reported by teachers, related to children displaying less complex play. It is unclear as to why these two scores have a negative

relationship, assuming that a higher classroom evaluation by the teachers would encourage, not discourage, children in their play development. A replicated study with a larger group of teachers should attempt to validate this paradoxical finding.

Another finding in relation to memory for the story, suggested that children's ability to both recall and recognize specific details about the story was positively related. This provides an understanding of how children are able to process and communicate the things they know. In relation to literature, the more children are able to comprehend and remember about a story, the more able they are to communicate that to others and translate it into their own thoughts and even play.

Secondary analyses were also conducted to gauge the relationship between children's role playing, prop use, language and scenario development. Interestingly, children who acted out more scenarios also engaged in more roles during play. As children created and recreated events during play, they were also able to demonstrate and define more specified roles. Language also played a factor in children's rate of roles in play. As children used more language, they involved themselves in more complex role playing behaviors. Children's ability to communicate and access their language and vocabulary appears to affect their level of expression not only verbally, but in play experiences as well.

Sometimes, as with the occasion of a few findings, there are some interesting factors that influence how children play. For instance, children in the study who used more props during their play did not necessarily create more play scenarios. Easily explained, children do not always have to be in a specific situation, scenario, or context to just be playing with a toy or prop. Children are equally as able to strictly just play with a toy as they are to use that toy to

create or support a dramatic play scenario. Children are also able to play with a toy or prop without having to use language, as was the case in the study.

Also interesting was the finding that less verbal expression during dramatic play related to higher prop use during play. Perhaps, children with less developed language skills interact more with props. We did not assess language competency in the current study. However, a future study might examine this relationship. Also, often times children can access their imagination, without expressing it verbally. It may be that children use less language if they are playing alone, being as they do not need to communicate to anyone but themselves. However, that was not coded in the current study. A future study might extend the current study by also coding for children's play style after storytelling (e.g., solitary, parallel play, simple social play, cooperative play). Peer play usually results in greater conversation and language expression.

There were also a few other factors that played into the assessment of children's level of make-believe play: age and gender. When determining whether younger preschool children scored differently than their older preschool peers, there were no differences in the reports on any of the measures. Children, in this study, are students in classrooms that consist of different aged children (i.e., classrooms have both 3- and 4- year olds). This being the case, perhaps it is not unusual that the younger children and the older children were comparatively similar in their play.

Further inquiry of study results allowed for gender effects to be evaluated. As boys and girls differ in some aspects of their development, they differed in their relationships with literature and the use of imagination within the context of this study. Overall findings from the

parent surveys indicated that the girls demonstrated both a greater engagement in literature at home and a greater use of imagination than boys.

The interactions and observations surrounding preschool children and their relationships to literature and dramatic play, are indicative of how children play, how they use language, how they use props, their memory, and even how they communicate. Evaluating children as they develop their skills and their personalities through play, lends way to creating a better understanding of how children develop overall.

Future Studies

Surveys for this study were gathered for all subjects. This could possibly have affected the interesting finding concerning teacher survey scores and children's roles in play. Perhaps scores from the control group participants adversely affected the relationship. The cause of this inverse relationship is unknown. However, it provides justification for this study to be replicated. A future study containing a larger sample size should be conducive to verify findings. An increase in sample size may also minimize the number of marginal results.

Studying children's dramatic play and literacy in other populations would also be of great benefit. This study contained a mostly homogenous group of participants, which may have limited the findings. Perhaps the study could be repeated with children in preschool or child development centers, where most of the children and families are low-income or "at risk". An assessment of their play and language use could provide important insight into emerging literacy. Another option, would be to repeat the study in a preschool or child development center where there is a broader spectrum of race and ethnicity, possibly even a different cultural context. Comparing results from research conducted in different schools and locations would provide a

more well-rounded and supported understanding of preschool play, preschool children's responses to literature, and how literacy evolves among this age group.

Lastly, reincorporating the *Plan* and *Extended Time Frame* categories from the original Make Believe Play tool, while conducting a similar study on older children, maybe 5-7 year olds, could support a larger view of play, its complexities, and its significant stages. How children expand their skill set and play interactions as they age are important concepts that might inform emerging literature and/or literacy.

Implications

The current findings can be useful to parents and teachers of preschool aged children. The findings may better inform parents and teachers about the relationship between dramatic play, children's literature and literacy. Because of the nature of this study, there are some practical and constructive ideas for both teachers and parents to incorporate when interacting with young preschool aged children. Both parents and teachers may want to use the tools and findings presented in this study as a way of assessing their interactions with their children, their understanding of how children play and learn, as well as how they can be more informed facilitators of positive play and literacy relationships.

Parents

If the parent survey findings are replicated, noting the differences between boys and girls in the study, parents could be informed of these findings and encouraged to become more intentional with their boys at home. Encouraging boys to participate in more literacy activities and literature based play would be of great benefit. One avenue for these activities could include parents playing their son's favorite game, whether board game or video game, and incorporating

literacy elements into play (e.g., point out specific words or names to highlight vocabulary, or use a favorite book character as the basis for creating a play scenario.) Given that prop usage influenced children's language during play, parents could also be encouraged to incorporate more prop usage at home during play.

Allowing children to assist in choosing toys and props may initiate even more interest in, and response to, literature. Additionally, parents should take note of the effect stories and literature have on their child's imagination. It is important to be reading to children, even at a young age. It is equally as important to facilitate an environment conducive to learning, growth, and play.

Teachers

Incorporating elements from the study into an everyday classroom routine, should be fairly easy for teachers. To start, teachers could include props into their designated story times and literacy activities to stimulate vocabulary and language development (e.g., word identification, character rolls, story theme identification, new vocabulary, etc.) Teachers could then also combine some of their literacy elements into free play sessions throughout the day. As children involve themselves in dramatic play and various centers, literacy skills like writing, letter matching, and word association activities could be provided as supplements to the children's play.

In addition to vocabulary and language, teachers have the ability expand memory and comprehension skills among their young students. As they read stories to their classes, teachers should make it a point to attempt to ask questions throughout and after the story. They can then use these questions and responses to facilitate vocabulary acquisition and discussion about

characters, story themes, story events, even props and their experiences with these items outside of the classroom. These discussions, even if very brief, may enhance memory and comprehension skills in young children.

Children make connections between their experiences at home and their experiences in the classroom, which may reinforce the value of literature. Children reenact what they observe in their world, and if there is consistency across the home and school environment, this may encourage greater literature use and enhance their understanding. As more is discovered about dramatic play and literature, more is understood about how children connect and relate to literacy growth.

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APPENDIX

Appendix B

Child Interview

Participant: _____ Age: _____ Trial/Class: _____

Verbal Script:

_____, I am going to ask you some questions about the story we read today. Are you ready to start?

#1: Who was Connor excited to see?

A:

#2: Where did Grandma Trudy and Connor go?

A:

#3: Was Connor excited to make pancakes or cookies?

A:

#4 Did Connor and Grandma Trudy go to the toy store or the grocery store?

A:

#5: What did Connor do with the money at the store?

A:

#6: Did Connor like chocolate chips or blueberries in his pancakes?

A:

#7: Did Connor and Grandma wash their hands before they started making pancakes?

A:

#8: Did Grandma Trudy and Connor wear aprons or jackets in the kitchen?

A:

#9: How did Connor use the whisk?

A:

#10: Did Connor just eat his pancakes or did he make a pancake tower?

A:

Recall: ____ / 5 Recognition: ____ / 5 Total: ____ / 10

#11: What was your favorite part of the story?

A:

#12: What did you do during play time?

A:

Appendix C

Literature Exposure in the Home

Name: _____

Child's Age: _____

Child's Name: _____

Child's Classroom: _____

Date: _____

Please answer the following questions concerning literature and your child.

1. Does your child ask you to read to him/her?

____ Yes ____ No

If yes, how often?

- ____ Once a month
- ____ Once a week
- ____ A few times a week
- ____ Once a day
- ____ Several times a day

2. How often do you encourage your child to read?

- Never
- Once a month
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a day
- Several times a day

3. How often do you read to your child?

- Never
- Once a month
- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Once a day
- Several times a day

4. How interested is your child in books?

- Not at all
- Somewhat
- Neutral
- Often
- Very Much

5. Do you play with your child?

Yes No

Describe how you play with your child (what games you play, types of toys, types of play, books used, etc.): _____

6. Does your child engage in imaginary or pretend play at home?

- Yes, by themselves
- Yes, with another child
- Yes, with an adult
- No

7. How often does your child use his/her imagination during play?

All the time

- Most of the time
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

8. Describe how your child uses his/her imagination:

9. Which of the following does your child have available and use at home? (check all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> picture books | <input type="checkbox"/> educational games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> activity books | <input type="checkbox"/> letter and number blocks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> video/electronic games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> drawing/writing materials | <input type="checkbox"/> legos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> flashcards | <input type="checkbox"/> educational posters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer software/apps | <input type="checkbox"/> puzzles (w/ vocabulary words, #'s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> audio books | <input type="checkbox"/> board games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ | |

Total: _____

Appendix D

Literature Exposure in the Classroom

ID: _____

Classroom: _____

Age Group: _____

Date: _____

Please answer the following questions concerning literature and your classroom.

1. Do you encourage the use of books in the classroom?

_____ Yes _____ No

If yes, how?

2. Are the children (as a group) interested in books?

_____ Yes, very much
_____ Yes, somewhat
_____ No

3. Please rate the interest in books of each child in your classroom according to this scale:
(include name and rating)

1- Not at all 2- Somewhat 3- Neutral 4- Often 5- Very Much

Name	Rating
------	--------

4. How many of the children in your classroom ask you to read to them?

5. How often do you read to the children?

- Never
 Once a month
 Once a week
 A few times a week
 Once a day
 Several times a day

6. Do you encourage and participate in play directed by literature (ex: children's books)?

Yes No

If yes, how?

7. How do you facilitate literacy development and dramatic play in the classroom?

8. How much time is given for dramatic play, daily?

- none
 0-15 minutes
 15-30 minutes
 30-45 minutes
 45- 60 minutes
 between 1-2 hours
 >2 hours

9. Which of the following age-appropriate literature materials are available in the classroom play area/s?

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> picture books | <input type="checkbox"/> educational games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> activity books | <input type="checkbox"/> letter and number blocks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> video/electronic games |
| <input type="checkbox"/> drawing/writing materials | <input type="checkbox"/> legos |
| <input type="checkbox"/> flashcards | <input type="checkbox"/> educational posters |
| <input type="checkbox"/> computer software/apps | <input type="checkbox"/> puzzles (w/ vocabulary words, #'s) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> audio books | <input type="checkbox"/> board games |
| Other: _____ | |

Total: _____

APPENDIX E

January 14, 2013

Office for Research

Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects



Kelly Barton
Dept. of Human Development & Family Studies
College of Human Environmental Sciences
Box 870160

Re: IRB # 13-OR-017-ME, "Children's Literacy Encouraged through Literature Themes in Dramatic Play"

Dear Ms. Barton:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on January 13, 2014. If the study continues beyond that date, you must complete the IRB Renewal Application. If you modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this application, please include the assigned IRB application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



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