The Connection between Play and Emergent Literacy in Universal Pre-Kindergarten Students

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The Connection between Play and Emergent Literacy in Universal Pre-Kindergarten Students

by

Megan Patricia McDaniels

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State University of New York at Brockport in partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Science in Childhood Literacy
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Chapter One: Introduction

The classroom involved in this study consisted of eleven children between the ages of four and five who were at the prime age to engage in creativity and use their imagination. When I went into the classroom for the first time I was greeted by many excited children who were engaged in free play, the period of time where they have free unstructured play in the classroom. Four girls and three boys were playing in the kitchen/dress up area, three boys were playing in the book corner, and one boy was playing with blocks. As I went around the room saying hi to the children, a little boy, Tommy (all students’ names are pseudonyms) enthusiastically asked me to play with him. By himself, Tommy had engaged in re-telling the story of *The Three Little Pigs* using blocks. With the blocks Tommy had built each pig’s house (straw, sticks, and bricks) and used four blocks to represent each pig and the wolf. In my observations I noticed that Tommy reenacted the story using the blocks to represent the characters and setting. He directed me to take the part of the wolf and instructed me on what the wolf does, “blow the house down.” He also used language from the story in his play. For example, he would say, “And I huff and I puff” and “not by the hair on my chinny chin chin.”

**Problem Statement**

Oliver (2004) states, “Self-directed play is a deeply satisfying emotional, cognitive, and physical experience for most children and one from which they draw an intrinsic motivation to learn about and engage with the world" (p. v). As a substitute teacher, I have had many opportunities to work with multiple ages of children in various classroom settings and observe their actions during free play.
Through my education and research I have heard multiple times of the benefits of play for students (Han, 2007; Korat, Bahar & Snapir, 2002; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1988; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Neuman, 2007; Rowe, 2007; Vedeler, 1997; Vukelich, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978; Welsh, 2008). However, I have seen very little unstructured play in the classrooms of students in kindergarten to sixth grade. Many classes have a very limited time set aside each day where they can participate in centers (different structured activities and games), or free choice (children choose whatever they want to play), but some classes have no time set aside. Through my experiences in day care and pre-school settings, I have observed that play is much more dominant in the structured day. In most classrooms, the children are constantly learning through structured play, which has a set of rules with specific objectives created by the teacher. Examples of this include card and board games, puzzles, etc. Pre-school teachers also give children a significant amount of time in free play, also known as child initiated play. Teachers may take part by the will of the children, but the children create the rules for what they are doing and use their own imaginations to guide their play. Types of unstructured play include playing with blocks, coloring, playing with toys, making up games, playing in dramatic play centers, etc. This type of play often encourages make believe play with other children, where the children create and act out different scenarios. During free play the children often bring in important emergent literacy skills such as reading, writing, representation, storytelling, re-telling, and comprehension like Tommy in the scenario described above. In conducting my study, I was curious to see the types of emergent literacy skills children brought into
their free play and how the development of literacy skills through play was prompted by the classroom teacher and the classroom environment.

Significance of the Problem

Educational research and theory demonstrates the need for unstructured free play in the classroom, as it correlates to the demonstration of literacy skills and literacy development. The relationship between children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development and play is deeply rooted in theory (Vygotsky, 1933; Piaget, 1962). Children’s play has been studied extensively over the years with researchers focusing on a wide range of various aspects (Han, 2007; Korat, Bahar & Snapir, 2002; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Neuman, 2007; Rowe, 2007; Vedeler, 1997; Vukelich, 1994; Vygotsky, 1933/1978; Welsh, 2008).

Vygotsky (1933/1978) claimed that play created the zone of proximal development in children, which is his theory of what children are capable of doing with assistance to eventually doing without assistance. When discussing the zone of proximal development in play, Vygotsky states, “In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it as though he were a head taller than himself” (1978, p.102). Literacy skills and their relationship to play also stem from theory. Piaget (1962) discusses the relationship between play and the development of understanding symbols and making representations. Today, play is still being studied in relationship to literacy including the ways children demonstrate literacy skills during free play, the teacher’s role in creating literacy-related unstructured free play, and the classroom setting’s role in promoting the use of literacy during children’s
unstructured free play (Han, 2007; Korat, Bahar & Snapir, 2002; Morrow & Rand, 1991; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Neuman, 2007; Rowe, 2007; Vedeler, 1997; Vukelich, 1994; Welsh, 2008). The complexity of play’s nature encourages further study in order to gain deeper understandings.

**Purpose of the Study**

Literacy is a combination of reading, writing, viewing, listening, and speaking skills. My experiences working with and observing children has allowed me to see the types of literacy skills such as reading, writing, book handling, representation, retelling, comprehension that children incorporate into their own self initiated play. These experiences have also further inspired my main research question for this study: How do children in a pre-school classroom demonstrate emergent literacy skills in their self-initiated free play? I was also curious to research the following question: How do the classroom setting and teachers influence the use of literacy skills within play?

As emergent literacy learners, the participants in my study were beginning to learn and develop important early literacy skills necessary to becoming strong readers, writers, and thinkers. In conducting my study I focused on literacy skills related to reading and writing. These skills included reading, pretend reading, reading with meaning, book handling, recognition of print, knowledge that print holds meaning, knowledge of words used to represent pictures, letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, pretend writing, letter and word formation, word structure, spelling, using background knowledge, making connections, comprehension, recalling information, understanding vocabulary, and hand/eye coordination.
Through this research experience I gained valuable skills and techniques of research I could bring into my own future classrooms. This study gave me an opportunity to study and learn through observations, interviewing, and journaling my experiences. I will be able to bring these skills into the teaching field and apply them to observing and assessing my own students’ skills and behaviors.

Through this study I also gained valuable knowledge of the role of emergent literacy in children’s free play. I found ties between play and emergent literacy development in my own research and related it to what I want to do in my own future classroom. Through my research I came to an understanding of how play has a role in learning and how to encourage and keep play as a part of learning in the classroom.

Study Approach

This study was conducted as a qualitative research approach. During my five week study I went into a UPK, Universal Prekindergarten classroom, located in a rural church/early childhood learning center in Western New York nine times. Through my study I observed and interacted with the eleven students (four girls and seven boys) during their free play time. My research data was collected through notes taken during observations, journaling of my thoughts and experiences afterwards, and an interview with the classroom teacher.

Rationale

I conducted this study for a few different reasons. My curiosity of the relationship between literacy and children’s free play was the driving force behind the
study. I also needed to conduct a study that would work with my being a substitute teacher and not having my own classroom of students. This problem was solved through deciding to use my aunt’s UPK classroom. She was open to me coming in, working with her students, and using her classroom for my study.

In choosing my study approach I considered three factors. Observation is an important tool that gives the researcher insight into children’s play. Christie (1990) states, “The simplest and least intrusive type of teacher involvement in play is observation. By watching children as they play, teachers demonstrate that they are interested in the children’s play and that play is a valuable, worthwhile activity” (p. 544). I observed the children as they interacted with each other and the classroom teacher in the room during their period of free play. However, after going into the classroom initially, I realized I wouldn’t be able to just sit and take notes the entire time. Most of the children wanted visitors to take a role in their play, so I became a participant observer and gained valuable data to use in my study. My decision to be a participant observer is why I chose to collect data not only through notes, but through journaling afterwards.

I chose to interview the teacher as a way of seeing her role in the play; how she encouraged and promoted using literacy within play. Although children are the main participants and learn through their own play, teachers also provide an important role. Going along with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of teaching to the children’s zone of proximal development, teachers should scaffold and prompt students to using literacy during their play. In Korat, Bahar, and Snapir’s (2003) study they state, “interventions by a sensitive teacher can relate children’s
experiences and knowledge in emergent literacy to the real world and build a bridge to it” (p. 392). By having the availability of a teacher, children are able to feel comfortable using their own experiences and knowledge to use reading and writing skills within their play (Han, 2007; Korat, Bahar, and Snapir, 2002; Morrow, 1990; and Vukelich, 1994).

Teachers also help promote the use of literacy skills in play through the set up of the play environment. Making literacy props such as paper, pencils, newspapers, menus, telephone books, address books, grocery lists allow children to use their reading and writing strategies along with their schema of the world to engage in meaningful play experiences (Han, 2007; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1997; Morrow, 1990; Vukelich, 1994; and Welsh, 2008). Therefore, by interviewing the classroom teacher and analyzing the classroom environment I hoped to gain insight into the connection between play and literacy.

**Summary**

Young children’s relationship with play is a major part of educational theory. Play and its impact on children’s development have been studied for the greater part of the last century and its complexity has encouraged further studies today. My study focused on the relationship between play and the development of children’s emergent literacy skills. The study involved observations of children’s free play and structured play activities, interactions with children during play, observations of the classroom teacher, observations of the classroom environment, and interviewing of the classroom teachers. Data was collected through notes, journaling, and an interview.
My study helped deepen my understanding of the importance of promoting and bringing free play into the classroom.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Play and its connection to emergent literacy learning and skills have intrigued researchers for many years. Studies of play and its relationship to literacy were abundant in the latter part of the 20th century. Today, researchers continue to look at this research in order to inform their own studies. The following literature review is just a sample of the many educational studies conducted over the last twenty years. This literature informs education professionals and others of the necessity of child initiated free play in today’s preschool classrooms. The ten studies in this literature review reflect the following recurring themes found in literacy-related play research: emergent literacy knowledge and skills exhibited during children’s free play, the role of adults/teachers during play, and the classroom environment’s role in promoting literacy-related play. These studies informed my own thesis study.

Emergent Literacy Knowledge and Skills Exhibited During Children’s Free Play

Han’s (2007) study is a response to limited research conducted on how the individual child approaches play and literacy skills. Han focused on how children’s play styles and literacy abilities influence their play. Taking place in four Head Start classrooms involving 58 children ages 3-5, the study was conducted in two phases. During the first phase the researcher and classroom teachers identified four focal children (who were labeled patterners and dramatists because of the way they approached play). During phase two, the focal children (one high-literacy patterner, one low-literacy patterner, one high-literacy dramatist, and one low-literacy dramatist) were observed over a four month period.
Within the play settings the patterners displayed mainly constructive play and functional play, while the dramatists displayed dramatic play or play involving coming up with make believe scenarios. Although the high-literacy dramatist was chosen in phase one (Han, 2007) because she spent a considerable amount of time participating in dramatic play, during phase two, this student engaged in less dramatic play and more reading and writing along with other academic types of non-play activities.

Lastly, evidence of proximal literacy activity (literacy-related activity that children were able to accomplish independently) was found in the study (Han, 2007). The two dramatists both engaged in more proximal literacy activities. One literacy activity they participated in that the patterners did not was interactive reading. The patterners both preferred to read alone. Narrative activity was only shown by the dramatists, all children engaged in at least one play activity involving writing, and none of the children engaged in any phonological awareness activity.

Based on research of emergent literacy, the development of writing, and Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development theory (1978), the purpose of Korat, Bahar, and Snapir’s (2002) study was to build a play based literacy model that fosters children’s pre-existing knowledge and assumptions of writing. This model includes teacher support, involvement, and scaffolding of writing skills during play, and has a variety of literacy materials available to use during play. The six month study conducted in a Hebrew school focused on two small groups of preschoolers whose sociodramatic play involved written symbols and language.

Introducing two levels of intervention involving enriching the play area with
environmental print and having the teacher available in the play centers, data was collected on the interventions’ relationship to children’s literacy-related play activities (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir, 2002). The data from the two play scenarios support the researchers’ previous beliefs on emergent literacy, particularly writing. The children demonstrated prior background knowledge of an office setting and types of writing that should happen in it. While playing in the new “office” corner they would use a typewriter, telephone, chairs, and different office materials to play as office workers. In this center children understood that they were supposed to write and not draw. The data shows that the children understood that print conveys meaning and is purposeful. In their play the children would try and fill out forms and write in journals. The researchers observed that almost all children recognized directionality of writing (right to left in Hebrew). The data shows that the children clearly used drawings to remember something instead of representing objects like they would do in their regular drawing. They showed knowledge of writing structure through dividing the tasks of the nanny in their play scenario with lines.

The play episode in Korat, Bahar, and Snapir’s (2002) study also demonstrated socialization as a way of developing literacy skills. Without any direction from the teacher, the children were able to collaborate together to complete the writing process. One child was the speaker while the other child was the writer. In their play, they acted as real writers would by answering the office phone, looking up information in the phone book, and talking to each other to help with writing down the information.

Morrow’s (1990) study which is discussed in detail later in the literature
review also demonstrated ways children use literacy skills during play. During the play scenarios in the veterinary office children showed many literacy behaviors, including reading to stuffed animal pets in the waiting room, children reading to themselves and others, drawing pictures, nurses recording information, pet owners and doctor's talking about problems, examining patients, writing down notes in the patients folder, and writing prescriptions.

Children in the Experimental Group One Classroom (Morrow, 1990) were excited to use the literacy materials (stacks of different types of paper, materials for making books, blank booklets already made, books and magazines, pencils, pens, crayons, and colored pencils) but the materials weren't used in any specific theme during play. The children experimented with writing materials through behaviors such as copying charts pretend writing, and trying to write letters. The children didn't use the books. The literacy children used wasn't related to their play, for the children didn't incorporate the materials into dramatic play episodes. The children did sometimes incorporate the materials into playing school but this only happened occasionally.

Neuman and Roskos' (1988) two month study was conducted with 50 children around the age of four in two preschools. The classrooms' setting included a house/kitchen corner, a block area, a coloring/writing table, and a book corner. In the study the researchers wanted to discover the common functions and features of literacy that children demonstrate in their free play and how often they occur across different groups of preschoolers.

Observing children in play areas including house/kitchen, block area, a
coloring/writing table, book corner, and office center, the researchers created 200 play protocols (Neuman and Roskos, 1988). The play protocols were a written documentation of each observed play scenario. The play protocols were analyzed for evidence of literacy-related demonstrations, and functional categories were created. After analyzing the coded data, Neuman and Roskos found similarities between the 103 literacy demonstrations recorded in the 200 play protocols. The categories of function most common in these literacy demonstrations were the exploratory, interactional, and transactional functions. The exploratory functions included reading and writing that was done to manipulate or investigate things found in the play environment, such as playing with file folders, handling letters, and using a typewriter. The interactional function was seen during play through children's social literacy, which included using reading and writing to spend time with others, to play games, and to pretend to record information. The transactional function was seen when children made meaning of print such as when they used reading and writing to label or name items during play. The literacy demonstrations children participated in show that children use literacy during play in ways that are meaningful to them and that even at a very young age children are already aware of the forms and function of print.

Neuman and Roskos' (1997) study involved creating three research-based literacy enriched play areas and observing preschoolers' demonstration of literacy knowledge within their play. Data was collected over the course of seven months through observations, videotape analyses, and weekly informal conversations with teachers, and the communication specialist. Observations were collected on
children's behavior in the post office, restaurant, and doctor's office play centers. Each play center was enriched with literacy props related to the specific setting.

The results of Neuman and Roskos' (1997) study show that play can be a way for children to demonstrate their knowledge of literacy. The researchers discovered that children displayed literacy skills through five common features: presence of the people, feedback from others, access to tools and related supplies, multiple options for activity, and problem-solving situations. Types of literacy skills shown in the various play episodes included declarative knowledge (children showed understanding of individuals and their roles in a particular play context), procedural knowledge (children showed knowledge of how to use and carry out literacy tasks within each setting), and strategic knowledge of literacy (self-monitoring, assigning roles and resources, checking, and gathering resources). Neuman and Roskos found that declarative and procedural knowledge was most often used when sharing information, making transactions, authenticating information, remembering, making choice, and organizing activity.

Rowe's (2000) interconnected studies show the importance of book-related dramatic play in literacy learning. The first part of her study took place in a preschool classroom over the course of nine months. Children spent time in the classroom centers including the book center where Rowe was placed and completed her observations. Within this center Rowe had the children create book related props, and the researcher began to introduce the concept of book related play through suggesting and talking to students about how they could link their play to the books they read in class and to the props they created. Her second study was a case study
on her son, Christopher, who was also a student in the preschool classroom. Rowe observed him throughout the day and took notes on his play.

The data analysis of videotaped play and anecdotal notes of both studies revealed the types of book-related play children demonstrated (Rowe, 2000). Through their play children made connections with books and props, showed their personal feeling about books, read books as a character in a pretend scenario, reenacted book events, figured out the author’s meaning, studied characters, and made inquiries about the world using book themes and characters as inspiration.

Welsh’s (2008) study also shows how children participate in book-related play. In two preschool classrooms, Welsh selected six fantasy books that contained memorable repeated language and the presence of an object or objects that were important to the plot of the story. Through repeated read alouds and introduction of props, her intention was that the repeated language would set up the play story and the objects would give children an idea of what props to use for their play. The researcher listened to the read alouds, tape recorded children’s play, and took notes at the book-related play center. In analyzing the play, Welsh (2008) used Rosko’s (1990) criteria to identify schemes and episodes that took place with children’s play. Using these schemes and episodes, Welsh indentified play behaviors.

Welsh’s (2008) findings reflect the types of book-related pretend play behavior children participated in and how they showed children’s literacy knowledge. In the study, children took part in eight book-related play behaviors. These included connecting books and props, book interactions, reenactments, character portrayals, global themes, expansion and extension of story content, integration of real and
pretend, and prop changes and additions. The students’ level of comprehension of the story was displayed through the multiple play episodes. Children were able to show deep understanding of the characters, settings, and plot.

During the study, the play behaviors demonstrated within-the-text thinking, and beyond-the-text thinking (Welsh, 2008). The play within-the-text behaviors showed how children relied on the text itself to develop their play. They showed within-the-text behaviors through connecting books and props, creating their portrayals of the characters, reenactments of the story, and referring to the book during their play interactions. In order to engage in play within-the-text behaviors, the children had to use their knowledge of the texts and props such as story, characters, and plot. Play beyond the text wasn’t as common an occurrence but children did show these behaviors through adding different elements to a story, changing props, adding characters, adding new dialogue, and connecting to the real world. Welsh (2008) noted that the play fell within the students’ zone of proximal development because they were able to self-initiate and self-direct the play. In other words, they didn’t need direction from the teacher.

Syntax, or the structure of spoken language, is an important aspect of developing emergent literacy. Vedeler’s (1997) study was conducted to explore possible differences in syntax between sociodramatic play and other play activities done in small groups. Six children in a kindergarten class were observed in 11 free play episodes (five sociodramatic play episodes and six other group play episodes). Children’s utterances were video and audio taped resulting in about 100 utterances per child. These utterances were then analyzed and categorized by type. The
findings showed that children used more advanced complete syntactic sentences when they were engaged in dramatic play than the other play activities. Vedeler (1997) concluded that children's participation in sociodramatic play allows them to create conversations with others that stretch their syntactic abilities. Children become deeply involved in the imaginary play scenario, and language is the key to creating it. The social aspect of sociodramatic play encourages children to practice syntactic abilities while other play activities don’t require the same language skills.

The Role of Adults/Teachers During Play

Most of the studies in this literature review reflect on the role of adults and teachers during children’s free play. The following studies investigated the role of the adult during play or the adult played a significant role in the study which was reflected in the findings.

Han’s (2007) study described above, found information related to the children’s number of literate interactions with the teachers. The high-literacy dramatist had considerably more interaction with teachers. The student's multiple reading and writing activities during play may have occurred because the teachers guided, scaffolded, and prompted for literacy.

The play scenarios in Korat, Bahar, and Snapir’s (2002) study described above, show the importance of teacher involvement. In the analyzed “nanny” scenario, the teacher was invited by the children to participate in their play activity. The teacher took the role of a client looking for a nanny for her baby. Through her involvement, she helped the children by giving them valuable information such as the role of a nanny, and assisted them with incorporating writing into their play activity.
She encouraged them to think of ways to remember information and the children came up with writing notes. One student used her knowledge of numbers to change the situation; when she wanted to write, "will work for twelve hours," she changed twelve to ten because she knew the number ten. The children expressed that they didn’t know how to write all the words, and the teacher directed them by asking how they could represent it. The children represented some words through pictures.

This play episode demonstrates that the teacher didn’t want to push the children into writing but to scaffold into their zone of proximal development and see what they could do within their own play (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir, 2002). She helped start the play scenario by being the client, gave them important information about the job of a nanny, and prompted additional thinking that would help their independent learning. The teacher helped develop children’s thought processes, expanded and modeled appropriate language, and scaffolded the problem solving. By doing this, the teacher provided support, encouraged independence and risk taking, and helped instill strategies.

The findings in Morrow’s (1990) study, which will be discussed in detail later, also reflect the importance of teacher guidance. Two of the experimental groups included having a teacher present in the play center to guide the students. The teachers introduced the literacy materials, suggested ways to use them during play, and were available for literacy-related support. In these classrooms, the children participated in many more literacy activities and a greater variety of literacy activities.

Vukelich’s (1994) study on play interventions concerning environmental
print, which will be discussed in detail later in the literature review, shows how teachers’ involvement in play leads to successful reading of environmental print. The teacher was a critical part of the intervention group: providing exposure to print and functional experiences with a more knowledgeable other during play in print-enriched settings. This intervention group was exposed to print and literacy experiences with the availability of an adult to assist them. The teacher’s role was to observe the play, take on a role in the play, and incorporate the environmental print into the play scenario. This allowed the teacher to scaffold children’s knowledge of the environmental print. Looking at the results of the study, the children who played in this setting with the adult were most successful at indentifying words from their environmental print. Vukelich concludes that exposure to environmental print and functional experiences with an adult during play allow children to make meaning with print which results in their learning of the words.

The Classroom Environment’s Role in Promoting Literacy-Related Play

The classroom environment is a crucial part of children’s play. How the classroom is set up with different play areas and available literacy materials has a direct impact on children’s literacy-related play. The following studies focus on how the classroom’s environment impacts children’s literacy-related free play.

Han (2007), in a study described above, makes conclusions about how the students in his study chose play areas. He discovered that a large difference was observed between patterners and dramatists in play setting choice in four parts of the classroom: the computer, block, reading, and writing areas. The two patterners frequently used the block and computer areas, while the two dramatists spent most of
their time at the art and dramatic play centers, in addition to visiting the reading and writing centers. Surprisingly, the patterners spent a considerable amount of time in the sociodramatic play area. However, the type of play seen by these children in this area didn’t reflect dramatic play. Han concludes that this is a result of the children not using the play areas for the purpose of dramatic play. The children in the classroom were able to play wherever they wanted, so although they went into the sociodramatic play area, they brought other activities in with them and just played them in that setting.

Neuman and Roskos’ (1990) study used the five functional domains of their previous study: exploratory, interactional, personal, authenticating, and transactional functions to develop and implement research based literacy-enriched play environments in two preschool classrooms. The redesign of the play areas for literacy enrichment involved creating separately labeled play areas; increasing the amount of classroom print; adding a post office, library, office, and kitchen center to the classroom, and setting up these centers near each other and away from non-dramatic play centers. Each center was enriched with appropriate literacy-related props. Data was collected through observation and video prior to the intervention and after the intervention which resulted in 148 protocols and 44 literacy play frames.

Neuman and Roskos’ (1990) findings support the redesign of play centers for literacy purposes. Along with more literacy activities shown during play, literacy in play became more purposeful. Prior to the enrichment of play centers, the literacy was demonstrated more as independent exploration and not incorporated into thematic play. After the enrichment of the play centers, literacy became an integral
part of the thematic play and helped develop coherent themes. Children used literacy throughout their thematic play to help problem solve.

Literacy in play also became more situated (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). Before the enrichment of play centers, the children had to rely on limited and imaginary resources to create the context of their play. Children had to make believe that they were using props during their play. After the re-construction of the play centers the children had developed contexts with multiple resources available to them. The names of the play centers alerted children to where their play should take place and the available props gave them clues to the types of literacy skills they should use during their play. Children began to use reading and writing in more complex and purposeful ways.

Finally, literacy in play became more role defined (Neuman & Roskos, 1990). Little interactive literacy-related play was seen prior to the changes of the play centers. Afterwards, with a set context for play, and literacy-related props available, the children took on specific roles related to the play center they were in. The children took on roles of librarians, postal workers, detectives, police officers. The children knew the purposes of those roles and incorporated reading and writing using the props in order to help assist in the role playing.

Neuman and Roskos' (1997) study described earlier in the literature review demonstrates the importance of having play settings that promote and develop literacy-related play. Neuman and Roskos conclude that having multiple play settings in different contexts allows children to have multiple options for activity and problem solving situations. When play settings are enriched with literacy props they
encourage children to try out different literacy routines and strategies. The props act as suggestions for activities the children could perform in their play scenarios.

Morrow's (1990) study shows the importance of using thematic play centers to promote literacy-related play. She states in her study that in previous research little recognition was given by teachers regarding how the physical play environment has an impact on children's play and learning development. This study sought to investigate the physical environment's role further in order to see if the type and quantity of voluntary literacy behaviors of children could be increased through intervention and redesign of the dramatic play area.

Morrow's (1990) study took place in thirteen preschool classes that were randomly distributed into one control group and three experimental groups whose play areas were redesigned. Experimental Group 1 (E1) included teacher guided introduction of books, paper, and pencils put into the dramatic play area. The play area was designed to look like a kitchen. Experimental Group 2 (E2) included teacher-guided thematic play with books, paper, and pencils incorporated into the play area. The play area was designed to look like a veterinary office. Experimental Group 3 (E3) included thematic play with books, paper, and pencils incorporated into the play area. The play area was also designed to look like a veterinary office. The play areas all had the same reading and writing materials in addition to materials commonly found in the setting.

Data of observations of literacy behaviors during play was collected prior to intervention, soon after intervention, and a month after intervention. After analyzing the data, Morrow found that intervention and the redesign of the play areas had a
significant impact on children’s types and quantity of literacy behaviors. The data showed that the thematic play settings produced the most literary activities. However, E1 produced the most writing behaviors. E2 produced the most reading activities.

Vukelich’s (1994) study examined the effects of play interventions on young children’s reading of environmental print. Three kindergarten classes were studied and the play settings were created for each class. One class received no intervention and children were observed playing in non-enriched play areas. Another class’ play was observed with the following intervention: exposure to print during play in print-enriched settings. The third class’ play was observed with the following intervention: exposure to print and functional experiences with a more knowledgeable other during play in print-enriched settings. The play episodes were videotaped and the researcher participated in the play in the third class as part of the intervention. She participated by choosing an appropriate role to enter children’s current scenario and incorporating the environmental print in the center into the play.

The findings in this study reflect the importance of enriching play areas with environmental print. Vukelich (1994) found that children were able to read the print during play using their background knowledge of the setting. Having environmental print embedded into the play environment encouraged children to incorporate reading and speaking about the print during their play. After comparing and contrasting knowledge of words embedded in play settings before and after the interventions the researcher found that children who participated in the enriched print play areas recognized significantly more words than the non-intervention group. The results of
this study also heavily focus on the teacher’s role which was discussed in the previous theme: the role of adults/teachers in the pre-school classroom.

Although Welsh’s (2008) study described above didn’t focus on analyzing the play settings role the study did provide some relevant information related to the theme. The children in Welsh’s study spent a considerable amount of time playing in the book center with the props. They used the book related props in each center to develop imaginary scenarios related to the books they read in class. Therefore, the availability of props in the center encouraged and developed book-related play.

Summary

The ten studies examined in this literature review reflect the researchers’ findings on various connections between literacy and play. The studies reflect three recurring themes: emergent literacy knowledge and skills exhibited during play, the role of adults/teachers during play, and the classroom environment’s role in promoting literacy-related play.

Multiple studies reflected the theme emergent literacy knowledge and skills exhibited during play. These studies informed the researchers of different ways children demonstrated literacy during their play. Han (2007), Morrow (1990), Neuman and Roskos (1988) and (1997), Rowe (2000), Welsh (2008) all found that children engaged in some form of reading activity. In Han’s study the children engaged in reading through proximal literacy activities including interactive reading. In Morrow’s study the children engaged in reading to stuffed animals, reading to themselves and others, and pretend reading. Neuman and Roskos (1997, 1988) didn’t specify what kinds of reading occurred but said they used reading as a means of
exploring the literacy props and carrying out actions. Rowe (2000) and Welsh (2008) both found that children engaged in play activities that related to the books they were reading in class, making connections between books and props, portraying characters, global themes, expanding on the story, and reflecting the author’s meaning.

Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002), Morrow (1990), and Neuman and Roskos (1988) all found that children engaged in some form of writing activity within their play. Korat, Bahar, and Snapir found that children understand and are able to apply types of writing to appropriate contexts of the play centers. They also found that children understand that print conveys meaning, is purposeful, and know the difference between writing and drawing. The children also showed knowledge of directionality, and writing structure. Morrow’s findings showed that children engaged in writing through recording information, writing down notes, writing pretend prescriptions, coping charts, pretend writing, and trying to write letters. Neuman and Roskos also found that children show writing by pretending to record information, showed writing through using various props, and were aware of the forms and functions of print.

Vedeler’s (1997) study focused on the ways children used language. He found that children who engaged in dramatic play used more advanced complete syntactic sentences. His study was the only one that analyzed this form of emergent literacy although the others reference the social aspect of play as being beneficial to developing literacy skills.

The studies by Han (2007), Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002), Morrow (1990), and Vukelich (1994) all reflect the theme, the role of adults/teachers during play. All
four studies conclude that an adult's involvement in play fosters children's development of literacy-related play. Through scaffolding, prompting, teaching to the zone of proximal development to the various play scenarios and literacy skills the adults present helped children make meaning, practice, and develop their literacy skills.

The studies by Han (2007), Neuman and Roskos (1997, 1990), Morrow (1990), Vukelich (1994), and Welsh (2008) all reflect the theme, the classroom environment's role in promoting literacy-related play. Han focused on what type of students chose different play settings, while the other studies focused on the ways the environment promoted and helped develop literacy skills. All the other studies reflect the importance of having thematic play centers that are enriched with literacy materials appropriate to the context. This helps students develop their play scenarios, and encourages them to use literacy activities in their play. Vukelich's study also demonstrates the importance of enriching centers with environmental print.

The studies in this literature review heavily informed my own thesis study. In my observation of the universal prekindergarten classroom, I focused on the emergent reading and writing skills that children engaged in during their free play. I also examined how the structure of the classroom and materials provided impacted the children's literacy-related play. Finally, I also observed teacher in the classroom as they interacted with children during play and interviewed her about how she connects literacy and play. I expected that my observations could be different due to the particular play centers and the literacy-related props available in the classroom. The observed teacher's role in developing play was also very different due to the amount
and type of interaction they had with students during play. Therefore, this literature review helped me understand the studies that have come before, so I could make connections and comparisons.
Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

The purpose of this study was to explore how children demonstrated emergent literacy skills through their free play and how the development of literacy through play was influenced by the classroom teacher and the classroom environment. I observed children during their free play and analyzed their observable emergent literacy skills as well as ways the classroom teacher and classroom environment influenced these skills. I also interviewed the classroom teacher to gain insight into her views of the link between literacy and play and how the teacher promoted literacy during free play.

Research Questions

I explored the following research questions:

- How do children in a pre-school classroom demonstrate emergent literacy skills in their self-initiated free play?
- How do teachers and classroom setting influence the use of literacy skills within play?

Participants

This study was conducted with a UPK classroom, part of a rural school district in western New York. This particular UPK program is located in a church/preschool setting. The classroom I studied consisted of eleven students between the ages of four and five (four girls and seven boys), a lead teacher, and an assistant teacher. All the participants were from low to middle-income families. I chose to study this district and classroom because of convenience, accessibility and prior personal
connections. All names used in the study were replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

**Positionality of the Researcher**

I am currently in the final semester of graduate studies for a master’s degree in childhood literacy. I hold a New York State initial teaching certificate in childhood education grades 1-6 and special education grades 1-6. Through my undergraduate and graduate education over the last six years I have been developing my teaching, writing, and research techniques. I have been practicing my teaching skills through substitute teaching in multiple school districts in the western New York area for the last three years.

**Criteria for Trustworthiness**

The research from this study comes from prolonged engagement with the participants. The participation of individuals remained confidential by using pseudonyms for the children and adults involved. The data collection was triangulation-based on notes taken on persistent observation of participants, journaling of experiences during children’s free play, and a teacher interview. When analyzing the data I considered participant debriefing and negative case analysis. In order to determine the validity of the study I also looked at the confirmability of the data. The transferability of participants and context is reflected in my description and analysis of the study. Referential adequacy was also reflected in the written scenarios of observations and the teacher’s answers in the interview. While conducting the
study I did not let my prior personal and professional relationship with participants influence my data collection and analysis.

**Data Collection**

I used three tools to collect data. First, I took notes of observations. I created an observation chart to record the types of literacy skills the children are demonstrating and details of the play they are participating in.

The second tool I used is journaling. Because I expected to be limited due to involvement with the children’s play in taking notes I also be recorded my experiences in a journal after each play session. The journal included what I observed and my experiences working with the children first hand.

The third tool I used was an interview of the classroom teacher. I created an interview to administer to the classroom teacher. These interviews gave me insight regarding how she viewed the connection between play and literacy. For example, how the teacher helped promote the use of literacy during play and how the classroom was set up in order for children to actively use their literacy skills in their play.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed each tool individually. Using color coding and constant comparison, I analyzed the anecdotal notes and journaling of my observations for common characteristics of play, types of play, knowledge and demonstration of literacy skills, student/teacher interactions, and influence of the classroom environment. Using, color coding and constant comparison, I analyzed the interview for information that was relevant to the teacher’s view of play and its relationship to
literacy. I also used color coding and constant comparison to look at the interview for evidence on how play was part of the curriculum, and what could be done to merge literacy and play in the classroom. The analyzed data from my anecdotal notes, journals, and interview are represented in my study through written accounts of types of literacy skills demonstrated in play, how children demonstrated these literacy skills, types of play children engaged in that promoted use of literacy, the teacher’s role in promoting literacy and play, the teacher’s view of the link between literacy and play in the classroom, and the classroom environment’s influence on literacy-related play. The study will also include scenarios of what I saw happen in the classroom. This data provided answers to my research questions and gave further evidence to the necessity of having unstructured play in the UPK classroom.

**Time Schedule**

This study began in May of 2011 and collection of data lasted for approximately five weeks. The analysis of data continued through the rest of the school year. I finished with the analysis at the beginning of July 2011.

**Procedures**

The following procedures took place throughout my study. Each day in the classroom consisted of observing and engaging with children throughout their afternoon period of free play. After each play session, the experience was journaled and the data was analyzed. During the study, the classroom teacher was interviewed formally and her input throughout the rest of the study was recorded when relevant. At the conclusion of the study, the multiple data sources were thoroughly analyzed.
and compared in order to find connections between the uses of literacy during children’s free play.

Limitations

There are a couple of limitations that should be noted. Because I worked with young children, their real actions during play may not have been apparent due to the researcher effect (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In other words, because there was an unfamiliar person observing them and writing notes, their behavior may have changed, impacting the validity of the data. To guard against adverse results due to researcher effect, I spent time in the classroom twice before starting this study. Another limitation is not being able to observe all the children at one time. The classroom is split into different play areas, and the children spread out where they want to play. This made it difficult to notice all play activities and all interactions. I focused on different areas in the classroom depending on the types of play I saw and the level of literacy demonstrated. Another limitation to consider is my lack of pre-school knowledge. I am not certified in early childhood education so my knowledge stemmed from previous experience, the emergent literacy classes I had taken, and my own research.
Chapter 4: Results

This five week study took place in a Universal Prekindergarten classroom with eleven students. Throughout the study I observed nine periods of children’s free play within the classroom setting. The free play differed each day according to what the children wanted to do and what the teachers made available for them to play with. In making my observations, journaling my experiences and interviewing the classroom teachers, I sought to answer two research questions: How do children in a pre-school classroom demonstrate emergent literacy skills in their self-initiated free play? How do teachers and classroom setting influence the use of literacy skills within play? These questions helped me understand the link between play and literacy in young learners.

Over the course of five weeks I went into the classroom nine times to observe and interact with the children during their free play period. The nine sessions will be described in detail and analyzed below. The highlighting and analyzing of the notes I took during observations and the journaling of my thoughts demonstrate the types of play children engaged in. Children engaged in multiple play activities during the five week period I came into the classroom. The play activities I observed included: kitchen, library activities (playing librarian, reading books, organizing and sorting books), construction/trucks, zoo animals, dinosaurs, legos, blocks, phonics tiles, water table, puzzles, coloring pictures, and stenciling.

The data from this study, summarized in Appendix A, revealed the literacy experiences that occurred within children’s free play activities such as a variety of reading and writing skills. Emergent literacy skills that were demonstrated during play associated with reading include: pretend reading, attempting to read words, using
picture cues, reading for information, letter/sound recognition, book handling, comprehension, alphabet knowledge, name recognition, and making connections. The children displayed some literacy skills involving writing. Observed skills include: inventive spelling, scribble writing, knowledge of directionality and letter/word formation, and knowledge that print hold meaning.

While making observations of children’s play I took note of the classroom setting and how it promotes literacy involvement during play. The Universal Prekindergarten classroom consisted of two rooms. The first room included tables, kitchen play area, library, writing center, and shelves with various toys. The children had ample room on the rug to play with the toys the teacher left out for free play each day. Different areas in the room were labeled with print including: kitchen, library, writing center, computer, blocks, painting, math, science, pots and pans, silverware, food. The kitchen was stocked with materials related to cooking (plastic food, cooking utensils, pots, and pans, etc) and contained a dress up area for the children. The kitchen play area did not include any reading and writing materials at the beginning of the study, but at the end of the fifth week it was stocked with reading and writing materials including: cook books and a recipe box with recipes and blank recipe cards. The library area included books, stuffed animals/characters from books, and puzzles.

**Play Session One**

The following information describes and analyzes each free play session I observed in relationship to children’s demonstration of literacy knowledge, adult interaction, and the classroom environment. This data can also be seen summarized
in chart form in Appendix A. In the first session many children were playing with trucks/ construction material while a couple children played for a little while in the library. The children playing construction were busy building a road for their trucks to go on. In this play session the children also brought in planes and trains. While playing together they used language such as, “Landing for takeoff,” “I need to put gas in the truck,” and “Chugga, chugga...” While playing, Brian showed knowledge of print when he said he was going to fill up the truck with gas. The “gas can” actually said “fuel” but when I asked him how he knew it was gas he told me it was written on the can. The teacher told him that “fuel” is the same thing as “gas” and asked him to say the word “gas” and tell her the letters. He was able to spell “gas” “g-a-s.” When asked what the yield sign said, Tommy knew that it meant slow down but did not know what the word was. This recognition of print and that print holds meaning are important emergent literacy skills.

The background knowledge children brought to their play is another important emergent literacy skill. Although they may not be reading and writing, the children are using their own knowledge of transportation and construction while playing with trucks/construction material. For example, actions such as filling up the truck with gas, language related to transportation, and general knowledge of types of transportation and why people use transportation all give insight into children’s understanding of the concept of transportation and construction. In reading and writing, children apply the skill of background knowledge.

In this play scenario the teacher was sitting and playing with the children. As shown above, the children led their own play but the teacher would offer suggestions
"How about building a road or tunnel for the trucks?" or ask the students questions related to what they were playing such as, "What is a milk truck?" "What sign is this?" (Stop sign) The teacher started a discussion about transportation. While this may be a way for the teacher to assess the students and promote more learning about the topic I feel that it was interrupting the children's creative process of play.

In relationship to the classroom environment during this play session, the only materials I noted were the trucks and materials for construction. There were no literacy materials other than the lettering that was on a few of the toys.

During session one there were two children who demonstrated literacy-related play in the library. These two boys were organizing a series of books/puzzles according to the letter of alphabet they were focused on. They were lining up the books in alphabetical order; often singing the ABCs to keep them on track. The children used the letters to spell their own names. They were able to do this by themselves and the teacher was not involved with their play. The only thing they brought to my attention as I was observing them was the book about the letter Q. They were confused as to why it was Q when the picture showed an owl writing. This shows the children's lack of background knowledge on the word quill. Quill is not a common part of our speaking today and the children had never encountered it before. This shows that they were not only paying attention to the letter but to what the letter represented and the picture on the cover that started with that letter. In this play scenario the children freely decided to play in the library and use the resources available to them. The library setting provided these books which inspired them to use what they knew about letters and play their own game of organizing them in
alphabetical order.

Play Session Two

In the second session, literacy skills were shown during free play when eight children played with plastic zoo animals. This was in preparation for their field trip to the zoo later in the week and the children had been reading books about zoo animals in class. I observed the children play with the zoo materials on two rug areas within the two classrooms. The children played with the animals making various noises, and pretending they were zoo keepers. One set of areas in the first classroom had a letter representing the animal’s name on them. Lily played with a jaguar (labeled with the letter j) and was referring to him as a cheetah. I asked her how she knew it was a cheetah. She looked at the letter j and responded, “No it’s a jaguar!” This action shows that she was using her background knowledge of wild cats, and because it looked similar to a cheetah she referred to as a cheetah. However, when prompted she knew how to tell what animal it was by looking at the letter j and realizing that j does not stand for cheetah, but stands for jaguar, thus demonstrating understanding of letter meaning and representation. Tommy and Rachel also demonstrated letter knowledge when they decided to sort the animals by their letter name in alphabetical order.

In the other room, children played with zoo animals on a rug made to look like a map of the world. This map had the continents and oceans labeled. The writing on the map gave me additional understanding regarding how the children were using literacy in their play. Alex was playing with a whale in the ocean and never brought it on land. I asked him, “Why is the whale there?” and he responded, “It’s where he’s
supposed to be.” I then asked him, “Why isn’t he on the green?” and Alex replied while pointing to the word ocean, “He belongs in the ocean.” This shows his knowledge of words representing meaning and words used to represent pictures. Even though he may not be able to read ocean on its own, he knows what it says because the words are used to label the picture of the ocean. Another observation that showed knowledge of words representing meaning and words used to represent pictures was when Lily said the polar bear was going back to the Arctic Ocean. She placed the polar bear on Antarctica and continued her playing.

The last literacy demonstration I observed in this play session involved reading. Dylan pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket with random letters and words written on it. (The paper must have been written earlier in the day.) Without my prompting he said to the other children playing with him, “This says keep out!” He used it as a sign to keep people away from the people visiting the animals in the zoo.

The only adult interaction that occurred in this play session involved my own observations and few comments to the children. My comments were given to better understand the children’s actions and use of literacy skills. My comments prompted children to use literacy such as when Lily was playing with the jaguar. The teacher was assessing students individually as the other children played in the classroom.

In the classroom setting, some of the materials that the children played with or near influenced their use of literacy during play. Each zoo animal the children played with was labeled with letters representing the animal. The lettering encouraged children to sort the animals alphabetically and use the letter as a prompt to what
animal it was. The rug/map of the world encouraged children to place the animals where they would be located in their native habitats and the written labels told what the areas represented and encouraged the children to read. Therefore, materials in the classroom encouraged literacy-related play. Additional literacy could have been displayed if there were books about zoo animals for the children to read and incorporate into their play.

**Free Play Session Three**

During this play session I observed four incidents demonstrating literacy skills within children's play. Three of these occurred in the kitchen play center. While playing in the kitchen, Molly took food and plates out of the labeled cupboards. She read the labels "food" and "silverware" (substituting "plates" for "silverware"). These comments show that she is recognizing print in the classroom environment and is incorporating it into her play. Molly's substitution of "plates" for "silverware" shows that she is reading with meaning but is not always using visual cues. She reads what she thinks it says based on her background knowledge of the name.

Another observation in the kitchen was Tommy showing his knowledge of writing. He noticed the paper I had in my hand and asked to use it to make a recipe (See figure one below).

![Figure One: Tommy's recipe created during play session three](image)

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Tommy gathered his ingredients and said he was making a Strawberry Cake. Without my assistance or prompting he wrote as he was making his recipe, “Strobreer” (Strawberry), “eggs,” “podr” (powder), “pepper” (pepper), “stove” (stove), and “frsing” (frosting). As he was writing I noticed him sounding out each part of the word. As a pre-kindergartener he shows vast knowledge of the alphabet and word structure. Many of the words were spelled correctly and the other words show evidence of this knowledge. Although not related to literacy, Tommy shows knowledge of time. He knew that his recipe needed to be timed and wrote down how long each ingredient had to go in the oven according to what time to put it in and take it out. Tommy’s recipe writing encouraged Caleb to try writing his own recipe as well. Caleb’s recipe only contained a few letters to represent his words (Caleb’s is at a lower level of reading and writing than Tommy). However, this demonstrates his knowledge that words contain meaning which is a crucial emergent literacy skill.

The last demonstration of literacy involved three children tracing animals using stencils. Only one child, Lily, included letters with her pictures. Without prompting she copied the names of the animals that were labeled on each stencil next to her picture. This shows that she felt it necessary to label her picture and she is practicing letter and word formation.

The teacher in the classroom was walking around, helping children trace animals and talking with children at the water table and in the kitchen. In the kitchen the teacher asked the children questions about what they were making and helped them gather ingredients. While tracing animals she would assess them on what they knew about the animals. This conversation with the children promoted use of
background knowledge and development of vocabulary. However, the teacher did not promote reading or writing in any of these play areas. She could have found materials to prompt the children to create grocery lists or write recipes in the kitchen. She also could have prompted the children to label their pictures or help them write a story about the picture. Because materials were not available to the children and they did not have the prompting, the children probably did not think about doing these things.

The classroom environment during this play session proved important. The labeling of the kitchen materials encouraged the children to read the print during their play. In the kitchen there were not writing materials such as paper and pencils. Tommy noticed the paper I was holding and thought to use it to make a recipe. The lack of materials make me question the amount of literacy that could be shown if these materials and others such as cook books, recipe cards, and menus were available to students in the kitchen play center.

**Play Session 4/5**

These two play sessions are combined because they played the same activity and demonstrated similar literacy skills throughout both sessions. During these two play sessions, seven children (session 4) and four children (session 5) played with plastic dinosaur figures which brought about three important reading/writing skills. The other children played with puzzles and at the water table. No reading or writing was observed at the latter play areas. However, while playing with the puzzles, they were helping strengthen their hand/eye coordination critical for reading as well as and motor skills necessary for writing. The children also engaged in speaking and
listening which are literacy-related skills. During their play with dinosaurs the children constantly used background knowledge related to what they already knew about dinosaurs whether it was from what they had seen on TV, books they had read, etc. Background knowledge was shown when the children referred to the dinosaurs by their names (t-rex, stegosaurus, triceratops, etc.), had some dinosaurs eat plants and some eat other dinosaurs (food), and actions/descriptions of the dinosaurs (“dinosaurs swing their necks,” “T-Rex is mad,” “T-Rex are the strongest,” “Dinosaurs can’t jump they can only run,” and “We’re going back in the cave”). These comments show that the children used their background knowledge of names of dinosaurs, types of food they eat, common characteristics of the dinosaurs, and where dinosaurs might live. Although they are not demonstrating reading and writing directly, using background knowledge is a critical strategy of reading and writing and the children used background knowledge to enhance their play scenario.

Literacy requires using background knowledge and making connections. The children showed a literacy skill when they incorporated what they learned from a song that was taught the previous day. One of the children started singing “We are the dinosaurs…” during their play and the children referred to the song when they mentioned that the dinosaurs were “marching,” “flattening up the earth,” and “building a nest.” This information was all taught to the children during the song and shows how the children are displaying previously acquired knowledge in their play and making connections between the song and their own play scenario.

One of the students made an important literacy connection during Play Session 5. He stated, “We need to make a stick house, so the wolf can’t blow it
The children had been reading different versions of *The Three Little Pigs* and were performing a play of the story for their graduation ceremony. Caleb made a connection between literature and his own play scenario.

During both play sessions the teacher played with the children and sometimes interrupted their play with questions assessing their knowledge such as “What’s a herd?” “What are the names of the dinosaurs?” and “Which is the meanest dinosaur?” She in addition asked questions unrelated to their play such as “Did you see your dad this weekend?” Although the assessment questions may be important teaching points, the questioning seemed to interrupt the children’s flow of the play scenario. Children stopped their play in order to answer the teacher’s questions. The teacher offered suggestions to further develop their play such as “Because dinosaurs are plant eaters how about we use your grass heads (children had been growing grass) as the dinosaurs’ food.” This was a great way to connect the children’s play to what they had been doing during school. Therefore, the teacher’s actions both impeded and encouraged the play scenario. During this play scenario, the teacher promoted literacy skills through suggesting ways to use background knowledge and helping develop their vocabulary.

The classroom environment promoted literacy-related play in these scenarios. The availability of the dinosaurs allowed children to play while using their background knowledge of dinosaurs and recalling information from previous lessons. The puzzles promoted practicing fine motor skills and developing hand/eye coordination. However, there was no print available related to what the children were playing and there were no writing materials. The only objects the children played
Play Session Six

During this play session seven children played construction (playing with
construction related toy plastic people, building houses with blocks, and playing with
collection trucks), three children played with Phonics Tiles (switching between the
play areas), and two children played at the water table (did not display any print
literacy skills).

While playing construction the children displayed background knowledge of
collection related jobs and construction sites. Applying background knowledge is
an important literacy skill and even though the children may not be reading or writing
they still applied this strategy when they created play scenarios. Background
knowledge was demonstrated when Dylan pointed to a plastic figure of a construction
worker and claimed, “This is the boss” and began to tell everyone what to do,
“Actually, I’ll get the wood, you stay and build the house.” The other children
referred to him as the boss as well, “Hey boss, where do I get wood?” This scenario
demonstrated what the children knew about the work field and their knowledge of
vocabulary. They realized that the boss was in charge and they had to listen and take
orders from him.

The children demonstrated background knowledge of construction through
their comments and actions related to building the houses. Brendan knew some of the
tools and materials that were used, saying, “We have no more drillers,” and “We need
more floor board!” The children referred to the play area as a construction site,
“Welcome to our site.”

Using their background knowledge as well as knowledge of writing, the children were able to label signs to put in their construction site. I asked the children whether a construction site might have signs displaying information. Together they decided to create a “Danger,” “Closed,” and “Keep Out” sign. With my assistance, Brian wrote “Danger.” He knew that it started with a “d” but did not know how to write it. I wrote the word and we spelled it together and then he traced over the writing. Dylan came up with “Keep Out” and stretched out the word to come up with the letters. The only letter he had difficulty writing was the “k.” Caleb, helped write “Closed.” He knew the c, needed my help to sound out each letter, and was able to use the letter chart in the classroom to write the remaining letters in the word. His knowledge of the letter c possibly came from making connections with his own name. After creating the signs the boys displayed them proudly to their teacher and set them up in the construction site. They told the other children what the signs said and that the children had to follow the rules. Through their writing, the children showed background knowledge, letter recognition, and word formation. The Phonics Tiles gave the children a chance to practice their letter and word recognition, letter sounds, and spelling words. I observed the children play around with the game and selecting correct options. For example, “Press the word ice,” “Press the word that starts with k.” The children liked playing with the letters to spell their own names and words they knew. “Spell dog. D-o-g,” Lily said.

The teacher in the classroom was not involved in either play scenario. The only adult interaction came from my suggestion to include signs in the children’s
construction site. I felt that this was a necessary move to show the children how they could incorporate writing into their play. Because of lack of materials available and the teacher not suggesting using writing the children might not think about doing this. My involvement prompted the children to use their literacy skills and demonstrated how they could incorporate writing into their play.

The classroom environment promoted literacy skills in one area. The availability of the Phonics Tiles encouraged the children to practice their reading and writing skills. As a game set up, it was a fun and interactive way for the children to hear words, letters, and sounds and to practice spelling the words. In this case, the classroom environment promoted literacy skills for the construction play area through the lettering on some of the construction vehicles, but the children did not refer to them in their play. The children did not have any writing or reading material available to them to suggest incorporating these skills.

### Play Session Seven

During this play session, six children played with construction, four played at the water table and one child additional played in the library for a short time. At the water table the children’s conversations provided evidence of applying background knowledge. They were pretending to be doctors and providing medicine (using the water squirters) to the babies. The following conversation occurred:

Tommy: “The baby doesn’t want the medicine.”
Molly: “He doesn’t like your Motrin.”
Rachel: “Doctor I’ve been giving him Motrin but he won’t take it.”
Lily: “He’ll get better if he takes it. Now he needs to take his eyedrops.”
Many of the children had been absent the previous week due to colds/allergies and their conversations reveal how they brought their own experiences and background knowledge into their play.

While playing construction, the children demonstrated literacy skills. The children had the signs that were made during the previous session. While playing they exhibited four literacy skills. Without any prompting Rachel found a Bob the Builder book on top of the shelf and used it as an instruction manual. Although the book did not give instructions, she pretended to read and used the pictures to guide her instructions: “First, I need a toolbox. Then, I need a wrench. Then, I need to build the house.” This shows that she knew construction workers have to follow directions; she showed knowledge of book handling (reading left to right, holding the book properly, turning the pages); and showed that she recognized that print contains meaning and holds important information. While playing construction, the children displayed their background knowledge of a librarian. Rachel picked up a toy figure of a woman wearing glasses and claimed it was a librarian. I asked her how she knew and she said because she was wearing glasses. The other children agreed with her. I asked them if all librarians wore glasses and they said yes because that’s what they had seen on TVs. This shows how they are using background knowledge of a common stereotype based on what they had seen in movies, television, or read in books. I do not know how much experience they had going to an actual library and seeing an actual librarian.

In the library, Will played with a stuffed animal of Clifford (based on the book and television character). Will picked up a Clifford book and decided to try to
read it to Clifford. When I came over, he asked me to read it to him because he was not able to. This action shows Will’s attempt to read a book like others read books to him. He showed knowledge of book handling, and knew that print held meaning and that he was unable to read the words. Instead of reading the story using the pictures, he requested help from an adult.

The only adult interaction during these play sessions were my comments about the librarian and my interactions with Will in the library. I asked Rachel what she was doing with the *Bob the Builder* book and she showed me how she was finding the directions on how to build the house. The teacher walked around the classroom a couple times and observed students, but was busy doing other things, such as finishing end of the year reports and planning for graduation.

The classroom environment provided an outlet for incorporating reading into play. The availability of the *Bob the Builder* book and the *Clifford* book encouraged children to use them during their play. The availability of the Clifford stuffed animal suggested a literacy-related play experience. Will, was familiar with the popular character and therefore played with him and read one of “Clifford’s” books to him. Therefore, the availability of books and book related toys helped promote the demonstration of literacy skills during play.

**Play Session 8**

During this play session I focused my observations and interactions on Rachel and Lily, who were playing in the library. The other students were playing construction, painting pictures, and tracing animals with stencils. When I came into the classroom, I noticed Rachel and Lily looking at the books in the library. I
suggested that the girls play librarian. I had never seen the children play this before in the library and was aware that it might be a new concept. The girls had never played it and were unsure at first. I asked them what things the librarian has to do, “Sign out books, keep everybody quiet, help find books.” The girls were able to tell me how to sign out a book “write name, date, and when the book has to go back.” I took a piece of paper and made a list for name, date, name of book, and due date. After my modeling, the girls took over and took turns pretending one was the librarian and the other was someone signing out a book. Rachel knew that she had to look at the books first and to take her time finding a good book. She even told the children playing construction, “You can’t be too loud; we’re in the library.” When looking at the books she read one to me based on the pictures. The book included pictures with labels. She was able to read many of them but sometimes read what she thought the picture showed and not the actual word. For example she said “horse” instead of “pony” and “couch” instead of “sofa.” This shows that Rachel recognizes that print is related to the pictures and has meaning, but she is not applying the visual cues when reading. When signing out books, Rachel and Lily both copied the name of the book, asked each other how to spell their names, and copied the date as shown in the classroom. After I modeled how to do sign out the book the two girls had no problem doing it on their own.

I was heavily involved in this play scenario. Because the girls were playing in the library, I decided to model another play activity they may not have thought of. Using the paper I brought with me, I created the sheet to sign out books. After my modeling, the girls were able to interact with each other and create the play scenario
while incorporating reading, writing, and library knowledge. This scenario shows the importance of teacher prompting for literacy during play and the necessity of play centers that promote literacy skills.

The set up of the library in the classroom provided literature for the children to use but did not suggest using them during play. The library did not have writing material or other things you might find in a library to use during play such as library cards. With my introduction of the literacy material, the children were able to incorporate the materials into their play scenario.

Play Session 9

During this play session I focused on the six children playing in the kitchen. Three of these children also spent time in the writing center. After the previous session I had given the teacher some ideas of how she could promote literacy during free play. These ideas included adding literacy-related materials into the kitchen center (cook books, recipes, etc). When I came in for session 9, the kitchen had three cook books, recipe cards with recipes written on them in a recipe box, and blank recipe cards for the children to use during their play. The children had already been introduced to the materials before my observation.

During this play session I observed many literacy skills demonstrated during the children’s play. The children actively read the recipe books to look for ideas for their own recipes and followed the recipes and pretended to cook them. Dylan had the cookbook open to a cherry cake and read the recipe to make the cake. He looked at the pictures of each cooking tool and made sure he got them out before he started making the cake. He then read the recipe and step by step made his cake. Although
he was making up the actual directions he used the picture cues and knew that he had to follow the numbered steps. While making their recipes, the children used language related to cooking, “I’m making recipes,” “I need a different tool,” “I need a new ingredient,” “Cake is ready,” “Now I need a fork and knife,” etc. This language shows that the children were actively using their background knowledge of cooking to create the play scenario. The language use demonstrates the children’s knowledge of vocabulary and therefore is another critical part of literacy because the children recognized the different words they needed to put into their play scenario.

The play in the kitchen demonstrated writing skills. While reading and cooking the recipes, Rachel, Lily, and Molly decided to copy the recipes onto blank recipe cards so they could have their own copies. The girls diligently copied the recipes word for word. Although they could not read all the words, they recognized that the print had meaning and knew that they were writing step by step directions to make a recipe. The writing helped the girls practice word formation and sentence structure.

During this play session the teacher walked around and helped children in the kitchen. She helped the children read the recipes, gather ingredients, and asked them various questions. Her questions were a way to assess the children’s knowledge: “Do you know what that says?” and “Why do you need your recipe out?” She offered suggestions to students as they were playing, “When you’re done writing your recipes try them out in the kitchen.” Her involvement in the kitchen was important to the children’s success. Because the children were just getting used to the materials, she was available to assist them if needed. Still, the children led their own play scenarios.
The classroom environment during this play session was crucial to the demonstration of literacy skills during play. Prior to this session I had not seen that much reading and writing occurring during free play. With the addition of the literacy materials related to the kitchen play center, the children actively sought the cook books and recipe cards out to incorporate them into their play. The availability of literacy materials encouraged and prompted literacy-related play. Because the children knew these materials were available and knew what to do with them, they were able to use them freely to develop and lead their play scenarios. Therefore, the literacy materials in the kitchen were crucial in developing the children’s literacy-related play.

**Teacher Interview**

The following interview was conducted during the fifth week of observations with the teacher of the Universal Pre-kindergarten classroom described in the previous pages. The interview was administered to gain a deeper understanding of the teacher’s views of literacy and its relationship to play as well as her impact on literacy and free play in the classroom. From the interview, I learned that the teacher believed, “Play is an essential part of learning at any grade level.” The teacher reported she tries to include play throughout the day through the scheduled free play session, and pretend play through movement activities or acting out the stories read in class. She said the activities during free play are very focused on promoting social and cognitive skills. When asked about the connections between literacy skills and free play, she provided some things that she had noticed, “Representing with blocks, acting out stories (nursery rhymes), putting on their own talent show, using
writing/symbols, using white boards to write each other’s names, drawing pictures and labeling them, and making name tags in kitchen.” In promoting literacy-related play the teacher said that she tried to put different books at each center and provided writing materials at the writing table. She also claimed that there are books, scrap paper, and colored pencils available every day for use during free play. The interview gave me insight into how the classroom is set up for free play and how the classroom teacher promotes the use of literacy during play. The centers that are available for children to play in are mainly to develop motor skills and social interaction. The kitchen center prior to the interview was not stocked with literacy-related materials. The writing center included materials for the children to use but in my observations the children never went over to use them unless I prompted them. In my observations I only saw one book in the center that related to it (construction) and the child got it from on top of a high shelf. The teacher doesn’t appear to have set up the classroom in a way that develops literacy through play. After my interview, I gave the teacher some suggestions which will be discussed in further detail in chapter 5. These included: developing literacy based play centers (stocked with literacy-related materials and props), begin prompting, modeling, and scaffolding for literacy-related play, and be available during the entire free play session. Prior to session 9 she incorporated some of the suggestions into her classroom and this made a significant difference in the level of literacy-related play seen in the classroom during that session.
Summary

My observations during nine play sessions and the interview I administered to the classroom teacher gave me an understanding of the types of literacy children incorporated into their free play, the teacher’s role in promoting literacy-related free play, and the classroom environment’s impact on children’s literacy-related free play. Looking at literacy as defined in chapter one, the literacy skills children displayed during their free play in the nine scenarios (summarized in the table below) included use of background knowledge, making connections (to own lives, to literature, and to previously learned information), knowledge of vocabulary, knowledge that print holds meaning and can be used to gather information, letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, pretend reading, knowledge that words can be used to represent pictures, word structure, letter formation, hand/eye coordination and motor skills, recalling information, and book handling. These are all important skills necessary to becoming emergent readers and writers.

The adult interactions observed in the play session include those of the teacher and I also took note of my own actions. The classroom teacher recognized the importance of play but focused more on how play develops cognitive and social skills. Prior to this study she had not given much thought to the connection between literacy and play. This is seen in her actions. When she was involved in the play scenarios she would play with children and often ask them questions either as a way to assess and develop their vocabulary or comprehension or to find out what was going on in their lives. These questions sometimes seemed to interrupt the children’s play scenario and cause them to lose track of their thinking. She sometimes made
suggestions for their play scenario and prompted the use of background knowledge.
Until the last play session, I did not observe her prompt or encourage the use of
reading and writing in the children’s play. My involvement in the play scenarios
occurred when children requested assistance or when I felt it was a necessary
teaching or prompting moment for demonstrating how to incorporate literacy into
play.

The classroom environment both encouraged and impeded literacy skills
shown through play. The play areas had some literacy-related material, but other than
the books in the library and one book in the construction center, the materials
consisted of literacy-related toys, writing found on toys, and print labeled on boxes or
maps. Until play session nine there were very few reading and writing materials
incorporated into the play centers to promote literacy-related play. After the teacher
incorporated literacy materials in the kitchen play area, the activity of reading and
writing activities during play greatly increased. Therefore, the materials available in
the classroom environment had a direct impact on the literacy skills shown through
children’s play. The literacy-related materials available both prompted and
encouraged children to use their reading and writing skills during their play.
Thesis Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study as documented in chapter 4 reflect many connections between emergent literacy and play. The analysis of observations and the administered interview of the classroom teacher provided insight on how children demonstrate emergent literacy skills during their free play. They also provided important information on how the classroom teacher and the classroom environment may have influenced these emergent literacy skills.

Discussion of Findings

Emergent literacy skills are demonstrated during play.

After analyzing observations and journaling through a constant comparison method by highlighting the documented notes, I discovered the types of literacy skills children exhibited through their free play. These demonstrated skills involved both reading and writing and many shared similarities with previous studies discussed in the literature review. The reading skills discovered included pretend reading, letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, using picture cues, recognition that print holds meaning, words used to represent pictures, using background knowledge, making connections, and book handling. The writing skills demonstrated during play included knowledge of word structure, letter and word formation, sentence structure, background knowledge, and making connections.

Pretend reading was observed frequently in my study. This was demonstrated when two children in the kitchen pretended to read the recipes and recipe books to make their recipe. Han (2007), Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002), Morrow (1990), and Neuman and Roskos (1988) all reported pretend reading demonstrated in their study.
Letter recognition and letter sound knowledge were observed in this study. The children demonstrated the knowledge when they went about reading books, signs, recipes and when they included their own writing in their play. The Neuman and Roskos (1988) study reported children demonstrating letter recognition and letter sound knowledge.

Using picture cues while reading was another observed literacy skill in this study. Pictures in the books available in the play areas enabled the children to understand what was written. Neuman and Roskos (1997) also reported children displaying this literacy skill in their study.

Recognition that print holds meaning was a very common occurrence in all of the children. The knowledge was demonstrated whenever children noticed and interacted with print. The skill recognition that print holds meaning was most likely displayed in all of the studies due to the kinds of reading and writing that occurred but was only reported by Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002) and Neuman and Roskos (1988).

The literacy knowledge that words can be used to represent pictures was displayed in this study. This was done when children labeled their drawings and read words that were written next to pictures in books. Neuman and Roskos (1988) reported on this skill in their study.

Using background knowledge was another common occurrence displayed in this study during both reading and writing. This ranged from children using their background knowledge of cooking to know how to read and write recipes to demonstrating their background knowledge of a construction area when incorporating
specific language, vocabulary, and knowledge of the job into their play scenarios. Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002) and Neuman and Roskos (1997) reported on this finding in their studies.

Making connections during their play was another relevant emergent literacy skill demonstrated during this study. In the study the children made connections to books, their home, and retained knowledge from school. Rowe (2000) and Welsh (2008) both reported on children making connections in various ways in their studies.

Knowledge of book handling was demonstrated when children read or pretended to read during their play. Book handling was not reported on in any of the studies in the literature review.

Children also demonstrated knowledge of writing through scribble writing, making lists, creating recipes, labeling pictures, creating signs writing. Reports on children using writing during their play similarly can be seen in studies done by Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002), Morrow (1990), and Neuman and Roskos (1988, 1997).

Specific writing skills concerning conventions of writing were also displayed. These included knowledge of word structure, letter and word formation, and sentence structure. Knowledge of conventions of writing were reported by Korat, Bahar, and Snapir (2002).

Based on this information, the children in this Universal Prekindergarten class are demonstrating excellent knowledge of emergent literacy skills concerning reading and writing, common in children just about to enter kindergarten. Their daily period of free play allows them to play and socially interact with each other but also allows
them to experiment with reading and writing. Although a vast knowledge of emergent literacy was observed, demonstration of child-initiated direct reading and writing was rarely seen. The administered teacher interview and the observations of the teacher’s interactions with students and in particular the classroom environment plays an important part in why I believe this is the case for this particular group of children.

**Classroom teacher’s role in promoting literacy-related play.**

Research suggests that teacher involvement including modeling, prompting, and scaffolding directly impact the level of literacy-related play seen in young children (Han, 2007; Korat, Bahar, and Snapir, 2002; Morrow, 1990; Vukelich, 1994). The research done in this study also shows the necessity of these actions during periods of free play. In my observations the teacher did not do anything until the last play session to promote literacy-related play in her classroom. Prior to the last play session her interactions with the children consisted of observing them, asking them various questions (sometimes assessment related), and playing with them. Most of the time the teacher did not do much interacting and went about getting things ready for the day and the week while the children played. During this time the children played with the materials available to them and engaged in very few reading and writing activities on their own.

During play session nine the teacher was actively involved in supporting children’s literacy skills during their play. New literacy materials had recently been added to the kitchen area and the teacher made herself available to encourage children to try out the materials, scaffold the use of materials, and scaffold their reading and
writing. Her interactions with the children directly influenced the level of literacy skills they demonstrated. The children were actively including reading and writing in their play and were confident in their actions with the support of their teacher. For example, during session nine, the teacher reminded the children that there were blank recipe cards available for them to use. She modeled how to find them and guided the three girls who wanted to copy the recipes onto the blank cards.

During my observations I noticed a three opportunities to model and encourage literacy-related play and take part in the play scenario. I participated by suggesting the idea of creating signs, providing writing materials (paper and pencil I brought with me to take notes), and modeling how to play librarian. This involvement encouraged children to use their reading and writing skills to fit into their play scenario.

Based on my experience some teachers feel that children’s play will be interrupted and don’t want to intrude while others, including the teacher who participated in this study, believe that they are contributing to the children’s learning by getting involved. There needs to be a mixture of correct teacher involvement and letting children create the play scenario and demonstrate the skills on their own. Children need initial support and instruction during their play in order to understand how to incorporate literacy skills into their play. This should be done through scaffolding to the children’s zone of proximal development. With teacher scaffolding, modeling, and prompting children will eventually be able to incorporate reading and writing into their play naturally and without assistance. Therefore, I
believe that teacher involvement when done correctly is important to developing literacy-related play.

The classroom environment’s role in promoting literacy-related play.

The set up of the classroom environment is another crucial part of promoting literacy-related play in a Universal Prekindergarten classroom. Having play centers that are literacy based (stocked with reading and writing materials and props) encourages and allows children to demonstrate and develop their literacy skills through their free play (Han, 2007; Neuman and Roskos, 1990; Neuman and Roskos, 1997; Morrow, 1990; Vukelich, 1994; and Welsh, 2008).

The administered teacher interview provided information on how the set up of the classroom environment impacts the level of literacy-related play. The teacher believed that “Play is an essential part of learning at any grade level” and incorporated play in the daily schedule through different body movements, games, acting out stories, and including a period of free play. The teacher set up the free play in the classroom through a selection of three or four centers. Different centers were open each day and were set up to allow children to develop motor and social skills. The teacher did not previously think of ways literacy could be incorporated into children’s play.

This study shows the importance of creating literacy based play areas or centers. Prior to play session nine, the only literacy-related materials available were books in the library, paper at the writing center, toys that were literacy based (phonics tiles), and writing that appeared as labels on toys used in the classroom. In my study there were only two occurrences where a child took a book from the library without
prompting and used it in an imaginary play scenario. One observed occurrence included children using the books in the library to alphabetize them. There were no other literacy-related materials or props found in the library. When I prompted the children to play librarian, I used my paper I had brought with me to create library cards. The children weren't encouraged to get books from the library to use in their play or paper from the writing center by the classroom teacher. The writing center was located on the opposite side of the classroom, not where the children usually played, and in my observations, I never saw children get paper on their own to use for their play. If children used writing, they were prompted by me or they noticed I was holding paper and asked to use it.

After the administered teacher interview, I discussed the importance of children using reading and writing during their play and gave the teacher suggestions of ways to incorporate literacy-related play in her classroom. During play session nine I observed how she had taken my advice and begun to change the classroom environment to help promote reading and writing during play. Through the addition of literacy-related materials to the kitchen play area she created a play center that promoted and prompted literacy-related play. Her interactions with the children also demonstrate her willingness to change the level of literacy-related play seen in her classroom. After my coaching I observed her modeling how to use the literacy materials, prompting for literacy-related play, and scaffolding when children struggled. The children were highly engaged and the level of literacy-related play I observed was greater than any of the other observed play sessions. Without intruding in the children's flow of the play scenario and creative thinking the teacher was able
to help them develop their literacy skills through play. Therefore, through my coaching the classroom teacher is beginning to change the way her classroom and teaching promote literacy-related play.

Implications

The research completed in this study has provided me with essential information to bring into my own teaching and work with children. The discovery that children’s free play gives them an outlet to practice their reading and writing skills instills my belief that a period of play should be incorporated in all prekindergarten and primary classrooms. This free play needs to take place in literacy based play environments which contain literacy-related materials and props that prompt for demonstration of reading and writing skills during play.

The importance of adult scaffolding and prompting during play has also firmed my beliefs as an educator. As a teacher I will use free play time as a way to promote and foster children’s literacy skills. I will be available for scaffolding and assistance when needed in order to reach each student’s zone of proximal development. Eventually, students will be able to incorporate reading and writing into their play with little teacher support. Therefore, the results of this study have developed my philosophy of teaching, and I will use the results in my future classrooms.

Recommendations for Practice

After the administered teacher interview during week five, I made some recommendations to the teacher for her classroom. Using information I had gained from the literature review, I stressed the importance of literacy-related play for
preschoolers. I encouraged the teacher to develop literacy based play centers that were focused on encouraging literacy practice and development. The play centers in her classroom can easily be changed to promote literacy-related play. For example, the kitchen area should include literacy-related materials and props such as cook books, recipes, restaurant menus, phone books, etc. Along with having books in the library, props including library cards, stamps for the due date, and a list of books that can be checked out should be available. When the construction play area is set up, additional reading and writing materials can be provided such as maps and instruction manuals. In all the play centers, materials to encourage writing should be available. Additional play centers that I recommended include a post office and doctor’s office. All of these play centers are literacy based but also provide the social development that the teacher is focused on.

I also recommended that the teacher begin prompting, modeling, and scaffolding for literacy-related play. This should begin with direct teaching and modeling of literacy materials provided in the play centers. The children need to be taught how to use the materials within their play or they will be confused on how to use them or not recognize what they are for (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir, 2002). Through scaffolding of playing with the materials the children will eventually be able to use them on their own with little prompting or assistance from the teacher (Korat, Bahar, & Snapir).

The teacher should also begin to prompt and scaffold for literacy-related play during their play scenarios that may not be involving literacy-related props. For example, when playing in a center with no reading or writing materials the teacher
should still be prompting and scaffolding for using background knowledge and making connections. Without encouragement and teacher prompting, young children may not think about using literacy skills or don’t know how to use them during their play. Having the teacher available for support during play is important to the children’s development of literacy skills.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The topic of the connection between play and literacy has been researched extensively for many years and still benefits from new research. This study was very short compared to many other studies done on the topic and requires further research over a longer time period to really understand everything about the classroom, its students, and its teacher. Research on how the teacher changes her classroom environment and teaching methods during play to promote literacy would provide additional valuable information on how the children’s literacy-related play has changed. If possible, I may do a follow up study to track results.

Future research is also required on additional Universal Prekindergarten classrooms. No classroom, teacher, and children are the same so the results from this study may be drastically different if done on a different classroom. It would be beneficial to research other classrooms and compare and contrast the findings. This would provide a larger picture of emergent learners and their literacy-related skills.

Additional research should also be done on the teacher’s influence and the classroom environment’s influence on literacy-related play. Although my study touched on this topic, I focused on the literacy skills children exhibited during their play and the other observations were in relationship to this.
Future research should also be done to discover the correlation between having literacy-related materials available and teacher prompting and children’s writing activities during play. My study demonstrates that children displayed writing activities during their play more often when prompted by the teacher and when they knew there were writing materials available for them to use. However, the study does not focus on this idea and I recommend additional research.

Summary

This research study has provided interesting findings and implications that lead to recommendations for the classroom studied and additional research. This study has restated three important points that have been heavily expressed in previous research. First, free play allows children to demonstrate various reading and writing skills crucial to emergent literacy. Second, after receiving coaching regarding educational research and strategies on the importance of incorporating literacy into children’s play and how to so incorporate the strategies in the classroom, the classroom teacher can successfully create a literacy based play center that prompts children to demonstrate reading and writing within their play. Third, availability of the teacher for prompting, modeling, and scaffolding allows children to understand how to incorporate reading and writing into their play and helps to develop these skills. Fourth, having literacy based play centers filled with reading and writing materials or having these materials ready available at each play area prompts children to demonstrate reading and writing during their free play. Therefore, having a classroom with literacy based play areas, teacher support and availability allows
children to demonstrate and develop their emergent reading and writing skills efficiently.
References


Appendix A

### Summary of Observations During Play Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Literacy Skills Displayed</th>
<th>Adult Interactions</th>
<th>Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Session 1**
Knowledge of print, background knowledge, vocabulary, letter recognition, and letter sound knowledge | Offered suggestions for play, assessed children’s knowledge through questions, and helped develop vocabulary through discussion | Construction materials had lettering and books available in the library. No other literacy materials were readily available. |
| **Session 2**
Background knowledge, vocabulary, letter recognition, knowledge of words representing meaning, knowledge of words used to represent pictures, pretend reading | The teacher was assessing students individually. My own interactions consisted of comments to assess student’s literacy knowledge and prompting for demonstration of literacy skills | Lettering on the zoo animals prompted reading, and showed letter knowledge. The writing on the rug/map of the world prompted reading during play. |
| **Session 3**
Recognition of print, reading with meaning, print holds meaning, word structure, knowledge of the alphabet, letter and word formation. | The teacher walked around and talked and helped students in the kitchen, trace animals, and at the water table. In her interactions she did not encourage or prompt use of reading and writing skills. | Environmental print, labeling of kitchen materials. There were no literacy materials available in the kitchen. Tommy noticed my paper which prompted him to want to write a recipe. |
| **Session 4/5**
No literacy skills other than speaking and listening at the water table. The puzzles allowed the children to build their hand/eye coordination and motor skills necessary for reading and writing. Observed in dinosaur play: background knowledge, vocabulary, making connections, recalling information. | Interrupted play with assessment questions, asked questions unrelated to play; she seemed to interrupt the flow of play. Offered suggestions, helped develop vocabulary, and encourage play related to what they had learned in class. | The toy dinosaurs prompted background knowledge and making connections. The availability of puzzles allowed children to practice hand/eye coordination and motor skills. No reading or writing materials available in the children’s play area. |
| **Session 6**
Background knowledge, vocabulary, letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, and word | There was no teacher involvement. I suggested using signs which prompted the use of writing in their | The Phonics Tiles encouraged the children to practice their reading and writing skills. There was lettering on some |

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Background knowledge or libraries and librarians, signing out books, reading using picture cues, print holds meaning, and word formation.</th>
<th>The teacher walked around and helped children in the kitchen. She asked questions to assess knowledge, offered suggestions, and prompted the use or reading and writing.</th>
<th>The teacher had recently added additional literacy-related materials to the kitchen. These materials (cookbooks, recipes, recipe cards, menus) prompted the children to use reading and writing in their play.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Session 7</td>
<td>Background knowledge, use of signs (print holds meaning), pretending to read a book as an instruction manual, book handling, pretend reading to a stuffed animal.</td>
<td>The teacher walked around the classroom and observed students a couple times, but was busy doing other things. The only adult interactions were my comments and interactions with children. These were done to assess children’s literacy skills and knowledge and to provide help reading.</td>
<td>The availability of books in the play areas prompted children to incorporate them into their play. The availability of the Clifford stuffed animal also suggested a literacy play experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Session 8</td>
<td>I was heavily involved in the play scenario, modeled, prompted, assessed background knowledge.</td>
<td>The set up of the library provided literature for children to use but did not suggest using them during play. No writing materials available or other materials you might find in a library.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>