Exploring the Literacy Development of Preschoolers Through Theme-Based Center Activities

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Exploring the Literacy Development of Preschoolers Through Theme-Based Center
Activities

By
Shannon Gross
August 2012

A thesis proposal submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of The College at Brockport, State University of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
Exploring the Literacy Development of Preschoolers Through Theme-Based Center Activities

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August 2012

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Conclusions

The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Created Opportunities for Children to Engage in Role Playing Activities.
The Addition of Props and Literacy Items Provided Various Opportunities in Each Center.
The Use Theme-based Read Aloud Created Opportunities for Children to Engage in Peer Conversations Based on Experiences and Emotions.
The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Enable Children to Use Knowledge of Previous Characters and Plot Summaries to Make Predictions and Build New Ideas.
The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Enable Children to Use Literacy Props to Engage in the Beginning Stages of Writing.

Implications for Student Learning

Children Benefit from Having Numerous Opportunities to Explore Books in a Wide Variety of Genres.
Children Benefit from a Common Theme Across Centers.

Implications for My Teaching

Build Theme-Based Curriculum.
Provide Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry Books Related to a Theme.
Use Literacy Props in the Dramatic Play Center.
Use Sociocultural Perspectives to Promote Literacy Development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further Exploration of Theme-Based Curriculum.
Further Investigate the Use of Dramatic Play Centers.
Further Explore the Peer Interaction of Three-Year-Olds.

Final Thoughts.

Appendices

Appendix A: Observation Sheet.
Appendix B: Interview.
Appendix C: Parent Survey.

References.
Chapter One: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

As I looked over my classroom of three year olds, I began to notice my children's engagement with our weekly theme of "Safari." We had explorers in the dramatic play area using binoculars (toilet paper rolls taped together) to observe animals such as monkeys, lions and rhinoceroses posted throughout the room. Some children were exploring the cave created under the table; some were building animal foot prints in the block area, while others were reading through stories based on safari animals.

As I walked throughout the room, sitting down in each center to interact with the children, I noticed that they were very engaged within their specific centers. They were becoming different animals, solving problems, and creating positive interactions with their peers. When I stepped into the dramatic play area, a child immediately handed me a set of binoculars yelling, "Ms. Shannon, can you find the monkeys?" As I made a look around the room using the binoculars, I interacted with the other children to help me locate the monkeys. They began shouting at me to head to "the kitchen area." I looked around and stated, "I don't see any kitchen area in here." A child took my hand and said "Ms. Shannon, they're right next to the cave past the water with the crocodile." I headed in the correct directions although still making a few misleading moves to give the children the opportunity to practice giving directions and specific details. When I finally reached the dramatic play area where
monkeys were hanging from a tree, the children quickly followed and the room
echoed in the squeaking sounds of hungry monkeys.

Along with the centers that are available to them throughout the day, the
children also participated in a math activity in which they matched cheetah spots to a
specific number, decorated a giraffe cut-out using golf balls, and explored sand in the
sensory bin. The children were exploring the safari through each and every activity
that was offered to them. I saw the excitement and enthusiasm they were having
while participating in all of these experiences.

The children were using their play experiences and new knowledge about the
theme of safari within their play and interactions within the different centers. Their
interests in playing with blocks, playing in the dramatic play area, reading stories,
completing an art project, exploring the sensory bin, and completing a math task led
them to the centers they chose to play in that day. Within these centers, their play
created socially appropriate interactions with their peers and adults along with giving
them the opportunity to use their imagination within their play. The theme of the
week assisted them in using their imagination and gave them the opportunity to
become explorers with the safari environment.

One thing that I have noticed while using a themed based curriculum is that
the children’s interest tends to decrease after the initial exploration of the theme’s
activities. Throughout the day, the children tend to move away from the themed
based activities. They quickly begin to participate in their own activities, taking out
toys that are of interest to them. The week of the safari theme was much different; however, the classroom was full of energy, and the children explored and investigated the center activities repeatedly. The center activities engaged and held the attention of the children. I felt successful in my teaching relating to theme of the week.

When she observed my implementation of the safari curriculum, my centers’ director was very pleased to see that I contributed all aspects of the curriculum into my teaching, specifically in relationship to the circle time activities with recognition of the themed Spanish words for the week, the song of the week, the letter of the week, question of the day, large group activity, a read aloud related to safari animals and the explanation and set-up of the theme related centers. She discussed how the implementation of the curriculum was completed in a fun and engaging manner throughout my circle time. I was at the children’s level while teaching, engaging in a variety of activities to practice the song of the week and other calendar time activities. The one suggestion that my director gave me in the discussion of my observation was integrating the weekly theme more consistently into the block area, dramatic play area, and art easel centers.

**Significance of the Problem**

Within the last few years, the implementation of play in the classroom has drastically decreased (Graue, 2010). Traditional early childhood programs were based on preparing children for school by exploratory and structured activities
(Graue, 2010). In recent years, the idea of play in the classroom has been recognized by some as a waste of instructional time, which has created an increased focus on literacy and math (Graue, 2010).

With the push for more instruction time and less play time, I as a teacher of young children have become curious about the effects of play in the classroom. Children play to work on their problem-solving and decision-making skills, which increase growth in their conversation with their peers (Gupta, 2009). I believe that the play experiences that young children have can support their literacy development with the recognition of and interactions with print, the exploration of books, completion of simple tasks, and singing of songs/chants/rhymes. Children play to experience the world.

The safari scenario I described earlier is a perfect example of a weekly theme that was easily integrated throughout the classroom centers in engaging ways for all of the children. The dramatic play area created the physical environment of a safari by the implementation of the animals and different characteristics of a safari. There was a representation of a watering hole and small areas of bare trees throughout the classroom. The items within the dramatic play area were each labeled with the name of the animal. The block area had step by step directions of how to create different animal footprints with the use of the blocks. There was also a visual representation of how to shape the specific blocks together to create a footprint. There were books in a
library bin on the reading rug for children to explore both fiction and nonfiction images and texts of a safari.

When working on how to creatively implement the weekly theme into the centers, I found that some themes were easier to implement throughout all centers rather than others. For example, when the school year begins many of the themes are based on helping the children to get acquainted with each other such as “Friends and School”, “Family and Home” and “I am Special.” I have discovered that these themes make it challenging for me to create additional props and activities within the classroom centers that capture and represent that theme authentically and purposefully.

I have discovered that weekly themes such as “I am Special” and “Family and Home” are more difficult to promote literacy learning based on the items already established within the different play centers. The dramatic play area is set-up with a stove, refrigerator, sink, table, and cabinet. There are dress-up clothes and food/dish items located within the center for the children to explore with the encouragement of engaging in dramatic play relating to work and home.

In contrast, themes such as “Down on the Farm” or “Pond Life” give the opportunity for children to create the pond life or farm within our dramatic play area, give creative tasks within the block area such as creating a specific animal or footprint using the blocks, and provide children with the ability to draw or paint on
the art easel. I have found that these themes enable me to create different aspects of those environments throughout the classroom more easily.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study, then, was to explore what happens when I integrated themed based curriculum throughout all the classroom centers. For example, I observed and investigated how the use of a weekly theme and theme related read aloud affected the preschoolers’ use of literacy items within the specific centers and their peer interactions. Through my observations of children, I took field notes and kept a research journal in which I wrote detailed notes about what I saw in the classroom and reflected upon my observations. In doing this, I became a more effective observer of what was happening in the classroom, specifically based on the themed curriculum. I am more conscious of literacy items in the classroom and how the children use them. I am able to investigate if and how the use of a consistent theme promotes my children’s literacy learning and development for and if and how it influenced their play choices and interactions within the specific centers.

The children’s center, in which I am employed, provides the weekly curriculum for the teachers and it is based on a weekly theme that is implemented by the classroom teachers into the daily activities. From my experiences with my three year old children, I can see the positive effects that play has on them over time. The growth that they make in one year from the ages of three to four is significant and
much of that is done throughout their play and the exploration of the centers offered to them in the classroom. Children make developmental growths socially and academically within the year. Children begin to play with their peers rather than just side by side, creating interactions and conversations relating to their play. They also begin to notice letters, shapes, colors, and numbers throughout the classroom along with their name recognition. By the ending of the school year, some children show the ability to connect different words to pictures and show an understanding of letters and occasionally their sounds.

A recent study by Walker and Spybrook (2011) found growth in children’s emotionally, socially, linguistic, and cognitive abilities based on the implementation of literacy-embedded play centers (LEPC). The researchers found an increase in the children’s engagement in literacy acts, as well as a building of the children’s schema, and the overall implementation of literacy in the classroom across a variety of domains.

Neuman and Roskos (1989) constructed a study based on the enrichment of dramatic play centers in preschool classrooms. After the observations of play centers were completed, the children were then individually administered the “Sands” booklet of the Concepts about Print assessment (Neuman & Roskos, 1989). Although, the results could not present a real relationship between play and literacy, the results showed that literacy demonstrations in play increased over a two month period and children were actively using print twice as much for play purposes.
Before the centers were created with literacy props, the average length of literacy related play was about 1.7 minutes, after the props were added, the length increased to 5.18 minutes. Children increased their literacy demonstrations throughout the study as well. The props established within the center were being more related to the theme given to that center. The uses of those items were more appropriate to realistic events that would happen based on that center theme. For example, boys played in the office using paper, pencil and a clipboard as a “sign-up” sheet for their peers to sign-up for the homeless (Neuman & Roskos, 1989).

Based on the findings of these two studies and my interest in integrating the theme of our weekly curriculum more purposefully across our classroom centers, I explored the question: How does preschoolers’ use of theme-based curriculum centers promote their literacy development?

This study aligns with my educational philosophy that children’s play experiences promote their literacy development. From my experience with one of my children whose parents encouraged the learning of reading and writing at the age of three, I have witnessed how literacy growth can happen at this young age. My assistant and I were able to help the child learn how to hold a pencil through activities in the fine motor center, and develop letter recognition (first focusing on her name), write letters and practice sounds through specific literacy activities with the use of flashcards and white boards. This experience helped me realize the importance of the implementation of literacy items and literacy centers within my classroom.
I have established a literacy enriched classroom with many opportunities for children to explore books, poems, and songs in a variety of genres. Each item in my classroom is labeled with a picture and the word. The children’s names are present in a variety of places throughout the classroom such as on their cubbies, assessment folders, job tags, and birthday board. The use of literacy activities are used to help the children develop recognition of their name and letters.

**Study Approach**

I used the weekly curriculum that the children’s center requires and used the weekly themes that can best be integrated throughout the various centers within the classroom. The center’s weekly curriculum focuses on specific art, math, literacy, computer, and sensory activities and is handed out a week before we are to implement it. During the study, I observed the children’s interactions in the centers during the weeks when I integrated the curriculum throughout the block area and dramatic play area centers.

This qualitative research study focused on children’s interactions with adults and peers based on theme related play centers. I have designed this study to focus on how infusing a weekly theme across a variety of play centers can promote young children’s literacy development. During the six-week study, I looked at how the use of literacy objects influenced the amount of literacy actions my preschoolers participated in (Neuman & Roskos, 1992).
The participants of this study were from a children’s center located in western New York. There were twenty-one participants: eleven girls and ten boys. The ratio of children to teachers in the classroom is 7:1. Therefore, only fourteen children could be in the classroom at any given time with my classroom assistant and me. The children’s center in which this study took place is open between the hours of 6:30am-6:30pm. The nine classroom centers are opened immediately with circle time and daily curriculum activities beginning around 9:00am. The children participate in circle time and a large group activity, followed by either Taekwondo or doodle dance and outside time. They then return to the classroom for centers with the options of art, math, literacy, sensory, kitchen area, block area, computer, easel and reading center.

The center’s weekly curriculum is based on small/large group activities, the implementation of literacy and math, and the exercise of large/fine motor skills. The curriculum promotes the use of play in literacy learning and prepares the children for the pre-k programs by using large group and individual center activities that focus on the letter of the week, name recognition, and the alphabet. Everything within the center is homemade and represents creativity; there is no use of dittos or worksheets within the classroom. The children are encouraged by their teachers to express themselves in a variety of ways. Many of the teachers encourage self-identity by giving choices in the completion of art projects. For example when given a number of different shapes, the child may be asked to create a house or animal. The children are also encouraged to brainstorm and share ideas with their peers and adults. Each
week, the children complete a specific letter in their alphabet books and are asked to
draw in their journal relating to the theme of the week. The children are assessed by
the classroom teacher based on monthly developmental indicators. These are
completed in a chart with the specific age appropriate developmental indicators where
a date is written in each one throughout the month and whether the action is seen
completed by the child C=consistently, O=occasionally, or N=not seen/not expected.
We use these three-year old developmental indicators to create goals for the children
to work on throughout the month as well as using pictures and artwork to represent
their progress. The teachers also assess their children based on letter, number, shape,
and color recognition. The teacher prompts the children to recite the different days of
the week as well as write their name. This assessment is completed by the teacher
every three to four months.

I gathered information and data for this study by observing the children’s
interactions during our daily read aloud and through the center activities for that day.
I focused these observations during the weeks where I integrated the curriculum
throughout all classroom centers. These themes were “Snow and Ice” (2 weeks),
“Read all About it with Jan Brett”, “Animals in Winter” (2 weeks), and “Dental
Health.” I recorded observations based on the interactions I saw the children
participating in that are based on the theme (see Appendix A). I specifically looked at
the use of theme related stories within the different play centers, focusing on if the
children were using stories within their play in other centers. I observed the amount
of time children spent using the literacy items present in the center and in what ways
they incorporated them into their play. I observed the children three to four times throughout the weeks that the weekly theme was highly enriched throughout the entire classroom. I observed the classroom circle time for approximately thirty minutes and classroom centers for about thirty minutes.

I analyzed the children’s conversations with their peers and adults in the classroom. I observed them as a researcher, asking them questions about their actions within the different centers. I looked for an understanding of how they were using the new items within the center and investigated if a connection was present between their actions and the stories read during circle time.

Rationale

I chose to examine my preschoolers because of the interest I have in their early literacy learning. I have found research promoting the use of dramatic play centers within the preschool classrooms and the positive effects that literacy items have with children (Neuman & Roskos, 1989, Neuman & Roskos, 1992, Walker & Spybrook, 2011). Although the research by Neuman and Roskos (1989) established no obvious relationship between literacy and play, the increase in the children’s ability to actively use print was enough to catch my interest. In Neuman and Roskos’ study, the classroom redesign consisted of an increased labeling within the centers, four distinct centers being created (post office, library, office, and kitchen), appropriate props were added to each area and easy movement between the different
centers was established. The children were observed and then individually administered the “Sands” booklet of the Concepts about Print assessment. Although, the results could not determine a relationship between play and literacy, the results showed that literacy demonstrations in play increased over a two month period and children were actively using print twice as much for play purposes. With these observations, the researchers determined that print rich environments can help promote children’s interactions with literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 1989).

Based on a study that evaluated the lasting effects of preschool education, Barnett, (2008), found that children who participated in well-designed preschool programs produced long-term improvements in their school success and showed higher achievement test scores. Three-quarters of study participants participate in a preschool program at the age of three or four. These programs varied dramatically based on the teacher qualifications, classroom sizes, and program services (Barnett, 2008), which made it difficult to see the affects of all preschool classrooms but when focused on a program such as Head Start, Barnett found that children showed an increase in their literacy skills and knowledge after only a nine month period.

I believe that it is important to remember that children participate in a wide variety of programs designed throughout the state when entering preschool, each having a different effect on the child. Barnett discussed the importance of teachers in preschool programs receiving supervision and coaching to improve upon their teaching and learning. There should also be the consistency of assessments for each
child to develop and monitor their specific academic and developmental goals (Barnett, 2008). These ideas support the expectations within the children’s center, teachers are observed yearly with professional developments to assist in the successful implementation of the curriculum and to understand the development of our children.

I have reviewed the topics of literacy and play and found studies focusing on children being playful during individual workshop time (Lysaker, Wheat, & Benson, 2010) and the creation of dramatic play centers with related props to the community and home (Neuman & Roskos, 1989, Walker & Spybrook, 2011). I have decided to focus on the idea of theme-based curriculum, play and literacy because it is the basis of my classroom curriculum. In this context, the theme curriculum sets the tone for the entire week and provides the children with activities that are to begin their literacy learning, math skills and creative abilities. The opportunities provide children with the choice of activity in the classroom as well as each activity relating back to one specific theme. Based on my work experience, I examined how the themed based curriculum influenced the children’s literacy abilities when I purposely infused it across all centers.

Research of preschool classrooms has been based on an “ecological” perspective, according to Neuman and Roskos (1992); the classroom environment has been studied to determine the impact the set up has on a child’s behavior. Neuman and Roskos (1992) suggest that “human behavior not only influences the surrounding
environment but is influenced by it” (p. 203). Based on this idea, the use of different items and supplies within a setting may affect the nature and value of a child’s learning through play. I examined and discuss the literacy items placed throughout the centers during the six weeks paying particular attention to how the interactions within these centers/activities created focus on the children’s literacy learning and development.

**Summary**

Based on my experiences in a preschool classroom and the use of a theme based curriculum, I integrated the theme throughout all classroom centers specifically the dramatic play area and block area. I expanded on the daily curriculum and created different activities and games the children could complete within those basic centers based on the weekly theme. I have come to realize that each and every weekly theme does not give me the opportunity to integrate it purposefully across all the centers. I focused on the themes that are established throughout all centers and saw how the children use those themes within their play in the centers, how they interacted with their peers, and used the theme and related real aloud stories within their play. I specifically focused on their interactions and language based on the theme, their behaviors within the specific centers, and their use of the literacy items located throughout the classroom. Previous research has shown some evidence of students’ increased literacy development based on the use of dramatic play centers.
and literacy enrichment within the classroom (Walker & Spybrook, 2011). I observed what happens when I integrated the theme across all of our classroom centers. I found ways in which I promoted the children’s literacy learning.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

I have researched, reviewed, and synthesized literature related to preschool education, literacy-embedded play centers, and emergent language and development in order to contextualize my topic. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the history of preschool education beginning in the nineteenth century and then focus on the early childhood programs offered throughout communities today. I look at the literacy development of children between the ages of two and four to gain an understanding of what is developmentally appropriate and what experiences promote the literacy development of young children. I then venture into how literacy-embedded play centers promote literacy development and in what ways literacy is incorporated within such centers as dramatic play. Through these topics, I formed an understanding of the research that relates to my research question: How does preschoolers’ use of theme-based curriculum centers promote their literacy development?

Preschool Education

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When researchers look at preschool education, they look at Friedrich Froebel who took Schiller’s philosophy, along with his childhood experiences, to focus on the teaching of younger children (Brosterman, 1997).

Schiller created a philosophy based on aesthetic education during the eighteenth century. This philosophy was created for man to work his way to freedom (Smith, 2005). For a person to portray aesthetic characteristics, he “may be understood to subscribe to values and possess dispositions that in important respects are distinctive” (Smith, 2005, pp.19). In Schiller’s writing of *His Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller discusses the quality of life “that are realized in the experiences of beauty” (Smith, 2005, pp. 20). These experiences are created through play, Schiller defines play as “a necessary condition for the emergence of a full humanity” (Smith, 2005, p. 20). This represents all the experiences that create the quality of life (Smith, 2005). This philosophy was based upon social interactions, emotions, and experiences that he believed must be a part of one’s life in order for one’s life to be fully complete.

In the early nineteenth century, Froebel was introduced to The Frankfurt Model School, a school based upon Pestalozzi’s progressive pedagogy (Brosterman, 1997). Pestalozzi wanted to do away with the lectures and recitation; he took a more “natural” approach in his teaching, and he focused on teaching orphans and peasants where the “the innate desire to learn is nourished and curiosity is unfettered” (1997,
Pestalozzi wanted more hands-on and active activities that would create "personal experience of the child supported by loving encouragement" (Brosterman, 1997, para. 15).

Froebel dedicated his life to practicing Pestalozzi’s ideas and teaching young children (Brosterman, 1997). Froebel believed that children between the ages of four and six had “outgrown the limits of home, but they were not yet ready for the discipline of school” (Sniegoski, 1994, pp. 9). With this belief he created the institute of kindergarten (Sniegoski, 1994). Through his teachings and practices, the use of objects was implemented into the classroom; these objects were used as simple manipulatives in such areas as math and science. These manipulatives consisted of “playthings” that varied in size, shape, and colors such as a ball, cylinder, and cubes (Sniegoski, 1994, pp. 10). Within the school, the implementation of “occupations” was also created; these jobs consisted of the modeling of clay, drawing, coloring, weaving, sewing, and paper cutting (Sniegoski, 1994, pp. 11). Froebel believed that play was the route to higher-level spiritual thinking and growth in children (Brosterman, 1997).

Froebel’s teachings shaped the early childhood classrooms of today; any classroom a parent or teacher step into generally has participation in singing, poems, rhymes, manipulatives, and hands-on activities for students. Agreeing with Froebel’s belief that kindergarten should be in a sunny room with bright colors, along with
animals and pictures, classrooms are often colorful, comfortable, and welcoming places of learning for students (Sniegoski, 1994).

John Dewey

John Dewey, similarly to Schiller, based his philosophies on the learner rather than the teacher. Dewey focused on the implementation of inquiry based activities and the ability for students to have control over their learning (Flanagan, 2005). With his philosophical ideas, Dewey became one of the most influential educators of the twentieth century (Flanagan, 2005). Dewey founded The Laboratory School at the University of Chicago as a testing area for his philosophical ideas and their implementation, which later led to his educational philosophy (Flanagan, 2005). Dewey based his practices upon three principles; to train children in mutually helpful living, educational activity that was instinctive, and not a submission of structured, external material, and promoting individual tendencies and activities (Flanagan, 1994).

Dewey’s belief in training children to mutual helpful living focused on preparing children to “grow in the community” (Flanagan, 2005, pp. 4). This focuses on social situations and interactions that a child will face in which he needs to “conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs” (Flanagan, 2005, pp. 4). Dewey’s second principle based on instinctive educational activity is based on a child’s instinct which is the beginning of all
education. The child determines the quantity and quality of learning (Flanagan, 2005). The last principle Dewey focuses on relates to both individuality and social factors, you cannot have one without the other. As Flanagan discusses “if we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert mass” (2005, pp. 4-5).

Based on these principles, Dewey made the decision that manual training, science, nature and art should be given precedence over reading, writing and arithmetic (Warde, 1960). Dewey’s principles were based on the assumption that success in constructive work would lead naturally to the more intellectual and abstract pieces of knowledge (Warde, 1960). This was done by implementing these subjects (art, science, manual training, and nature) into the public school. These subjects were created based on what children were missing at home (Warde, 1994). Dewey’s idea was to create an education that works to create balance in children that would in return, develop a balanced democratic country (Warde, 1960). Dewey allowed for early specialized training in the public schools primary grades based on the external interests of the students (Warde, 1960).

Dewey went against most educational views and declined the concept of teleological explanations (Flanagan, 2005). Subject centered learning was based on the separation of “each topic into studies; each study into lessons; each lesson into specific facts and formulae”, there was a focus on assignments and isolated study
Dewey's laboratory school was created to break the barrier between school and community (Flanagan, 2005). The teacher was dedicated to allowing students to learn in a natural way and in guiding them through the complex situations in life; specifically in problem solving and dealing with new tasks (Flanagan, 2005). Dewey felt strongly about learning through real situations and inquiry based activities (Flanagan, 2005).

**Universal Prekindergarten**

During the twentieth century, many different educational programs have been created through the ideas of Froebel and Dewey. Some examples of these programs are Head Start, High/Scope, and Universal Prekindergarten (High/School, 1995, Gormley, 2005, Parks, 2000). These programs are designed to assist young children who are below the poverty line and could potentially have the inability to succeed in school (Gormley, 2005).

Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) was established to create educational services for four year olds that were voluntary as well as prepare strengthen education and children's experiences in kindergarten (Lekies, Heitzman, Cochrun, 2001). UPK programs support public schools and believe that children can be successful within these schools. Supporters of UPK believe that if children come to the classroom prepared to learn, they can be successful within the community and in a profession (Gormley, 2005). UPK gives the opportunity for all ethnic and racial groups to have
success within an educational setting; the UPK program shows progress within prereading, prewriting, and pre-math skills (Gormley, 2005). Gormley discusses that Hispanic students receive the greatest gains from the UPK program (2005).

UPK is seen as an appropriate step in early childhood education because of its availability, affordability, quality, and parental choice (Gormley, 2005). UPK offers the opportunity for parents to have their children in a program that will promote literacy and math skills as well as prepare them for kindergarten and their upcoming elementary years. Participating in UPK programs enable young children to become aware of the routines and expectations that are established within a classroom environment (Gormley, 2005).

According to Gormley (2005), UPK programs only focus on four year old children, which can be seen as an argument against the idea of UPK to educators and families. There has been evidence, according to Gormley, that children under the age of four can benefit from a UPK based program through opportunities for these children to learn prereading, prewriting, and pre-math skills. The development of children happens so rapidly before and through age four based on the curriculum distributed throughout a program (Gormley, 2005).

Gormley (2005) discussed different studies that support the need for UPK programs such as the Perry Preschool Project (Parks, 2000) and the Abecedarian Project (Gormley, 2005).
Perry Preschool Project

The Perry Preschool Project began in 1962; it is an early childhood intervention based on an active learning model that focuses on children’s intellectual and social development. Parks (2000) described how the program was carried out between both home and school creating an “educational component and family support” (p. 5). The participants of a longitudinal study of the Perry Preschool Project were three to four year old children who attended preschool Monday through Friday for two and a half hours per day for two years. Along with attending the preschool, the participants’ families were visited in their home by the teacher for one and a half hours per week. Participant families also took part in monthly small group meetings with the program staff (Parks, 2000). The participants of this study were revisited at the age of nineteen to twenty seven in order to track their progress and success in school. The findings of this study show evidence of participants’ better academic performance throughout high school, better academic scores, higher graduation rates, as well as fewer instances of placement in special education classes (Parks, 2000).

High/Scope Program

The Head Start program and UPK were designed to assist underprivileged children to have success throughout their educational career (High/Scope, 1995). The High/Scope program is an open-framework (High/Scope, 1995). The framework is
based on decision-making and the needs and interests of the children. High/Scope consists of a “plan-do-review,” which encourages children to achieve goals which they create along with their teacher. The plan represents specific goals for each child. The children participate in situations throughout the day where decision-making and problem-solving skills are established, these activities are designed to work on children's specific goals. The High/Scope program has been effective in response to student success, social responsibilities, along with improvements in socioeconomic success later in life (High/Scope, 1995). The data collected from the Perry Preschool Project showed evidence that at the age of nineteen, fifty percent of members from the study were employed and self-supporting, eighteen percent more than previously (High/Scope, 1995). The study also concluded that fewer members received welfare assistance and had more economic stability (High/Scope, 1995). The Perry Preschool Project was conducted in 1962, while the study has ended; researchers are still collecting data from the long-term effects of the project. The foundation responsible for the Perry Preschool Project is an independent organization who conducts nonprofit research, training, development, and public sponsorship (High/Scope, 1995). The High/Scope Preschool model has become worldwide (High/Scope, 1995).

Conclusion

Many traditional theories of teaching and learning were based on students retrieving information by lecture or dictations given by the teacher (Graue, 2010).
Throughout the years, many educational theories and perspectives were established. In recent years, the teachings of Dewey and Froebel are being recognized and implemented into the classroom (Brosterman, 1997 & Flanagan, 1994). This is being seen in the inquiry based activities that present themselves in classrooms as well as the use of manipulatives and hands-on activities. Classroom teachers who focus their instruction and environment based on the ideas of a child’s creativity, discovery, and learning through play are supporting research being conducted today; we see these types of programs being created through UPK, Head Start, and High/Scope Programs. These programs were created help make a difference in young children and their educational success. The programs work towards kindergarten readiness and increasing a child’s abilities in literacy learning. These programs promote strong educational experiences for children that are age four. The use of these programs has been seen to increase the success of students in their overall educational career from kindergarten to the primary grades. The use of play can be seen as a social interaction related to Froebel and Dewey’s theories, which directly affects ones thinking and development throughout their life.

Emergent Language and Literacy

According to Tompkins (2010) emergent literacy refers to the way in which children learn to read and write. A child’s literacy development has now been
incorporated with their social and cultural aspects as well as their experiences in understanding written language (Tompkins, 2010). During the emergent stage of both reading and writing, children are creating an interest in reading and learning the purpose of writing (Tompkins, 2010). According to Tompkins (2010) during the emergent reading and writing stage, children complete the following: “develop an interest in reading and writing, acquire concepts about print, develop book-handling skills, learn to identify the letters of the alphabet, develop handwriting skills, and learn to read and write some high-frequency words” (pp. 118-9).

Children at the ages of two and three begin showing evidence of literacy learning, children begin recognizing specific signs and labels that become present in their daily lives. One significant way young children learn these symbols and signs are through the reading and rereading of their favorites stories. Nelson (2011) focuses on rereading not being a memorization of the text but as a reconstruction of the meaning of the story. In order to engage young children in these positive experiences, there has been research conducted by Harste, Burke, & Woodward that presented information to support that teachers can “litter” the classroom with print (Nelson, 2011). According to Tompkins (2010) and the research completed, teachers may see evidence of this in the classroom through

“posting signs in the classroom, making a list of the classroom rules, using reading and writing materials in literacy play centers, exchanging messages
with classmates, reading and writing stories, labeling classroom items, drawing and writing in journals and writing notes to parents" (2010, p. 112).

It is important to add these types of items throughout the classroom for children to recognize letters, their name, and activity choices. Nelson (2011) discusses a study done by Harste (Harste, Burke, & Woodward, 1984) where researchers added a writing table to a book corner in the classroom, which consisted of different pads, pencils, envelopes, and stamps. Researchers found that children spent three to ten times the amount of time they usually did in reading and writing activities (Nelson, 2011). This study was conducted in a traditional classroom in which the teachings of reading and writing were done formally (Nelson, 2011). Based on this study, when children were provided the appropriate reading and writing materials, they naturally knew the use for them (Nelson, 2011). According to Nelson and her discussion on the study conducted by Harste, the results the study presented established the perspective that children come to school already knowing about language and literacy (Nelson, 2011). The instruction in the classroom should be built upon that knowledge to continue development in each child’s reading and writing abilities (Nelson, 2011).

**Early Literacy Development**

Before the 1970’s, the focus of how children developed literacy skills and abilities were based on five year old children who came to kindergarten (Tompkins, 2010). This idea was pushed aside by researchers when they started looking at
literacy from a child’s perspective. Researchers began realizing that preschoolers were able to identify and recognize signs and environmental print in the community, as well as retell stories, scribble letters, and listen to stories (Tompkins, 2010). According to Tompkins (2010), “literacy development has been broadened to incorporate the cultural and social aspects of language learning, and children’s experiences with and understandings about written language—both reading and writing—are included as part of emergent literacy” (p. 111).

A child understands the purpose of reading and writing through the way in which it is used within his/her community (Tompkins, 2010). It is used differently between different cultures, for example, in some communities the purpose is paying bills and in other communities reading and writing is seen as leisure activities (Tompkins, 2010). These experiences vary between the socioeconomic status of the families and communities.

The first experiences of learning about print are very personal experiences (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). A child recognizes such things as the symbols to his/her favorite restaurant, his/her street name, and cereal boxes and although he/she don’t know the letter names, each child is bringing meaning to those symbols and recognizing different features (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). The most powerful word in the learning of print is a child’s name; children quickly begin to make connections between their name and other words in their community (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). According to Fountas and Pinnell, “working from children’s names and words
frequently used in interactive writing, teachers can help children recognize letters and sounds as they appear within words and alone” (1996, p. 13).

**Literacy Abilities and Skills in Children**

It is important to understand how young children learn and adapt to spoken language and letters. This gives educators the ability to create those experiences that children need to thrive in terms of their literacy development. According to the National Institute for Literacy (2005), young children are able to become “aware of systematic patterns of sounds in spoken language, manipulate sounds in words, recognize words, and break them apart into smaller units, learn the relationship between sounds and letters, and build their oral language and vocabulary skills” (p. 4).

The National Institute for Literacy (2005) created characteristics/predictors of a child who is consistently building upon his or her language. These characteristics consist of such things as knowing the names of printed letters, knowing the sounds associated with printed letters, being able to manipulate the sounds of spoken language, being able to rapidly name a sequence of letters, numbers, objects, or colors, being able to write his or her own name or even isolated letters, and being able to remember the content of spoken language for a short time (2005).
According to Owocki and Goodman (2002), children develop language and literacy developmentally and based on his/her sociocultural perspective. Children build upon their knowledge based on their experiences in his/her social world (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). These experiences include children consistently testing hypotheses about how they believe language works (Owocki & Goodman, 2002). According to Owocki and Goodman, "when internal and social forces meet, children meaningfully connect their ways of thinking with objects, events, and people in the environment" (pp. 4).

The National Institute for Literacy (2005) focuses on how to recognize and monitor literacy throughout the school day. Some important pointers they suggest are activities that help children learn the names of the letter-shapes in the alphabet and the sounds the letters make, activities that help make children aware of the sounds in language and provide opportunities to practice manipulating sounds, activities that help children remember spoken information, activities that support oral language and development, and activities with books or other forms of print to help children understand how print works.

**Conclusion**

A child’s literacy learning begins at home and is often based on the child’s experiences, community and family. The interactions and personal experiences that a child has within his/her community build his/her understanding of print. These experiences build a base for teachers to expand upon once the child enters school.
Teachers should work with a child’s name and the letters in the name to begin the recognition of letters and sounds. Research has presented evidence of emergent language and literacy happening within a child’s first years of life, experiences at a young age begins a child’s recognition of letters and understanding of print. Based on these understandings, the classroom environment should be enriched with print, letters, and activities that promote a child’s literacy learning.

**Literacy-Embedded Play Centers**

Dramatic play takes place when children are adopting different roles and using their imagination to act out stories (Christie, 1990). Dramatic play centers are generally incorporated throughout many child care centers and preschool classrooms. A literacy-embedded play center is a dramatic play center that contains literacy tools and materials that involve print and writing materials that have purposefully been placed into them (Walker & Spybrook, 2011). According to Tompkins (2010), some reading and writing materials within these centers may include: food packages, play money, and price stickers in a grocery store center; a post office might include, letters, stamps, and mailboxes; and in a hospital center, items such as appointment books, prescription pads, and folders for patient records” could be present (p. 115). According to Walker and Spybrook (2011), the use of literacy items within centers creates a print-rich environment where “open-ended and constrained exploration of literacy” can take place (pp. 89-90).
When children are given the opportunity to explore literacy play centers, they willingly begin to use literacy within their play scenarios (Christie, 1990). Christie (1990) discusses the promotion of literacy when print becomes a part of a child’s dramatic play. Christie believes with dramatic play, children begin to increase their knowledge and use of what they have seen in the everyday use of language, they begin experimenting with “scribble writing, invented spelling, and emergent reading in rich, contextualized situations” (pp. 542), dramatic play also assists in a child’s understanding of story structure while giving them the opportunity to invent and act out scenarios. Literacy play centers also assist in the use of literacy vocabulary, such as the terms “read, write, pencil, paper, and book” (Christie, 1990, pp. 543).

Christie discusses a study that was done in a preschool classroom’s housekeeping area conducted by Hall et. Al. (Christie, 1990) in which there were no literacy items placed within the center (1990). Researches filled the housekeeping centers with literacy materials such as pencils, pens, telephone books, note pads, cookbooks, magazines, newspapers, picture books, and catalogs (Christie, 1990). Before the placement of these items, children rarely presented reading or writing behaviors within the center, after being observed for four days with the literacy items added to the center, the children were “observed engaging in 290 separate literacy events in conjunction with their dramatizations” (Christie, 2002, pp. 543).

Walker and Spybrook (2011) recognize the importance of adult interactions within these literacy-embedded play centers. These researchers have reported that
when adults become uninvolved with students in the centers, the opportunity for the students to use those literacy items appropriately begins to decrease. Walker and Spybrook suggest that adults should “model, demonstrate, and guide play” (p. 90). Play behaviors vary when an adult acts as a director, interviewer, or remains uninvolved. When adults become a part of the play experience, they can extend and redirect play behaviors therefore increasing a child’s expectation for literacy success (Walker & Spybrook, 2011). In doing this, the children’s language, interactions and conversations can be expanded on with the assistance of an adult.

The study conducted by Walker and Spybrook (2011) took place in a local children’s museum where literacy-embedded play centers were created. The play centers created were: an aquarium, a grocery store, a camping site, a sensory cupboard, a veterinarian office, and a rain forest used as a reading area (Walker & Spybrook, 2011). The participants of the study were any children who entered the museum; these children were observed in the play centers and given a score based on their interest of the different themes (Walker & Spybrook, 2011). The study was looking specifically at which items the children established the most play with. Based on these observations, researchers rearranged the items and made accommodations to each center. One example that Walker & Spybrook discuss was the observation that many children were using shopping lists while in the grocery store, to accommodate for all the children, the researchers laminated blank shopping lists and provided a washable marker so that the lists could continuously be used
(Walker & Spybrook, 2011). Researchers promoted more literacy opportunities based on the observation of play within those centers.

Walker and Spybrook discuss the creation of literacy-embedded play centers that were based upon a theme, for example a community area that children may have been exposed to, such as the post office, increased the students’ literacy engagement. It was a familiar and safe space within their classroom in which they could explore. The children’s use of literacy-embedded play centers helped them gain an understanding of environmental and basic print concepts (2011). The whole idea of a literacy-embedded play center is for students to have the opportunity to experience print and language. Literacy-embedded play centers purposely allow engagement in different literacy acts as well as promotes a child’s emotional, language, social, and cognitive development (Walker & Spybrook, 2011).

Conclusion

There have been a number of studies conducted that result in the promotion of literacy-embedded play centers and the use of literacy items within different classroom centers (Walker & Spybrook, 2011, Christie, 199). The focus on literacy has become the new priority within many early childhood classrooms and it can be promoted as young as the age of three. Many dramatic play areas already present themselves in preschool classrooms, the addition of literacy props and different community themes can promote the literacy development in children. As Christie
(1990) discusses, “these centers should be ‘literate’ and have an abundance of reading and writing materials” (pp. 543), the additions of pens, pencils, note pads, and cookbooks increase the number of literacy events that take place within that center. Based on the studies conducted and read, all classrooms should recognize the importance of literacy props, specifically in early childhood programs. Programs and teachers should be encouraging and creating opportunities for literacy development within their classroom play centers.

Chapter Three: Methods and Procedures

The main purpose of this study was to understand what happened when I integrated themed based curriculum throughout all the classroom centers in my preschool classroom. A second purpose of the study was to become a more effective observer of what is happening in my classroom, specifically how my students' develop their literacy abilities in relationship to the themed curriculum.

In this chapter, I discuss the study environment and participants who took part in this study along with the different ways in which I collected and analyzed data in order to determine the themes related to the topics of themed based curriculum and literacy.

Research Question
Through this six-week study, I explored the research question: How does preschoolers’ use of theme-based curriculum centers promote their literacy development?

Participants

The participants of this study attend a children’s center in western New York. The center is constructed of thirteen classrooms, separated by age groups. The age range begins at six weeks old and goes through age eleven. The center has a UPK program that is funded through the local school district. The lead center is based in Buffalo, New York and has recently expanded to develop additional centers throughout the western New York regions within the last four years. The center hours are 6:30am-6:30pm and children can be dropped off and picked up anytime between those hours. The parents are encouraged to have their child in the classroom by 8:30am if they would like their child to participate in the school aspect of the center, which begins with circle time and a morning meeting.

I asked the twenty-two children (eleven girls and ten boys) assigned to my classroom to participate in this study. Fourteen children attend daily: Monday, Wednesday and Friday there are six girls and seven boys and Tuesday and Thursday there are seven girls and six boys. Each child has a different weekly schedule. Four of the students (two boys and two girls) attend the center full-time; others attend part-
time, which consists of Monday, Wednesday, and Friday or Tuesday and Thursday. The ratio within the classroom is seven children to one teacher.

The children come from various backgrounds and religious beliefs. Many have diet restrictions based on religious beliefs such as a child who is Jewish and cannot have any pork. The children come from both middle-class and upper-class families. The majority of the children in the center are Caucasian, in addition, there are three African-American children and five who come from India. Three students speak Russian and one student is from India and does not yet speak or understand fluent English, which created a language barrier between the teachers and student. We also have three students who receive special education services for behaviors or autism. There are also twelve children who receive push-in support services for speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. Many of these support services are provided by staff from the Head Start Program.

My classroom consists of twenty-two Caucasian children and one child of mixed race; I have four students who receive outside services for speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy. I also have a student diagnosed with autism who has the support of a special education teacher three times a week.

Context of the Study
This children’s center uses a themed based curriculum (Doodle Bugs!, 2011), which includes weekly themes that have daily curriculum activities. The curriculum is divided into circle time, question/song/letter of the day, morning center activities, afternoon center activities, large group activities, and journals. The center activities, which consist of themed based choices for the children, focus on math skills, literacy skills, art, music, science, and computer. The content of each activity is specifically explained within the curriculum and how it is to be set-up daily within the classroom. The classroom also has a block area, a dramatic play area, a reading area and an easel area that are consistently available to the children. These centers can be added to and should be expanded on based on the specific theme of the week.

Our daily classroom routine begins with:

- Free-play/Breakfast 7:45am-8:45am
- Circle time 8:45am-9:30am
- Taekwondo/Doodle dance 9:30am-10:00am
- Outside time 10:00am-10:30am
- Morning centers 10:30am-11:15am
- Story time 11:15am-11:30am
- Lunch 11:30am-12:00pm
- Table toys 12:00pm-12:30pm
- Nap time 12:30pm-2:30pm
- Snack 2:30pm-3:00pm
- Outside time 3:00pm-3:30pm
- Afternoon centers/Happy hour activity 3:30pm-4:30pm
- Large group music- 4:30pm-5:00pm
- Home toy-time- 5:00- pick up

Circle time consists of our calendar activities such as, the days of the week song, counting, today is..., choosing daily jobs, song of the week, question of the day, letter of the week, Spanish words related to the theme, read-aloud, and a morning large group activity based on the theme. Taekwondo and Doodle dance are exercise enriched programs that are offered to the children throughout the center. They are offered two days out of the week and all preschool and pre-k classrooms participate in these activities.

During our circle time activities, we focus on our letter of the week in which we practice the sound that letters make and by determining a number of words that begin with that letter. In working with this letter we may act out some movements such as hopping for the letter “H” or tiptoeing for the letter “T”. We also focus on the beginning letter of the student’s names and the recognition of their name throughout our literacy activities; this may be in a matching game or in working with the magnetic letters. Letters, numbers, colors, and objects are the main focus in the three year old classroom. My assistant and I have a goal in the classroom to allow the students to explore and make sense of the world around them.
We create morning and afternoon center activities based on the theme of the week and focus on math, literacy, creative arts, and science skills. Table toy times are activities that are offered during transition times in the classroom where children work on fine motor skills such as puzzles, peg boards, and legos. The happy hour activity is a week long activity that the children participate in every afternoon. It is a project that is slowly completed throughout the week. For example, the children work on creating a family tree throughout the week of Family and Home. Each day they focus on decorating a different part of the tree and then completed it by adding their family photos. At the end of the day, the children are able to bring out any toys they have brought from home. This is a time when we work on sharing and give the children the opportunity for free-play in the classroom.

The room set-up, curriculum, and school environment within the children’s center is designed to allow the children to participate in reading opportunities. Each item and center is labeled within the classroom for the children to recognize the word and picture. Their name is labeled throughout the room as well, on their cubby, job chart, birthday board, assessment folders, and within literacy activities. Each week there is a special library bin that I have filled with books relating to the theme of the week. I focus on both fiction and nonfiction stories along with poems. I allow the children the opportunity to look through these stories at any time to explore and become familiar with different prints.
My assistant and I are consistently walking around the classroom, creating conversation and interaction with the children. These interactions can sometimes be very short and specific or they can be very exploratory for the children. I recognize that creating these opportunities for the students in my classroom has increased their engagement in play and increased their own discoveries. It gives them the opportunity to take chances within their play with adult guidance.

Our curriculum focuses on the skills of reading, writing, and math skills within the daily centers offered to them. These opportunities within the preschool classrooms and UPK program invite the student to begin having success within education at an early age. Working in the three year old classroom, I prepare the children for the responsibilities and expectations they will have when moved up into either the UPK program or the four year old classroom. We have one UPK classroom funded through our district in western, New York. The other classrooms, specifically the three year old and four year old classrooms, begin these school experiences to prepare the children for their upcoming experiences within school.

Through this study, I explored how to integrate aspects of theme-based curriculum in a variety of play centers: block area and the dramatic play area. I paid particular attention to how the integration supported the children’s literacy development.

My Positionality as the Researcher
I am a 24 year old Caucasian female teaching in a preschool classroom at a children’s center located in western New York. This is my second year teaching at this center. I completed my bachelor’s degree in both childhood and students with disabilities grades 1-6. While completing my bachelor’s degree, I worked for Monroe 2 Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) where I was a substitute teacher for seven months before becoming a permanent student behavioral assistant in an 8:1:2 classroom. I have also worked at an elementary school in a suburban area of western New York in a behavioral program that focused mainly on students diagnosed as emotionally disturbed (ED).

Presently, at the children’s center, I am in my second year with three-year old children who have either moved up from the toddler classrooms or who are brand new to the center. My teaching is based on the theme based curriculum given to me by the center’s administrators. I can and have incorporated creative new ideas related to the theme into the other centers.

I believe my role within this particular teaching setting is to implement the curriculum and the theme in the best way suitable for my students. It is my responsibility to build upon their social skills and support their learning experience in a school setting. I see part of my work to prepare them for pre-k and kindergarten. I specifically focus on exposing them to many types of literature throughout the day. I do this through read-aloud and opportunities within the different centers where literacy objects and texts are offered. I specifically have each item in my classroom
labeled with its name and a picture, which helps the children make the connection between an item and its name. The literacy activities focus on the student’s learning their name and the recognition of the letters of the alphabet. We also focus on a letter of the week and activities are built around that letter. I practice the sound that letter makes, the items/names within the classroom that begin with that letter, and repeat use of that letter throughout the entire week with the children.

I am currently a graduate student at The College at Brockport, SUNY working toward my master’s degree in childhood literacy. I am in my final semester of classes. Based on my experiences within my graduate classes and observations of children in my preschool classroom and our prepared theme based curriculum, I have decided upon this research topic to help me better understand the influences a themed-based curriculum has on three-year old children.

Data Collection

I collected data through the use of observations of and interviews with my three year-old preschoolers, parent questionnaires, and a research journal.

Observations

I collected the majority of my data through observations of the children participating in open center time and their interactions with peers and adults during
circle time and the morning read aloud. I chose four weekly themes (see Table 3.1) and observed how the children interacted and used the literacy items during each week. I observed the children at least three days of the specific themed week, describing the environment created based on the theme, the student interactions with the use of the theme, read aloud interactions and the use of literacy items throughout the classroom (see Appendix A). I conducted the observations during the morning center time for thirty minutes and during the circle time activities for thirty minutes.

Interviews

After I completed the observation, I had a discussion with the children. I used pre-determined interview questions (see Appendix B) to prompt the children in expressing what they were playing and how they were using the specific literacy items within the given centers. I looked to learn how the children were responding to the theme. I performed the interviews immediately after the completion of the thirty minute center for approximately five to ten minutes, being careful and sensitive to the children’s age and short attention time. I interviewed the children individually to eliminate the opportunity of repeating a friend’s statement. I observed two to three children who played within the center(s) observed that particular day.

Parent Questionnaires
At the end of each of the week, I sent home a parent questionnaire (see Appendix C) to learn if and how the students implemented the theme at home within their play or in conversation with their family and siblings. This data helped me learn if and how students were exploring their knowledge of a specific theme outside of their time at the center. The questionnaire also provided an opportunity for parents to comment on what they were seeing their child doing in relationship to the weekly theme as well as their child’s use of literacy skills and behaviors outside of the center.

Research Journal

I used a research journal to reflect upon and discuss the different interactions I saw within the classroom. Through journaling, I recorded my observations, reflected upon those observations and discussed any wonderings/ideas I began to think of. I was able to recognize patterns and consistencies after the first few weeks within the different center themes and how, if at all, the integration influenced the children’s play. I completed a free-write entry in the journal after each day.

Data Analysis

Based on my use of the observations, interviews, parent questionnaires, and the research journal, I looked at the student’s different interactions and use of literacy items and props. I was able to categorize my data based on the students’ individual
play, peer interactions, adult interactions, and the use of literacy items. I organized and categorized the data from each specific themed week under these large themes. After categorizing the data, I looked for patterns within the themes. Based on the patterns and similarities I found, I drew conclusions to answer my research question.

**Observations**

I took field notes during circle time, read aloud, and center time (see Appendix A) three times a week. Each day I focused on the children’s participation in circle time, their interactions during the read aloud, and one or two specific centers during the open center time. As a way to analyze the observation data, I read and reread through the notes. I then coded my data based on possible categories related to the students’ behaviors, language, and their interactions with the literacy props and with their peers. I then analyzed any patterns to determine possible themes.

**Interviews**

After the center time has ended, I met individually with two or three children who took part in that center for at least ten minutes. I asked each child several questions focusing on a discussion about his or her play choices (See Appendix B). During the analysis, I read and reread the interview data and coding for possible patterns and themes related to the child’s perspectives of literacy and play. Once I
completed the analysis of the individual children, I looked across my analysis of all children to determine common themes among and between the children’s perspectives.

**Parent Questionnaires**

I sent home a questionnaire at the end of each week. The questionnaire invited the parent to indicate how the child explored the week’s theme at home (see Appendix C). Each week, after the questionnaires were returned, I read and reread the parents’ responses. I evaluated the answers and categorized them by their responses. I looked through the responses to see what if there were any similarities and differences. Based on those similarities and differences, I was able to determine patterns within the responses. At the conclusion of the six weeks, I looked across the responses to determine any patterns in the students’ interactions with the various themes outside of the center.

**Procedures**

**Week One: Theme: Snow & Ice**

**Theme based activities/centers:**

**Monday-** *Question of the day:* How do you build a snowman?
Art- Have the children decorate their paper plate to look like a face. Have them glue on the red tongue with a snowflake on top. Attach a craft stick to make it a puppet.

Math- Have the children match the mittens with numbers to the mittens with the corresponding dots.

Sensory- Bring in snow from outside. If you do not have snow, add items that resemble snow (cotton stuffing, cotton balls, etc)

Fine Motor- Set out play dough and plastic animals. Have the children make animal prints in the play dough while they play together.

Tuesday: Question of the Day: What do you wear when it is cold out?

Art- Have the children dip the boot-shaped sponge in their favorite color paint. Press it onto the paper to make prints. Add cotton stuffing or cotton balls to represent snow, or provide additional winter stamps.

Math- Have the children match the mittens with numbers to the mittens with the corresponding dots.

Sensory- Bring in snow from outside. If you do not have snow, add items that resemble snow (cotton stuffing, cotton balls, etc)

Fine Motor- Set out play dough and plastic animals. Have the children make animal prints in the play dough while they play together.
Wednesday: *Question of the Day:* What do mittens look like? What do gloves look like?

*Art*- Have the children rip pieces of foil and mold it into the shape of icicles. They will glue it onto a piece of blue construction paper. Add silver glitter and glue. Splatter white paint on the paper to look like snow.

*Math*- Each child will pick a number card. Read the number aloud. Count out that number of cotton balls and place on table.

*Science*- Show the children the unlabeled bowls of salt and sugar. Do they think they are the same or different? Write down their descriptions of each bowl on a piece of paper divided into columns. Have them guess which bowl is sugar and which one is salt. Give each child a spoon to taste a little to see if they are right.

*Fine Motor*- Using tongs, have the children pick up cotton balls to transfer from one side of the table to the other.

Thursday: *Question of the Day:* What is ice? What sports are played on ice?

*Art*- Set out various sizes of white circles and let the children build their own snowman on a piece of blue paper. Set out your snowman features for them to choose from. Punch holes in the top corners of the project and string yarn to make a wall-hanging.

*Math*- Each child will pick a number card. Read the number aloud. Count out that number of cotton balls and place on table.
Science- Show the children the unlabeled bowls of salt and sugar. Do they think they are the same or different? Write down their descriptions of each bowl on a piece of paper divided into columns. Have them guess which bowl is sugar and which one is salt. Give each child a spoon to taste a little to see if they are right.

Fine Motor- Using tongs, have the children pick up cotton balls to transfer from one side of the table to the other.

Friday: Question of the Day: How was the weather this week?

Art- Set out the winter hat cutouts. Have the children choose one and paint it their favorite color. Have them drape different colors of yarn across the paint to make a ‘wool pattern’. Have them glue it onto a piece of newsprint. Add a pom-pom on the top. Splatter white paint on the project to resemble snow.

Math- Have the children match the snowflakes together in a game of memory.

Sensory- Bring in snow from outside. If you do not have snow, add items that resemble snow (cotton stuffing, cotton balls, etc)

Fine Motor- Place a container of salt, flour, or sugar at the center. Have the children use their fingers to write and draw in the ‘snow’. Work on finger isolation by asking them to use their pointer finger, pinkie, etc.

Week Two: Theme: Snow & Ice
Theme based activities/centers:

**Monday-Question of the Day:** What did you wear to school today?

*Art-* Mix one part shaving cream and white glue with a small amount of blue paint. Have the children place some of the mixture onto a piece of dark blue construction paper. Using their fingers, the children will ‘finger skate’ around the paper.

*Math-* Have the children sort the picture cards into a ‘winter’ pile and a ‘summer’ pile.

*Sensory-* Place ice in the sensory bin, along with mittens and gloves. Add plastic figures from the block center. If you have snow outside, add it to the bin.

*Fine Motor-* Set out white paper and scissors. Have the children make snow using the ‘snipping’ method with scissors. Using a glue bottle, encourage the children to make a design and sprinkle the ‘snow’ on top.

**Tuesday- Question of the Day:** What is the difference between mittens and gloves?

*Art-* Have the children use the colored ice cubes to paint designs on newsprint. They can dip the ice cubes in paint to give the color more pigment.

*Math-* Have the children sort the picture cards into a ‘winter’ pile and a ‘summer’ pile.

*Sensory-* Place ice in the sensory bin, along with mittens and gloves. Add plastic figures from the block center. If you have snow outside, add it to the bin.
Fine Motor- Set out white paper and scissors. Have the children make snow using the ‘snipping’ method with scissors. Using a glue bottle, encourage the children to make a design and sprinkle the ‘snow’ on top.

Wednesday- Question of the Day: What is your favorite winter sport?

Art- Give the children their choice of colored paper. Using a glove or mitten, they will paint a masterpiece with their hands. Is it easier to use the mittens or gloves? Why?

Math- The children will match the snowman with the number on it to the snowman with the correct amount of buttons.

Science- Have each child observe the ice cubes at the science center. Ask the children to explain what will happen if the ice cube sits in a warm room for a long time. Ask the children what water temperature they think the ice cube will melt at; warm or cold? Place one ice cube on a plate, one in cold water, and one in warm water. Which one will melt faster? Record their predictions. Who had correct predictions? Can they think of any other ways to melt the ice?

Fine Motor- Place shaving cream on the table, along with toy vehicles. Have the children maneuver the vehicles around in the ‘snow’.

Thursday- Question of the Day: What is another word for “cold”? 
**Art**- Using a large paint brush, a sponge, roller, or their fingers, children will make a ‘white blob’ using a mixture of white paint and salt. Have the children add their snowman features to their free form snowman.

**Math**- The children will match the snowman with the number on it to the snowman with the correct amount of buttons.

**Science**- Have each child observe the ice cubes at the science center. Ask the children to explain what will happen if the ice cube sits in a warm room for a long time. Ask the children what water temperature they think the ice cube will melt at; warm or cold? Place one ice cube on a plate, one in cold water, and one in warm water. Which one will melt faster? Record their predictions. Who had correct predictions? Can they think of any other ways to melt the ice?

**Fine Motor**- Place shaving cream on the table, along with toy vehicles. Have the children maneuver the vehicles around in the ‘snow’.

**Friday**- **Question of the Day**: What have we learned about snow and ice?

**Art**- Provide the children with various art materials and ask them to paint a winter scene. Make it a wall hanging by punching holes in the top two corners and string a piece of yarn through.

**Math**- Repeat any of the math activities from this week. Set out popular math manipulatives for the children to explore.
Sensory- Place a combination of snow and ice in the sensory bin. Supply mittens and gloves for the children to use.

Fine Motor- Have the children clip the colored clothespins on the edge of the cup that matches the color.

Week Three: Theme: Read All About It with Jan Brett

Theme based activities/centers:

Monday- Question of the Day: What do you think the book ‘The Mitten’ is about?
(after the book) Why wouldn’t it be a good idea to have white mittens?

Art- Have the children paint one of their mittens. Introduce them to dot painting with a q-tip, sponge painting, painting with their fingers, etc. Have them press their other mitten on top to make them match. Just like in the fine motor center, you can punch holes in the sides and have the children lace them together.

Math- Have the children roll a die and count the dots. Have them find the corresponding mitten and place that many bears on the mitten.

Sensory- Mix one part cornstarch and one part water for an ooey, gooey mess.
Provide craft sticks and cups for those children who are hesitant of the texture.

Fine Motor- Show the children how to lace the edges of the mittens made.
**Tuesday - Question of the Day:** What kind of animals do we hear about in *The Mitten*?

*Art* - Set out water colors and cups of water. Show the children how to wet their brush and gently dip it into the paint. Encourage them to paint a picture to go along with the Jan Brett stories you have just read or about a winter scene.

*Math* - Have the children roll a die and count the dots. Have them find the corresponding mitten and place that many bears on the mitten.

*Sensory* - Mix one part cornstarch and one part water for an ooey, gooey mess. Provide craft sticks and cups for those children who are hesitant of the texture.

*Fine Motor* - Show the children how to lace the edges of the mittens made.

**Wednesday - Question of the Day:** What are some of the similarities between *The Hat* and *The Mitten*?

*Art* - Have the children decorate their hat pattern with art materials. They will glue a puff ball on top. Attach it to a headband to fit around their head. Tape it secure.

*Math* - Using legos, have the children create towers that follow AB patterns. Set out strips of paper that shows examples of these patterns.

*Science* - Continue to discuss seasons. Set out materials and have the children create scenes for winter, spring, summer, and fall. Label them at the top.

*Fine Motor* - Continue lacing, work on zippers and buttons, and set out puzzles.
Thursday- Question of the Day: Who is Jan Brett?

Art- Have the children help you make a large white mitten. Lay a large piece of bulletin board paper on the floor and glue the mitten on it. Paint the bottom of the children’s feet to make a footprint trail to the mitten.

Math- Using legos, have the children create towers that follow AB patterns. Set out strips of paper that shows examples of these patterns.

Science- Continue to discuss seasons. Set our materials and have the children create scenes for winter, spring, summer, and fall. Label them at the top.

Fine Motor- Given play dough and toothpicks, have the children make their very own Hedgie.

Friday- Question of the Day: What was your favorite book this week?

Art- Given various materials and paper products, children can create their very own borders, just like Jan Brett has in her stories.

Math- Repeat any of the math activities from this week or create your own.

Sensory- Encourage the children to tear cotton fluff into tiny pieces. Include cotton balls as well.

Fine Motor- Given play dough and toothpicks, have the children make their very own Hedgie.
**Week Four:** Theme: Animals in Winter

**Theme based activities/centers:**

**Monday-** *Question of the Day:* What kinds of animals enjoy the wintertime?

*Art-* Have the children tear pieces of black construction paper or tissue paper and collage them together to create a penguin.

*Math-* The children will match the numbers up with the corresponding dots. Have partners work together to achieve the goal, or take turns.

*Sensory-* Mix equal parts of cornstarch and water together. Add white paint. Add plastic figurines. The children can pretend the animals are ‘stuck in the snow’.

*Fine Motor-* Set out your cookie cutters and play dough. Add paper plates and encourage the children to create designs, faces, shapes, etc.

**Tuesday: ***Question of the Day:* What color is a polar bear?

*Art-* Have the children paint a polar bear on black and blue paper, holding a paintbrush while wearing mittens. Add snow by using cotton balls or cotton stuffing.

*Math-* The children will match the numbers up with the corresponding dots. Have partners work together to achieve the goal, or take turns.

*Sensory-* Mix equal parts of cornstarch and water together. Add white paint. Add plastic figurines. The children can pretend the animals are ‘stuck in the snow’.
Fine Motor- Set out your cookie cutters and play dough. Add paper plates and encourage the children to create designs, faces, shapes, etc.

**Wednesday: Question of the Day:** What sound does a seal make?

**Art-** Have the children cover their paper plate with cotton stuffing or torn cotton balls. Have them add two black eyes, a nose, and black pipe cleaners/yarn for whiskers to make the face of a harp seal pup.

**Math-** Have the children match the patterned craft sticks together.

**Science-** Fill jars or cups with equal amounts of liquid-cooking oil, corn syrup, dish soap, and water. Place the jars with oil and dish soap next to each other. Have one child hold a marble over the oil, while another child holds the marble over the cooking oil. On the count of 3, the children should drop the marbles into the jar. Have everyone watch carefully which marble reached the bottom first.

Fine Motor- Encourage the children to cut out various shapes and glue them onto a piece of paper.

**Thursday- Question of the Day:** Do you know what a walrus is? What do they look like? What noises do they make?

**Art-** Have children paint over strips of white construction or tissue paper with glue, and place them onto their rolled tusks. String their two tusks together.

**Math-** Have the children match the patterned craft sticks together.
Science- Fill jars or cups with equal amounts of liquid-cooking oil, corn syrup, dish soap, and water. Place the jars with oil and dish soap next to each other. Have one child hold a marble over the oil, while another child holds the marble over the cooking oil. On the count of 3, the children should drop the marbles into the jar. Have everyone watch carefully which marble reached the bottom first.

Fine Motor- Encourage the children to cut out various shapes and glue them onto a piece of paper.

Friday - Question of the Day: What color do you think a snowy owl is? What is migration?

Art- Have the children paint their pattern with glue and add white or light colored feathers on their owl pattern. Then, they can add a beak and eyes.

Math- Repeat any of the math activities from this week.

Sensory- Place equal parts of shaving cream, paint, and flour together and let the children explore.

Fine Motor- Encourage the children to cut out various shapes and glue them onto a piece of paper.

Week Five: Theme: Animals in Winter

Theme based activities/centers:
Monday- *Question of the Day:* Do you see a lot of birds flying around in the winter? What noises do you hear birds make?

*Art*- Children will paint a bird pattern using a feather as a paintbrush. Birds come in all colors so encourage creativity.

*Math*- The children will choose a cup and read the number on the bottom. They will put that many objects in the cup and move onto the next one.

*Sensory*- Place coffee sand in the sensory bin along with plastic animals which can ‘burrow’ into it. Also include cups and shovels.

*Fine Motor*- Make play dough with the children with flour, salt, alum, and water. Give the children plastic animals to make ‘animal prints’ in the play dough while they play.

**Tuesday: Question of the Day:** How do rabbits move? How do mice or squirrels stay warm?

*Art*- Lay out bulletin board paper on the ground. Have children take off their shoes and socks to paint the bottom of their feet. Have them hop away with the white paint on their feet.

*Math*- The children will choose a cup and read the number on the bottom. They will put that many objects in the cup and move onto the next one.
Sensory- Place coffee sand in the sensory bin along with plastic animals which can ‘burrow’ into it. Also include cups and shovels.

Fine Motor- Make play dough with the children with flour, salt, alum, and water. Give the children plastic animals to make ‘animal prints’ in the play dough while they play.

Wednesday- Question of the Day: What is hibernation? How do bears stay warm?

Art- Have children paint a paper plate gray to resemble a cave. Then, have them paint their bear and give it eyes and a nose. They can glue the cave to the blue paper, then their bear to the cave and glue on some cotton for snow.

Math- Scatter the fish so that the numbers are clearly visible. Say “I’m hungry for a number 4 fish!” then carefully lower the magnetic rod to catch that number fish. Continue with each number.

Science- Place 3 bowls of ice in various places throughout the room or the center. Have the children pick the locations. Keep checking back on the ice, which is melting the fastest?

Fine Motor- Set out different shapes and sizes of paper. Encourage the children to count how many clothespins they can fit around the edges.

Thursday: Question of the Day: What do you know about Groundhog’s Day?
Art- Give each child a groundhog cut-out. Have them paint it with pom-poms to give it a furry texture.

Math- Scatter the fish so that the numbers are clearly visible. Say “I’m hungry for a number 4 fish!” then carefully lower the magnetic rod to catch that number fish. Continue with each number.

Science- Place 3 bowls of ice in various places throughout the room or the center. Have the children pick the locations. Keep checking back on the ice, which is melting the fastest?

Fine Motor- Set out different shapes and sizes of paper. Encourage the children to count how many clothespins they can fit around the edges.

Friday- Question of the Day: How does a snake/frog/fish move?

Art- Mix equal parts glue and shaving cream. Have children paint this onto construction paper, then take plastic animals and make winter snow tracks. They can sprinkle these with glitter for a winter shimmer.

Math- Repeat any of the math activities from this week.

Sensory- In the rice bin, provide containers to dump and pour.

Fine Motor- Place 3 fine motor activities out at the center. The children will choose their activity of choice.
Week Six: Theme: Dental Health

Theme based activities/centers:

**Monday: Question of the Day:** How many teeth do you have in your mouth?

*Art-* Set out a yellow tooth for each child and have them glue white tissue paper on it. You could set out paper and have the children cut out facial features as well.

*Math-* Set out the red paper mouths and the bag of lima beans. The children will count out the number of lima beans that are on the card. The lima beans will represent teeth.

*Sensory-* Mix two parts cornstarch and one part water in a bowl. Have the children explore the mixture. Add silver glitter for a bit of sparkle.

*Fine Motor-* Set out your box with slits in the top along with a few strands of white string or yarn. Show your children how to floss between each tooth. Talk to them about how they can floss at home too.

**Tuesday: Question of the Day:** Did you brush your teeth this morning?

*Art-* Set out paint, newsprint, and toothbrushes for the children to paint with.

*Math-* Set out the red paper mouths and the bag of lima beans. The children will count out the number of lima beans that are on the card. The lima beans will represent teeth.
Sensory- Mix two parts cornstarch and one part water in a bowl. Have the children explore the mixture. Add silver glitter for a bit of sparkle.

Fine Motor- Set out your box with the slits in the top along with a few strands of white string or yarn. Show your children how to floss between each tooth. Talk to them about how they can floss at home too.

Wednesday: Question of the Day: What color is your toothbrush?

Art- Set out a toothbrush shape for the children and have them marble paint it all different colors. Place the shape in a box and drop in the marbles and paint. Have the children shake the box around. Then they can cut and glue yellow strips to resemble brushes.

Math- Set out the red paper mouths and the bag of lima beans. The children will count out the number of lima beans that are on the card. The lima beans will represent teeth.

Science- Add clay to your sensory bin along with some tools for children to explore the mixture with.

Fine Motor- Set out a couple pair of tongs, lima beans, and bowls. Show children how to pick up the ‘teeth’ and move them from bowl to bowl.

Thursday: Question of the Day: What is the name of your dentist? Have you been to the dentist before?
Art- Set out dental floss, paint, and newsprint for the children to paint with.

Math- Set out handheld mirrors and have the children count the teeth in their mouth. Cut out some red mouth shapes and white paper squares. Have the children glue that amount of teeth on the mouth using the squares.

Science- Place baking soda, salt, and flavoring in a bowl. Add enough water to make a foamy paste. Then place the toothpaste in small plastic cups and cover with saran wrap. Attach a small note so parents know that their child made toothpaste today.

Fine Motor- Set out a couple pair of tongs, lima beans, and bowls. Show children how to pick up the ‘teeth’ and move them from bowl to bowl.

Friday: Question of the Day: Do you use dental floss?

Art- Set out tooth stencils, paper, and paint. Tape the top of the stencil to the table. Lift and lay a piece of newsprint under the stencil. Give the children some paint and have them paint the inside of the stencil.

Math- Set out handheld mirrors and have the children count the teeth in their mouth. Cut out some red mouth shapes and white paper squares. Have the children glue that amount of teeth on the mouth using the squares.

Sensory- In your sensory bin, add white rice, scoops, and funnels.

Fine Motor- Set out scissors and white play dough. Have the children cut the dough into small pieces and mold them into teeth.
Table 3.1: Observation Schedule

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<tr>
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<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Week 2</th>
<th>Week 3</th>
<th>Week 4</th>
<th>Week 5</th>
<th>Week 6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Snow &amp; Ice</td>
<td>Snow &amp; Ice</td>
<td>Read All About It with Jan Brett</td>
<td>Animals in Winter</td>
<td>Animals in Winter</td>
<td>Dental Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>Observe circle time &amp; read aloud (30 mins)</td>
<td>Observe circle time &amp; read aloud (30 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday</td>
<td>Observe 1-2 morning center activities (30 mins)</td>
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<td>Wednesday</td>
<td>Observe 1-2 afternoon center activities (30 mins)</td>
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<td>Observe 1-2 afternoon center activities (30 mins)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday</td>
<td>Observe Read Aloud Based on Theme (30 mins)</td>
<td>Observe Read Aloud Based on Theme (30 mins)</td>
<td>Observe Read Aloud Based on Theme (30 mins)</td>
<td>Observe Read Aloud Based on Theme (30 mins)</td>
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### Criteria for Trustworthiness

As a teacher-researcher, I conducted this study in an unbiased and ethical manner. I used at least eighteen days of persistent observation resulting in prolonged engagement over a six week period. I focused my observations during thirty minutes of the morning center time along with the read aloud at either circle time or before lunch. I observed circle time including the read aloud for thirty minutes; I also observed morning or afternoon center activities for thirty minutes.

I used a variety of methods for data collection: observations, interviews, and parent questionnaires and research journal to ensure the potential for triangulating a variety of data sources. I ensured transferability and dependability with a detailed description of the research process and how the study was conducted as well as detailed description of observations based on children’s interactions and their use of literacy items within the classroom and outside of school. I discussed in the greatest detail possible aspects of the curriculum that I implemented throughout each theme and the activities and items I offered the children. I drew conclusions and created research themes based on rereading the data, recognizing patterns, and categorizing the findings to ensure confirmability.
Limitations of the Study

One limitation of this study is the reliability of the children’s statements during the interviews based on their age: three-years old. The children were not able at all times to understand a question or have the ability to describe or explain their decision-making throughout the different centers. The ability for the student’s to describe and explain while communicating with peers and adults is a developmental indicator teachers within the center continually look at within the three-year olds. I conducted this study in the middle to end of the school year, where the ability for the children to do this will vary and depend on their abilities and experiences.

Summary

During a six week time frame, I observed six different weekly themes and the corresponding center activities/opportunities to learn more about how integrating the theme across the centers supported the literacy development of my preschoolers. I used observations, interviews, a research journal and parent questionnaires as my methods of data collection. My analysis of the data will help me determine patterns and categorize interactions between and among the children and the use of the literacy items within the centers based on the weekly theme. Based on these patterns,
I drew conclusions and understandings of how infusing themed based curriculum across the play based centers influence the children’s literacy learning.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preschoolers responded to theme-based curriculum and how it supported their literacy development. Through this qualitative study, I was able to investigate interactions between preschool children and their play related to a specific theme. I observed specific centers through the themes of “Snow and Ice,” which we focused on for a two week period, followed by “Read All About It with Jan Brett,” “Animals in Winter,” which also lasted for two weeks, then “Dental Health,” and finally “Dinosaurs.”

During each week/theme, I integrated read alouds and circle time activities that focused on the theme followed by classroom centers that incorporated the theme across all domains. Throughout the study, I observed the dramatic play area, block area, art center, sensory center, and math center. At times I placed our themed-based stories within a center for the children to utilize.

Research Question
How does preschoolers' use of theme-based curriculum centers promote their literacy development?

In this chapter, I discuss my observations of and interviews with the preschoolers, and the results of the parents' surveys. I have divided the chapter into the weekly themes. I describe each theme in detail with the specific classroom centers and read alouds that occurred throughout the theme week.

**Weeks One and Two: Snow and Ice**

The theme for the first two weeks of the study, as dictated by the center's curriculum, was snow and ice. This gave children the opportunity to learn about the season of winter, what happens to the leaves and the plants, the change in weather, the different opportunities the winter brings with sports and holidays, as well as how ice forms and the exploration of water freezing and melting.

**Day One**

The first day I introduced the theme, I focused my observation on circle time because it was initial discussion of what the children knew about these topics. The question of the day focused on winter wear: “What did you wear to school today?”
The children were able to make a connection between the cold and winter. Winter wear had been previously discussed in an earlier week. Together, the children and I revisited the different clothes wore in winter such as hats, scarves, gloves, and mittens. The children were able to explain the difference between gloves and mittens. Many of them had difficulty explaining the difference in words but were able to make a hand gesture that showed how a glove and a mitten are worn.

Today’s topic focused specifically on winter sports. When I asked the children about sports, they were able to immediately recall a variety such as soccer, basketball, baseball, and hockey, but they were unable to name sports related to the theme of winter. When I offered a few examples such as skiing, ice fishing, and sledding, they were still unable to make a connection between a sport and winter.

For the read aloud, I asked a child to choose a story from our theme related book bin. The child chose the book *The Ice Horse* by Candance Christiansen (1993). Throughout my reading of the story, the children were able to recall and revisit snow and ice facts they learned the previous week. For example, one child discussed how water becomes ice when it is cold outside. Another child made a hand gesture—one hand flat and the other hand moving like a fish underneath—that I had shown the children the previous week to represent that ice forms on top of a lake or river but the fish underneath are still swimming.

I perceived that the read aloud was difficult for the children relate to personally. The story presented a lot of new information that I had to explain to the
children. For example, there was a part in the story where horses walked across the river carrying food and supplies. The children were unfamiliar with this idea so they were unable to make a connection. They questioned many of the pictures asking what the horse was pulling, what the men were doing, where the ice was and why the horse was referred to as an ice horse. The connections that the children made to the story were focused around their knowledge of ice-skating and how ice melts.

Days Two and Three

My focus the following two days were based on the circle time activities and the read aloud. I made sure the read alouds were focused on the theme but in a more simplistic way than the previous read aloud. The read aloud for the second day was *It’s Winter* by Linda Glaser (2002). The children did not have many connections or discussions based on the book’s cover, which had a picture of a young child dressed for the winter standing in falling snow. I began by asking, “What do you think the girl is doing here?” Some of the children’s first reactions were, “That girl is playing in the snow.” “She is rushing somewhere.” “That girl is rushing to school.” The children’s discussion to the cover became more specific while moving from one child’s response to the next, resulting in appropriate inferences to what might happen in the story.

Throughout the read aloud, the children made reference to the ways they play outside during the winter or specific events that have happened to them. For
example, one child shared, "I can’t catch snow. Mommy gave me some and then I had it.” Another child said, “Mommy says it gets in my eyes.”

The children were interested in pointing out the different animals and birds that were present throughout the story. One child made a text-to-self connection when the story referenced people going to Florida during the winter months. The child commented, “I will go to Florida some day and there will be sand there and shells.” The children were engaged and focused on the pictures and the details of the story.

Center Choices

Throughout this week there were many center activities that were based around the theme of snow and ice. Some of these activities consisted of the exploration of ice and snow in the sensory bin (if snow was not available the use of cotton balls or stuffing was used), we were able to use both throughout the week. We had children decorate snowflakes using a mixture of glue and shaving cream, we used plastic animals for the children to make “snow tracks” on a black piece of construction paper. The students also practiced number recognition by counting “snowballs” (cotton balls).
Day Four

After the children used their schema and the new information presented on snow and ice during circle time, I observed two centers, one during the morning center time, and one during the afternoon center time. My first observation was of the dramatic play area. Within this center, I had hung decorated snowflakes from the ceiling and on the table was an empty tissue box along with colored pencils and small blank pieces of white paper. There was also a container of wax paper where the children could place their feet on and "ice skate."

I observed the majority of the conversations that took place in the dramatic play center were not between two children but by only one child conversing with him/herself. For example, one child came into the center and was "ice skating," he continually repeated, "It's slippery!" to himself. Another child was cooking by the oven and telling herself she was making cookies and cupcakes.

I noticed that there were limited interactions between the children. The interactions that took place generally took place at the table while the children were using the colored pencils. One child went to the paper and pencils and stated to a peer, "You don't draw things, you make numbers or letter." The children interacted between five to fifteen minutes and generally returned back to the center after visiting the other centers. The children scribbled on the paper, rolled up the slips, and placed them in the empty box. When I examined the pieces of paper were afterwards, I found that some children wrote letters of the alphabet, others made scribbles and lines.
that resembled letters, and other made pictures of faces and shapes. There was
evidence that both home themed and ice skating scenarios were taking place in the
dramatic play area. Home play was taking place with children using the dramatic
play area as a kitchen area and baking. The idea that the dramatic play area was also
an ice skating rink was present in children using “tickets,” and wave paper for “ice
skating.”

The afternoon center I focused on was the sensory bin activity. I had covered
the bottom of the sensory bin was covered with shaving cream. I had place toy cars
on top of the shaving cream to give the play experience of “driving in the snow.”
There were three children in this center at a time. Similar to the dramatic play area, I
noticed that there was very little interaction between the children. They were
interested in covering the entire car in shaving cream and pushing it through the
shaving cream. One child, who was not participating in the center, came up to the
other children and stated, “Look at the snow! Get out you silly heads, get out of the
car! The ice is going to get cold!” The child was using information from a discussion
that took place that morning to communicate with her peers. The morning discussion
had focused on the experience of driving in the car while there is snow on the road.
The three children in the center did not interact or respond to the child. The children
at the center made car noises and some short comments such as, “Oh, that was hard,
my face is covered,” while a child pushed his car (which included a face on the front)
through the shaving cream.
Interviews

When I interviewed the children about the two centers, I found that they were very hesitant to discuss what they had played or done while in the centers. I used many prompts in order for them to describe/explain their play experiences. Three of the four children responded that no one played with them, and one child named children who were beside him in that center. The children struggled to explain the toy or objects they used in the center. Each child either pointed to the object (such as the wax paper for “ice skates”) or went over to pick it up to show me. One child explained a game that she was playing while in the sensory bin. She described the game as, “I played who can race and I won and I played I’m driving to school.” She played this game independently.

Day Five

The following day, I focused my observations on the art center. The children’s task at the art center was to create a winter scene using crayons, glue, glitter, sequins, and streamers. This activity was open-ended and allowed for creativity and exploration. Each child who participated in this center spent between twenty to forty minutes completing his/her project. I noticed that as one child completed her project, she stated the purpose of each piece of material. For example, picking up a silver sequin she said, “This is going to be the moon.”
As I noticed while observing centers the previous day, many interactions in the art center were not between participants, they were very independent. This is developmentally appropriate for children who are three years old, they continue to prefer side-by-side play but gradually increase their peer interactions throughout the year. One child mentioned what happened in the morning at home to another child, “This morning my mom made my breakfast.” I also notice that the children in the center were appropriately using their words and asking each other for materials for help with their project, “May I please have the glue?” “May I please use that when you’re done?” I noticed that none of the participants chose to use crayons while creating their winter scene, there was much more interest in the other materials. Many of the children used sequin pieces to represent snowflakes, streamers to represent clouds, as well as glitter to represent snow.

When I interviewed the participants, one child who vocalized her step-by-step creation during the activity explained the suns and moons she put in her picture. Another child described a snowman and snow castle in his picture. This showed evidence that the participants were using their knowledge of snow in the creation of their project specifically with the snowman as many read alouds during the week focused building snowmen. Both children gave specific descriptions of the materials they used, along with the other materials that were on the table (that may not have been used in their project).
Parent Surveys

After the week was completed, I received four parent surveys back that indicated that the theme of snow and ice was being implemented in the children’s play at home. Through this theme, we experienced a few snowstorms and the children were engaging in snow activities outside while on the playground, such as the creation of a small snowman. One child had discussed ice skating with his parent and gave specific details of how he/she was able to “skate” in the dramatic play area and that some children also tried the activity on the blue rug. One parent indicated that she discussed snow with her child but did not hear or see any new knowledge from her child.

Summary

The observations, interviews, and parent surveys from this week indicated that some of the children participants used their background knowledge during circle time and the read alouds. My observations during the center time activities revealed that the children used the theme of snow and ice in their play such as in the dramatic play area with an ice skating rink and in the sensory bin. These activities encouraged their learning and experiences about winter sports and activities.

This week, I noticed that the children were more successful explaining their experiences when they could use the materials as part of the reflection process. Three-
year-old children are not always able to express their ideas during play and the choices they made but by observing their interactions helped me see how they were integrating the theme into their play.

Week Three: Read All About It with Jan Brett

The theme of Read All About It with Jan Brett focused on several books by Jan Brett. This theme focused on helping the children develop awareness of these stories and the characters. The main focus this week was the story The Mitten by Jan Brett (2009). The goal in the group-related activities, as determined by the school’s curriculum guide, was for the children to put on a play based on this story and present it to an audience.

Day One

Today was the children’s first experience with the story and we started by presenting the characters using the Spanish words for raccoon, rabbit, mouse, mole, fox, hedgehog, bear, and badger. After the Spanish words were practiced, I lead the children in a book introduction. I discussed the difference between the author of a story and the illustrator with the children.

While going through the book introduction, the children made a prediction that the little boy was going to get lost in the tree and/or down the hole. They noticed
the animals trying to fit into the mitten. I made the connection between the Spanish words and where those animals appeared in the story. The children did notice the hidden mitten as well as the animals presenting themselves on the borders of each page. The children were unfamiliar with the badger, many children referred to it as “doggy.” Many children also referred to the fox as, “the big bad wolf.”

During the reading of *The Mitten*, I introduced the word Baba as the grandmother. The children questioned who that was, as they had never heard a grandma referred to as “Baba.” Throughout the story, the children made the inference that the animal going to the mitten next was going to bite the other animals. The class yelled “ROARRRR” when the bear came into the story and followed along and sneezed, “A-A-A-CHOOOO,” all the animals out of the mitten. The children were engaged throughout the entire read aloud but were not able to make the connection between the two different sized mittens and why one was larger than the other.

**Days Two, Three and Four**

The children were able to recall the story the more we repeated it. The sneeze from the bear was the most memorable part of the story for all the children and they thought it was funny that the mouse tickled the bear’s nose to make it happen.

We covered large cardboard with white paper and put a large paper cutout of a mitten on the front. The book was available at the circle time rug during center time
each day where the children were able to act out the story if they chose. Each afternoon, we practiced a play version of the story. With teacher support and guidance, each child was given a character. We went through the story and had each animal enter the mitten. Through this repetition the children were able to become more familiar with the badger, what it looked liked, and that it had large claws that the children referred to as “diggers.”

The classroom centers throughout this week were focused on general concepts and not all related to the Jan Brett characters. The math center was focused on general math concepts such as sorting colors. The art projects were focused on masks to resemble the characters and other types of projects that created these animals.

Day Five

Today we reviewed the story of The Mitten by Jan Brett before performing the play for our audience of the center director and director assistants. The children were able to recall most parts of the story due to the continuous repetition of the play from throughout the week. They now had an understanding of the role of grandmother and the little boy. They also had an understanding that the little boy was playing outside and lost his mitten because it was the same color as the snow. The children were able to make more connections to the story and gather a more detailed understanding of what happened. One child stated, “The grandmother doesn’t want the boy to loose his mittens,” and another followed by saying, “She’s afraid it’ll match the snow.”
As the children performed the play, they were so excited to represent the
different animals, One child immediately stated, “I want to be the rabbit!,” another
child said, “I want to sneeze all the animals out and be the bear, ROAR!” I had to
guide the children through the story but they all knew their part going into the mitten.

Summary

This activity of putting on the play really engaged the children in stories
written by Jan Brett and increased their excitement about reading and exploring
stories. I noticed a huge increase in the amount of children choosing to look at stories
on the circle time rug during center time. I also noticed that the children were reading
stories out loud and taking the role of the teacher and showing pictures to other
children as they “read” through the story. Many of the children turned the story they
were reading into a song and sang it throughout the story as they turned through the
pages.

I did notice that although the children were more interested in stories and
reading to each other, the children wouldn’t practice or role-play the story without the
teacher support. They looked to the teachers to guide them through the story so they
could practice the play. It was not an activity that the children would take upon
themselves.

Interviews
I interviewed two children this week, the child who had the role of the little boy in the story and the child who had the role of the grandmother. The children were interested in practicing the play consistently throughout the week. Each child loved talking with me about the role they had for the play, “I’m playing the boy, I lose my mitten in the snow!” “I’m playing Baba, I will practice to knit!” They were able to state what they were doing in the story. Throughout the interviews, both children while discussing their role, repeatedly stated, “Let’s do the play!” “Let’s do it again!”

Parent Surveys

This week I received one completed parent survey. The parent indicated that the child was excited about going to school this week but did not indicate why that was. The parent did relay that her son was more interested in reading this week and being read to.

Weeks Four and Five: Animals in Winter

The theme of Animals in Winter was created to follow the theme of Read All About It with Jan Brett based on the animals in Brett’s stories. The transition was meant to follow and help the children have a background of the theme from the week before.
Day One

Our focus during circle time today was an introduction to the theme and specifically the introduction of the emperor penguin. When I asked the children what they thought a winter animal was, they were very quiet. I prompted them by saying, "What animals do you remember learning about last week?" The children began to call out many animals, "birds," "bears," "hedgehog." They called out "fox" and "duck." When "duck" was called out, one child immediately made a connection, "I feed ducks at Gigi and Papa's."

After hearing all these animals, I began giving the children a list of the animals we would be learning about throughout the week: polar bear, penguin, seal, and walrus. The children made an immediate connection between the animals on the list to animals they see at the zoo. One child shared his connection by saying, "I see penguins swim under water and eat fish!"

Today I read a nonfiction story about penguins as our read aloud, Penguins by Gail Gibbons (1999). This story gave specific details about the emperor penguins, how they take care of their egg, and how they take care of their babies. While reading this story, it resembled many of the things that were presented in the movie "Happy Feet." I thought this was a child friendly connection that the children would make to the story. I found that the children were not familiar with the movie, therefore, I could not use it to prompt other connections.

Following the read aloud, I asked the children to make movements like a penguin such as waddling. There was a great interest in how penguins move and how
they swim in water. This encouraged the children to take part in the fine motor art project where they created a penguin. They were provided with materials the color of a penguin (black and white paper). The children were to rip up the paper into small pieces and use those pieces to create a mixed up” penguin.

Day Two

Today the center I focused on during my observations was the block area. Within the block area, I provided the children with colored pencils, construction paper, and our bin of theme related stories. This presented the children with the opportunity to use the materials to create their own shapes and possibly the animals presented in the theme stories. The children have seen my assistant and I trace the different shapes in the block area to create different shapes and objects.

One child came into the center and immediately hoped to create a baby bear, this was in relation to the baby polar bear we read about during circle time. The child attempted to trace blocks to create the bear. After working on her bear for about ten minutes, the child asked, “Can you help me make the rest of my bear?” She continued to tell me, “I already made the head of the bear and his cheeks but I still need the mouth, feet, ears, nose, and butt.” The child was following the picture of the baby polar bear on the story read during circle time.

I noticed another child in the block area who was tracing different sized blocks as well. This child also engaged in writing her name and continuing her
picture without the use of blocks. She specifically added a figure with a head and body. While working on her picture, she stated, “a dinosaur.”

**Interviews**

When I interview the child who drew the bear about her play choices, she discussed both her uses of play dough and activities in the block area. She discussed using “all sorts of colors” on the bear. She also said that she was looking at the story to create her bear.

When I interviewed the second child, she discussed her dinosaur with a big fat body. She was able to point out the different blocks she used, she used these blocks to trace and create her dinosaur. She also recognized the writing on her picture, the writing of her name and her sister’s name.

**Day Three**

Today the focus was on migration. During the circle time discussion, I prompted the children by saying, “Migration is when birds fly ________.” I paused and immediately a child yelled out, “to Florida!” Last week, I had mentioned to the students that when birds fly somewhere warm during winter that was called migration. The child made the connection to Florida because his grandmother lives there during the winter months and he remembered it being warm there.

The children also shared a lot of background knowledge when I asked, “What sounds do birds make?” They called out a variety of sounds, “chirp,” “caw,”
“whooo,” “quack.” The children shared their knowledge of different sounds birds make and a variety of birds.

The book I chose for our read aloud was a nonfiction story about birds in winter called, *Backyard Birds of Winter* by Carol Lerner (1994). The story was informative and gave information about different birds in winter but the language was complex and confusing for preschoolers. For this reason, I slowly went through the story noticing the pictures and explaining the information in shorter phrases for the children. The children did not have much engagement during this book. They children did enjoy choosing this book to look at independently during other book times.

Today I also chose to observe the art center, which consisted of an activity of painting of a bird with a feather. When the first group of children came into the center, one child stated, “If you put this on a friend’s face, it will tickle.” I noticed that there was a lot of conversing among the children about each other’s favorite colors. The children also talked to specific peers, for example, “Look at my bird. I like your bird.” “We are going to get messy, do you like to get messy?” “Yes, I like to get messy.”

Six of the children who came to this center chose to use the feather to paint, while others asked for a paintbrush. The first group of children focused on painting their bird one color while later participants used a variety of different colors. Some children described what they were doing as they did it, for example, “I’m painting the birds face.” “I’m painting with a feather, a long feather.” The children also worked
on color recognition together. They discussed both the paint color options, as well as the feather colors.

**Day Four**

During this week, we focused on migration and immigration within the curriculum. I recognized that the definition of migration was difficult for the children to grasp. I came across the story, *The Bear Snores On* by Karma Wilson and Jane Chapman (2002). This story presented the concept of hibernation and I used this as an introduction to the topic. The children were excited about this story and wanted to hear it several times. We created a “hibernation station” in the dramatic play area based on the book. I added many bear stories to a book bin and placed it within the center along with a hibernation list of what the children would need to hibernate. I created the list with the children, they came up with many ideas such as popcorn, drinking tea, campfire, and food based on the book. I also added crayons, and placed cave cutouts along the wall, with blankets, and a fake campfire.

As the children entered the center, one child began “making popcorn” at the oven. He stated, “Very hot, it’s very hot!” He also stated, “I’m making it warm.” The child seemed to be using both his knowledge of popcorn by knowing that he needed to be careful with it because it is hot. His repetition of the story enabled to play. This child focused on popcorn the entire time he participated in the center. The child later went up to a peer with a piece of play corn on the cob and said, “Here’s the popcorn!” This child looked to his peers for recognition and interaction.
During the observation, there were few children who interacted and engaged together in play. When one child entered the center, she immediately grabbed a blanket and comfy objects (stuffed animal, pillow) and laid with them in front of one of the cave poster boards against the wall. She stayed there for awhile having no interactions with others. She said, “I’m a big, big bear!” After a few moments, another child put food items together on a tray and took them to “the bear.” The child continued to play using a plastic cup and utensils to pretend to paint the other child’s nails. After about five minutes of interactions, the children being the bear became a baby bear. Toward the end of the center time, another child came into the dramatic play area and stated, “I am the mole.” I recognized this as a reference to the story *The Mitten* by Jan Brett (1989) as well as *The Bear Snores On* by Karma Wilson and Jane Chapman (2002).

**Interviews**

I interviewed three children who played in the dramatic play center during the center time, each child was able to discuss his/her play choices. They all discussed the different food items they used in the center and the different roles they took while playing. One student shared, “I was a baby bear, I was sleeping and actually when I’m done, I’m going to sleep.” Another child stated, “I was being the mommy bear, I gave the baby bear food.” The children were engaging and interacting together and taking specific roles based on the theme and home. The third child I interviewed
stated, “I played pop popcorn, I put them in the over, I made popcorn. The bear ate the popcorn, he liked it.”

Summary

During this week, I observed how the children used their knowledge of, experiences from other themes, and the new information in their play choices throughout the week. The children were engaged in the theme read alouds for the week and were able to understand the concept of migration and hibernation. During this week, there was an increase in interactions between the children and the amount of conversations taking place among them.

Parent Surveys

This week I received five parent surveys. Many respondents indicated that they didn’t notice anything new in play or have any new information to present at home. Five of the parents mentioned that their child did mention a polar bear. One parent shared that her daughter mentioned that penguins wobble and frogs hibernate. Another parent shared that her child was able to recall the different animals we learned about, owls, penguins, polar bears, and walruses.

Week Six: Dental Health
The theme of dental health was focused on following the week Animals in Winter. The center director created this theme to help the children become knowledgeable about how to keep their teeth clean and healthy.

**Day One**

I introduced the theme by going around the circle with a mirror. I had the children notice their teeth and mouth using the mirror. I asked the children, “What do you see?” The children began shouting out what they noticed, “Tongue,” “Red,” “Teeth,” “Lips,” and “Back of my throat.” Our Spanish words for the week related to what the children noticed in their mouth, such as: mouth, teeth, tongue, and dentist.

The read aloud today chosen by a child was *Little Bear Brushes His Teeth* by Jutta Langreuter and Vera Sobat (1997). This story was about a bear that was learning to brush his teeth. The bear did not want to brush his teeth and gave his parents a difficult time about completing the task. At the beginning of the story, one child said, “That little bear does not look like the one on TV, they are different.”

Throughout the story, the children were very excited to talk about their experiences of brushing their teeth and the different toothbrushes they use, One girl yelled out, “I have a Dora toothbrush!” Another child stated, “Mine is green!” Followed by a child saying, “Mine is Spiderman!” The children also discussed their experiences at the dentist. Over the last few months, seven of the children had recently had their first cleaning appointment and were very excited to share, One
child shared with the class, “I went to the dentist and he cleaned my teeth and there
was a TV on the ceiling and I watched Nemo!” The children’s experiences were all
positive, one child even discussed a filling, “Ms. Shannon, I had a cavity and had to
go to the dentist. It was a hole in my tooth and I can’t eat gummies anymore.” The
conversations about the dentist continued into the different classroom centers
following circle time.

Day Two

Today I chose to read The Tooth Fairy by Peter Collington (1995). This story
was specifically created with only pictures. I have read other wordless stories before
and have noticed that at times that the children are unsure of what to do with the story
but if given the story independently, they will create an oral story.

I began by prompting the class to see if they noticed that there were no words
in the book, “What do you notice about the pages in this story?” The children needed
prompts in order to notice that it was wordless, “What do you usually see on the
pages?” “Let’s look at the first page, can you see what’s missing?” When I directly
stated to the children that there were no words on the pages, a child stated, “There are
words right there!” The child came up and pointed to the copyright page, which was
to the left of the first page.

I began telling the story with the pictures by beginning very generally, “This
is the tooth fairy, she lives in a small house in a tree.” I quickly looked to the
children to assist me in creating the story. The child recognized that the girl lost her tooth, "She lost her tooth! She needs to put it under her pillow!" When the tooth fairy appeared in the story, there was a forest in the background, the children stated, "The tooth fairy is lost in the forest!" When the forest was mentioned, another child yelled, "There's a big bad wolf in that forest!" The big bad wolf, although never pictured, was included in the children's responses throughout the entire story.

As the story continued, there were many pictures that took place in the forest. The tooth fairy was shown entering a workshop in the forest and a child immediately stated, "That's the big bad wolf's house!" The children noticed many of the details in the pictures and continued with a sequential story where the tooth fairy needed to stay away from the big bad wolf. Some specific details that the children noticed were the wagon in the workshop, train tracks, rocks, and the tooth fairy making something. I noticed that the children became quiet when the story was coming to an end.

As the story came to an end, there were pictures of a piano key, which the children could not identify. The tooth fairy had been building this piano piece in the workshop to fix her piano in her home. The children did not have the background knowledge to understand that the fairy was in a factory fixing the piano key. I recognized that they were able to engage with the story up until this point. The children also were confused when they noticed that the tooth fairy made a coin for the girl who lost her tooth. More than half of the children knew from having older siblings that the tooth fairy brings money. The children didn’t recognize that the
tooth fairy made a coin in the pictures because the environment was very cave like that showed tools, train tracks, and old wagons. The children thought that the tooth fairy creating a rock. I looked closely at these pictures with the children and allowed them to assist me in talking through the story. I always discussed what they thought of the pictures first. I then followed the conversation with the meaning of the pictures.

Day Three

I focused my observations on the dramatic play area, which had been turned into a dentist office for the week of dental health. The dramatic play center had the following items added: teeth x-rays, x-ray board, notebooks, toothpaste box, colored pencils, dentist dress-up outfit, and toothbrushes. Previously observing this center this week, I noticed children using the items for a short time and then began their own play.

When children entered the center, they immediately grabbed the notebooks and focused on writing. I noticed the children creating straight lines and swirled lines. The children focused on the notebooks for about ten minutes while in that center.

The x-ray board was observed by some children but was not touched or explored. As the children were playing, one child from the block area came around the corner to the dramatic play area and yelled, “Dentist! I made your chair!” The task in the block area was to create a dentist chair. They were able to use the pictures
they remembered from our nonfiction stories that showed a trip to the dentist. I noticed a child grab the box of toothpaste and motion it on the toothbrush as if she was preparing to brush her teeth. Children made connections to our stories where pictures showed characters brushing their teeth, they began conversations about their toothbrushes as well as their first trip to the dentist.

After the children explored the different items, they began to participate in a role-play situation. One child became a dentist and told a peer, “It’s time for the dentist,” the peer responded, “I don’t need to go to the dentist, I went last week!” The child taking the role of the dentist continued to try and interact with her peer until another child came over to be the patient. All the play situations created within the center were based on going to the dentist. The children also began taking roles of mommy, daddy, and baby (which occurs daily within this center). Today the children packed the book bags to “take the baby to the dentist.”

Day Four

The activity in the math center today involved the children looking at their mouths in a mirror. They were asked to count their teeth, and then glue that many teeth (white paper squares) onto a mouth cutout previously prepared for them. More than half of the children naturally picked up the mirror to look at themselves, the children held the mirror to their mouths.
When I began observing, I noticed that children held the mirror to their mouths and counted their teeth. Some children pointed to each tooth as they counted and other children just counted out loud. I found a few children assisting one another in counting their teeth one counting while the other held the mirror.

The children need fine motor development skills to complete this activity. I noticed the way the children used the glue and placed the teeth on the mouth cutout. Some children were able to assemble the way their teeth looked, straight and in two rows. Others just placed the teeth in various spots around the mouth, some layered on one another. This center was very quiet, there were very few interactions between peers. Some children vocalized the observation of their tongue and other parts of their mouth such as their gums and throat.

**Interviews**

I interviewed the two children who spent the most time at that center, they participated for about ten minutes. The children stated, “I looked at my mouth” or “I counted my teeth!” One child talked about going to the dentist stating, “When I go to the dentist, he looks at my teeth with a mirror but I can’t see what he’s looking at.”

**Summary**

This week created many interactions between and among the children. Many of the children had knowledge of the dentist and how to take care of their teeth. This
allowed for play in the dramatic play area that resembled both home and work experiences. The interactions between the children were increased this week, many conversations took place between the children about going to the dentist and taking care of their teeth at home.

**Parent Surveys**

One parent reported that her child was “excited to tell me about her gums and that when you get cavities your teeth get holes and fall out.” One child who had a cavity filled shared the experience and what he knew about cavities with his peers. Another parent also reported that her daughter occasionally pretends to brush her baby dolls teeth at home. Five parents mentioned that their child had shared with them that a dentist had visited the center and talked with the children about how to brush and floss their teeth.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the six weeks, I found that the peer interactions increased between the children. Many of the themes invited the children to relate to different experiences such as going to the zoo, going to the dentist, and playing outside. The children used their background knowledge and expanded on it in relationship to the different themes. The themes created the opportunity for me to add new information to each child’s schema. It also allowed me to show them different things that go on
around them in their environment, for example the themes based on winter worked with their experiences and taught them about animals and what took place outside during that season. Some themes such as dental health gave me the ability to teach them the knowledge they needed to be healthy and how to take care of themselves. The curriculum was integrated across all classroom centers by me as the lead teacher and allowed for exploration in a variety of different settings.

Chapter 5: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations

Through this qualitative research study, I focused on my preschoolers' literacy development and interactions based on theme-based center activities. I used the weekly curriculum that the children's center requires and integrated props and books into the art, math, sensory bin, block area and the dramatic play centers. During the study, I observed the children's interactions in the centers and how the children's play related to the read alouds and to the weekly theme. The stories were books that I read aloud during our circle time and other transition times. I also looked at how the children used the literacy objects placed within the dramatic play area and block area, these items included the library book bin, colored pencils, crayons and paper slips. Throughout the study I focused on the research question: How does preschoolers' use of theme-based curriculum centers promote their literacy development?

In this chapter, I discuss the children's engagement in role playing activities based on the opportunities created through the curriculum, their peer conversations
during read aloud and center activities as well as implications for future teaching. I discuss the benefit from having continuous exploration of a variety of books in the classroom as well as the benefit of a themed-based curriculum.

Conclusions

The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Created Opportunities for Children to Engage in Role Playing Activities

In a study their study of literacy props, Neuman and Roskos (1989) found that when props were added to dramatic play centers related to a specific theme that children were more likely to engage in realistic events related to the theme. I found through my observations that the weekly theme-based curriculum I integrated into the centers prompted interactions between and among the children. Each theme we explored generated discussions of the children’s experiences and their emotions during our circle times. I observed that these experiences were later portrayed through the children’s play within the different centers. Much of the children’s use of role play was evident within the dramatic play and block centers. To both centers I made small additions that created an environment the children could relate to the theme. Many times, I added literacy items to the center (colored pencils, paper, and the library book bin) along with other props that related to the theme.
During the theme of Dental Health, there was much discussion around keeping our teeth healthy and brushing our teeth. This theme occurred around the time that many of the children were having their first cleaning experience at the dentist. This prompted much discussion about those experiences and we should correctly brush our teeth. Similar to what Neuman and Roskos (1989) observed the use of props from a dentist office created the opportunity for the children to role play a visit to the dentist office in the dramatic play area numerous times throughout the week. The children set up a dentist chair and used the props available to create the environment and what the experience of going to the dentist for a teeth cleaning was like for them.

During the week of the Dental Health theme, I observed some of the children pretending to visit the dentist office, taking on the roles of a mommy, a daddy or a baby and how they incorporated the theme to life through their play. The “parents” took the “baby” to the dentist for a cleaning. As I observed, the child playing the role of the “baby” was very hesitant to go to the dentist and did not want to get near the toothbrush or box of toothpaste. Here I heard the “mommy” say, “It’s ok, I will show you how they do it. Don’t be scared. Who else can we take to the dentist?” The “baby” then sat down and let the “dentist” clean her teeth. Here I heard of the experiences the children had with their own dentist and their emotions towards going to the dentist.
The Addition of Props and Literacy Items Provided Various Opportunities in Each Center

The discussions and read alouds that took place during circle time lead into the center activities from the curriculum and into the theme-based interactions between the children. I added additional theme-related props to the dramatic play and block areas each week. Neuman and Roskos (1992) discussed the importance of a classroom environment and how children are influenced by the environment and the ways in which it is set up. Throughout my research study, I specifically paid attention to the classroom centers and the additional props that I added in order to set up meaningful experiences for each child. For example, during the week of the Snow and Ice theme, I had placed items in the dramatic play center that the children could use to create an ice skating rink. While some children did create an ice skating rink, many other children used it as the kitchen area where children take roles of mommy, daddy, and baby. I observed during center times, how many children used the paper slips to create “tickets” for ice skating, while others were writing messages on the slips, and others were “baking cupcakes” at the stove. Each child was engaged with the items in different role playing activities within the dramatic play center in ways that were meaningful and interesting to him or her.

As I continued the study, I found the children incorporating the theme into their play without prompts from me or my co teachers. At times, the required child center curriculum gave specific ideas of tasks or props that could be added to the
block or dramatic play centers to enrich those centers with the weekly theme. I found that the children participate in theme play using their knowledge and experiences in relationship to the props available. Many children created new opportunities based on their own ideas. For example, a child worked together with a few other children in the block area to create a dentist chair for the children in the dramatic play area. This was not a task any of the adults in the classroom gave or suggested to the children but one that they created from what they found missing in the dramatic play area. Children also used the experiences from the stories we read during the read aloud to become different characters. For example, when reading about hibernation, many children became sleepy bears in the dramatic play area, where other children would cook for them and fill their “cave” with food for the winter.

The Use Theme-based Read Aloud Created Opportunities for Children to Engage in Peer Conversations Based on Experiences and Emotions

Through my research of the early theories of education, I found that much of the curriculum given to me by the children’s center focused on activities that were easily relatable to the children. This followed Pestalozzi’s (1997) theory of education and the creation of activities that were based on personal experiences (Brosterman, 1997).

In my research study, I observed that majority of the children were able to easily relate to each weekly theme. And I observed that they were able to use their
background knowledge to engage in conversations with their peers. Their conversations were based on experiences that they had with the theme and their emotions towards those experiences. For example, when focusing on the theme of Dental Health, I observed that the story about the tooth fairy generated a variety of discussions about older siblings loosing their teeth and how their siblings had to put the tooth under their pillows for something special.

I noticed, too, that the focus I presented each day during our circle time often lead into conversations and discussions. Many times I asked questions that invited the children to talk about their experiences and feelings. For example, during the theme of snow and ice, the children discussed what they wear in the winter, playing outside, building snowman, icicles, and the feeling of being cold. I prompted discussions with questions such as, “What did you wear to school today?” “What types of things do you do in the snow?” “How do you feel when you’re outside in winter?” These lead some children to make connections to read alouds such as when one child made a reference to Florida when a story mentioned a family going south. He was able to make a connection because his grandma stays in Florida during the winter months.

The children also discussed winter sports such as skiing, and one child shared with the class that he is able to ski all by himself and how his brother skied each weekend in races. The weekly theme created opportunities to build upon the knowledge that the children already had about the theme. Each child talked about an experience he/she had with each theme. Each daily discussion prompted the children
to recall a memory, which lead them into using that knowledge and those experiences in their play.

Throughout this research study, I conducted read alouds three or four times a week, all based on the weekly theme. The read alouds generally took place during our circle time and the book was either chosen by a child or by me. The read alouds offered me the opportunity to expand on the theme of the week through stories and with the use of different genres, and they gave the children the opportunity to gain new knowledge and ideas about the theme.

I found that even the stories that were too difficult for the children to comprehend completely were still engaging and informative for them. Many of the nonfiction stories were full of text—often too much to read aloud to three year olds—but they served as great resources for the children to see real life pictures related to the theme. I observed how the children were able to gather information from studying the pictures and illustrations and through discussion of what they were noticing and from the small facts that I pointed out from the text.

I let the children lead the discussions and use their own ideas to “read” the story. For example, while reading a nonfiction story about the birds found in winter, we looked through the story and the children pointed out the birds that they’ve noticed outside. I would give a few facts about the birds and then some of the children would share their experiences of putting bird feeders out for the birds and
seeing them in the trees. The children also actively looked out the classroom window to see if they could identify any birds while we looked through the story.

I read fiction, nonfiction, and wordless books based on the weekly theme. Each book offered a new experience for the children. The wordless book allowed us to create a story together based on the pictures. Each child was able to give some thoughts and ideas about what was happening and why it was happening. The nonfiction stories offered the opportunity for the children to see the theme in a realistic and authentic experiences and pictures.

The fiction stories were a fun way to explore the themes and give experiences through fun characters and situations. I made sure that the read aloud texts were consistently available for the children to explore at all times during the day. All of the theme-base stories for each week were kept in a special library book bin. At times, I put the theme-based book bin in the dramatic play or block areas for the children to explore during their play.

I found that the children explored the theme-based books no matter where I placed them in the classroom. I observed how the children engaged with the read aloud story, or sing a song to the story, or tell a story to a friend or a pretend class based on the pictures in the book or what they remembered hearing from the read aloud during circle time.
The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Enable Children to Use Knowledge of Previous Characters and Plot Summaries to Make Predictions and Build New Ideas

The children and I began the research study with the theme of Snow and Ice, which was based on the weather changing to winter and what to expect in this season. The children learned about the changes that happen outside, winter activities, and items people wear in winter. I observed that the children were able to connect to the theme quickly because of the articles of clothing they were wearing to school such as hats, gloves, scarves, and warmer jackets. When I prompted them with the question “What did you wear to school today?” One child immediately stated, “A jacket, a jacket! And gloves! It’s cold outside.”

The next theme was Animals in Winter. During the read alouds that happened with the theme of Snow and Ice, the children became familiar with aspects of the weather and environment of winter. The children stated different animals that they didn’t see outside in the winter, such as ground hogs, which we generally see outside our classroom window throughout the year. They remembered hearing stories about animal footprints in the snow and they brought these connections to the theme of Animals in Winter. One child stated in reference to one of our winter stories, “Remember the bunny footprints! And the deer!” This prompted other children to recall different footprints they might see in the snow and footprints they’ve seen at their homes. One child discussed woods in his backyard, “The deer come from the woods and I see their footprints near my playground.”
I observed how the children used their knowledge of previous read alouds to begin their understanding of the presentation of the new theme of Animals in Winter. Throughout the theme, the children consistently discussed birds and rabbits, which were in many of our read alouds. One child stated, “There’s lots of red and blue birds in winter!” This was a detail he remembered from a story we read that focused on snow. Another child said, “Rabbits like to hop in the snow!”

As I discussed earlier, the children’s center determined the specific themes and how they were to be taught; each new theme related to the theme before. For example, the theme Animals in Winter followed the theme Read All About It with Jan Brett as well as the theme Snow and Ice. In the themes Animals in Winter and Jan Brett, the concepts of hibernation and migration were mentioned. The children and I discussed hibernation in great detail during the theme of Animals in Winter. I found that the children used their knowledge of the stories by Jan Brett to assist them in understanding the concept of hibernation. In the stories by Jan Brett, there was a focus on staying warm in the winter. There were animals within that story that hibernate during the winter, for example, the bear. I began to discuss the idea of hibernation and how bears sleep all winter long.

The next theme, Animals in Winter, gave me the opportunity to present books where we saw a bear sleeping in a cave for the winter. The children were able to make a connection between the two because of their previous exposure to the character of a bear. They learned about animal characters in the Jan Brett stories through *The Mitten* (1996) and *The Hat* (1997) and used them when discussing
animals in winter. For example, when we began the theme of Animals in Winter, the children automatically stated, “Rabbit! Bear! Mouse! Badger!” The children were able to recall the features and names of the animals in the Jan Brett stories when reading books during Animals in Winter theme. They remembered the badger, specifically because of the claws, which they referred to as “diggers.” When we discussed the concept of hibernation, the children used the character of the bear in the Jan Brett story *The Mitten* (1996) to build on their knowledge and create an understanding of hibernation. One child immediately mentioned that a bear hibernates and said “The bear needs to find a cave! He likes to sleep all winter!”

**The Use of Theme-based Curriculum Enable Children to Use Literacy Props to Engage in the Beginning Stages of Writing**

According to Christie (1990) children increase their knowledge and use of what they see in every day language to begin experimenting with the different stages of writing such as scribble writing and invented spelling. Through the addition of paper slips, colored pencils, and crayons to the dramatic play area during many of the themes, I found this to be accurate. I noticed the children were at different stages in the development of their writing. I noticed some were in the scribbling stages, others were making more controlled lines and shapes, where others were writing letters, and some even their names.
These actions increased as the weeks of the study continued, and I found toward the end of the study that many children had the ability to write their first name. I began to notice conversations about writing as well as the children scribbled on the slips of paper. Some children began talking to their peers about their writing saying, “I can write my name. This is the letter “R,” can you make the letter “R?” Others were asking questions or making comments of their peer’s scribbles saying, “What did you write?” or “Those aren’t letters. Let me show you how.” Much of the writing did not focus around the theme of the week however, there was a continuous interest in writing and the process of writing when the materials were offered to the children.

Implications for Student Learning

Children Benefit from Having Numerous Opportunities to Explore Books in a Wide Variety of Genres

I found that the children seemed to respond well to a structured curriculum based on a weekly theme. Our use of theme-based stories allowed me the opportunity to consistently give the children exposure to and exploration of a variety of genres based on that theme. The weekly themes supported the children’s creativity through the dramatic play, the block, and the easel centers.
Each week I placed a library book bin on our circle time rug that was full of fiction and nonfiction stories related to the weekly theme that the children had access to throughout the week. I generally kept this bin on the circle time rug, but would occasionally place it within another center such as the dramatic play area or block area to encourage the children’s exploration.

I found the children used the books to learn about the theme of the week. As Nelson (2011) discussed, reading and rereading of favorite stories is how children begin reconstructing the meaning of a story and learning about the reading process. I saw many of the children consistently rereading through the stories in the library bin, as well as having them read to them by an adult. I found that many times during our circle time activities that there were one or two books each week that became a classroom favorite and was read numerous times. Following these readings and rereading, I witnessed how the children used these experiences to guide their play. The children would also pretend to be the teacher and use these stories to conduct read alouds with their peers recalling details from the different stories.

I found that the children were more likely to explore new books based on the theme than the books our classroom library. Their use of the library book bin gave children the opportunity to look at stories during any time of the day, if they chose to go to the circle time rug; they were looking at a story from the bin. Many times when children were exploring the stories, I saw them sitting in a teacher chair pretending to do a read aloud, singing songs to go along with the story, or looking through pictures.
with a peer and recalling information that they remember from a read aloud. All these actions happened more consistently when the library bin was full of theme related books.

**Children Benefit from a Common Theme Across Centers**

The use of a consistent weekly theme gave the children a focus for learning and building their knowledge where they are in control of the exploration within the different classroom centers. The theme gave them consistency with the curriculum as well as in the schedule for the week (sometimes two). The children were able to use what they knew about the weekly theme as well as what they learned through listening to the read aloud to explore books, writing materials, labels, dramatic play props, sensory materials, and art supplies. They used these items in the classroom as well as in their practice of literacy and math skills. They used many objects for sorting, counting, practicing sequential order, and letter recognition.

Because I integrated the weekly theme into all classroom centers, the children were able to recall information and build upon their knowledge through play and exploration. Through dramatic play and the block area, for example, the children were able to take risks and experience/express their thoughts having to do with a specific theme. For example, during the theme of Animals in Winter, the children expressed their ideas and thoughts of hibernation in the dramatic play area. Many of the children pretended to be sleeping inside a cave with food all around them but only
for a short time before they’d say, “I’m all done sleeping! Winter is over.” One child even stated, “I don’t know how bears could sleep that long.” Through this structured theme-based curriculum, I was able to continuously assess the children’s understanding of the theme as well as evaluate their academic and developmental goals. As Barnett (2008) discusses in research based on education with a common theme, literacy skills increase when teachers are able to teach in an organized environment where assessment is taking place as well as the development of academic and developmental goals. Our weekly themes allowed for consistent assessment and observation in the classroom.

A curriculum specialist employed by the children’s center creates the curriculum. The curriculum specialist designs the themes in a sequence order where some themes will follow one another. I noticed that this successive sequencing enabled the teaching and learning to flow in a meaningful way. I found that this assisted the children in their understanding of a theme and the ideas and concepts that were portrayed in the curriculum. For example, the themes of Read All About It with Jan Brett and Animals in Winter each focused on hibernation and specific animals in winter. The children were able to build an understanding of these animals and hibernation through the stories written by Jan Brett, they then used this knowledge when we began focusing on each of these animals specifically the following week in Animals in Winter. They were able to have a starting point for learning that allowed for me as the teacher to expand on that knowledge and provide more opportunities for learning.
Through classroom centers, the teacher can approach a theme/topic from a variety of different areas. Our preschool curriculum focuses on math, literacy, art, sensory, and science activities. Each center activity related to the theme in some way, whether it was a picture of an animal or character or movement or shaving cream to represent snow along with toy cars to make car tracks through the “snow.” These opportunities and activities allowed the children to approach the weekly theme in a wide variety of ways and during play in the classroom.

Implications for My Teaching

Through this study, integrated six themes into a variety of centers in my preschool classroom. This gave me the ability to see some of the benefits of theme-based curriculum and some of the ways curriculum support the literacy development of the three-year old children. There were many implications that I will integrate into my future teaching.

Build Theme-Based Curriculum

Through this study, I was able to see some of the positive effects a theme-based curriculum had on my three-year old students. I saw the benefit of having a consistent theme per week. The Center’s curriculum for each week focused on one theme, which I integrated into circle time, real alouds, large group activities, math
centers, sensory activities, art projects, fine motor centers, and in large group discussions. In my future teaching, I anticipate that I will implement theme-based curriculum across all domains (literacy, math, technology, and science). I will use one specific theme and incorporate it throughout my lessons in each subject area. The children will have a focus for learning and can build upon their background knowledge in each lesson and activity.

Through this approach, I believe that the children will build upon their vocabulary, experience read alouds with both fiction and nonfiction stories and be exposed to opportunities to strengthen their understanding of the theme.

**Provide Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry Books Related to a Theme**

Through this study, I observed some of the effects that my theme-based read alouds had on my preschoolers and how the children incorporated the stories into children’s play. I found that the children used the knowledge of the stories in their play and interactions with their peers. In my future teaching, I will be sure to always provide children with the opportunity to explore books from a wide variety of genres related to the theme. This will enable the children to develop a positive attitude and interest toward reading, stories and story telling at an early age. They can become familiar with different traits that text contains for example labels and vocabulary within nonfiction texts. I will use nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and wordless stories and books. The stories will enable the children to explore a theme or unit independently.
and give them the opportunity to recall information and try to retell stories they’ve had read in a read aloud. The children will become familiar with story telling and how a story is constructed. The children will be able to practice sequencing events of a story as well as understanding different characters.

I will also change the books’ placement in the classroom from time to time, and incorporate them into different areas of the classroom. I believe if the books are offered in multiple areas, then the children will have the opportunities to explore them in areas where they feel comfortable in their play experiences. I suspect that the children will be more likely to explore the books based on their own interests and not because they feel they need to. Creating this level of comfort and choice may encourage the children to have an interest in reading and begin their understanding that text creates meaning.

**Use Literacy Props in the Dramatic Play Center**

In my classroom, the dramatic play center is an area of exploration for children; it is where they are most able to take risks and investigate different ideas and concepts. Flanagan (2005) discusses the importance of inquiry-based activities and how such activities enable children to have control of their learning. I recognize in my classroom that the dramatic play and block centers are the places where this is most likely to happen. The environment in these two centers seems to enable the children to develop relationships with their peers and practice socialization. While
interacting with peers, the children revisit information gathered from read alouds and use that in their play.

I have also found that children show an interest in becoming a teacher and taking on that role while in the dramatic play area. Many times, the children would “read” to their peers and tell stories that related to the things they recalled from our circle time. The dramatic play area generally took the set-up of a household kitchen area with items such as a refrigerator, play food, an oven, a cupboard, a baby cradle, brooms/mops, baby dolls, and dress-up clothes. When this area had new items and was transformed into something else, it provided opportunities for greater exploration by the children and gave them the ability to experiment with new ideas and concepts. It moved the children away from the home environment and into other situations and experiences. I observed that giving children the opportunity to use props that were related to the theme of the week gave the children a chance to use the information they learned from our circle time discussions and read alouds. It gave them the opportunity to use that knowledge in a play setting. They explored situations that happened within the stories read as well as used new knowledge while communicating with their peers.

There were, through our exploration with each theme, many opportunities for me to add writing tools in the dramatic play center along with other props related to the specific theme. Tompkins (2010) discusses the importance of having the ability to add reading and writing materials to play centers consistently. Many times I added paper, colored pencils, and newspaper to the center to create exploration for the
children. I found that they appeared interested in writing and were showing early stages of literacy development. I observed how each child was at a different stage in his or her writing of letters: some scribbled on the paper, others formed lines, and others wrote the letters in their name. I found that the children used pictures and letters to recognize labels, the letters in their name, or the beginning letter of their peer’s names.

In my future teaching, I will implement similar experiences into my exploration of the weekly theme. Doing so will enable my students to experience more in-depth learning around a particular idea or aspect of a theme. I anticipate that the children will become part of the learning and investigation. During the study, I found that this was important to incorporate a variety of opportunities with each theme because it gave the children control over their learning. It enabled them to ask their own questions and practice their ideas in a structured setting. I realize that when a teacher observes the peer interactions and play within this center, he/she is able to see the children’s learning and development.

**Use Sociocultural Perspectives to Promote Literacy Development**

In my research, I found that children build their understanding of literacy by the environment and the social situations in which they are immersed. Owocki and Goodman (2002) discuss that children build knowledge based on experiences in their social world. In my research study, I observed how the center activities enabled the
children to work both independently and with their peers. Through the activities, I placed the children in situations where they could explore items and activities that prompted and promoted their understanding of the weekly theme.

The center activities presented the children with opportunity to explore letters and numbers. The children used their center time to continue their exploration of the read aloud stories, which gave them the ability to understand print in a deeper way. The children saw how I performed read alouds and examined pictures and read through text.

Through this study, there was evidence that the children understood how letters create sounds, which create words and that words create meaning. I also noticed that the more excited I was about a story, the more enthusiasm I used, and the more opportunities I left for discussions, engaged the children in text and understanding books.

I believe that all of these observations showed the importance of book introductions and interactive read alouds, which I will continue to implement in my teaching. It is important to promote a positive attitude towards reading with your students and have a positive and excited classroom environment that is ready to read and explore books. I will be sure to include read alouds where I will read a wide variety of genres as well as reread stories. I believe children become more engaged with a story, the more experience they have with it. As I said earlier, the children would have two or three stories each week that captured their interest and helped them become excited about reading.
Recommendations for Future Research

Further Exploration of Theme-Based Curriculum

Before completing this study, I found minimal research focusing on a curriculum created around weekly themes, especially for the preschool classroom. Much of the research I found focused on a unit or theme and results of specific teaching during that time. It did not focus directly on a whole curriculum implementation based on a theme that changed from week to week. This is an area of research that I believe needs to be further explored to fully understand what, if any benefits, this type of curriculum has for young children's literacy development. I believe this area should be explored across different age levels specifically in elementary grades to determine how such an approach to teaching and learning might support young children and their literacy development.

The center's curriculum is designed for students who are between the ages of two and four. I believe that it would be interesting to see what affects theme-based curriculum would have on elementary-aged children where the push of literacy instruction becomes very intense.

There are a variety of aspects that can be explored in a curriculum based on a theme. Future researchers can look at the level of engagement of children in theme base centers, their level of peer interactions and the children's conversations based on
a theme, as well as the amount of information the children learn and recall based on a theme. I found that through my research study that the children were more engaged with text, characters, and stories through their experiences within the different centers. Looking at theme-based curriculum and its potential for instruction could be very interesting.

Further Investigate the Use of Dramatic Play Centers

From conducting my research study, I learned that the most interactions between and among the children took place in the dramatic play area center. I believe further research should focus on the dramatic play center within a variety of classrooms and observe the play that takes place within that center. Researchers could add and manipulate the literacy props and resources that are available for the children within the center. Researchers might examine what changes occur when literacy items are added based on a theme. I think focusing on the dramatic play area would enable teachers to see children in a comfortable setting where they may not be afraid to take risks, but explore new ideas and concepts. Researchers might explore how the children use information from the read alouds and the information they hear during circle time and other group activities to guide their play and completion of different classroom centers. When children are in a comfortable setting, they can use their knowledge to experience new situations that are created from the conversations and interactions that have taken place in the classroom.
Further Explore the Peer Interactions of Three-Year-Olds

Throughout this six-week study, I noticed an increase in the amount of interactions between the children within specific centers. I found that the children were comfortable taking roles and using their peers to recall different details from stories and interacted with the stories they showed the most interest in.

The children also used vocabulary and character traits of characters portrayed within different stories throughout the themes, which helped me think about the children’s social development and how it changes over time. Children grow a tremendous amount emotionally, physically, and socially between the ages of three and four. My observation helped me think of the socialization at three years old and how it develops over time. The children in the beginning of the study I noticed that the children play side by side with one another without much conversation or peer interaction. However, as the study continued, the children began play with one another. During these interactions, they acted out stories that I had read to them. I believe this is an area that could be focused on in further to learn more about theme based center play and children’s social development.

Final Thoughts

I conducted this study to understand what happened when I implemented
theme-based curriculum into our classroom centers. I looked closely at my students' literacy development in three-year old children through observations, interviews, and parent surveys. I observed the interactions the children had with the peers and adults in the classroom. I also looked at these interactions and their relationship with the theme and read aloud stories.

While conducting this study, I looked closely at the theme-based curriculum that my Center provides and expanded use of the theme into center areas such as the dramatic play area, block area, art center, sensory bin, and math center. Through doing this study, I found a connection between theme-based read alouds and the children's play within the different classroom centers. I found that read alouds and discussions during our circle time lead to children engaging in theme-based play using additional prompts in the dramatic play and block centers. Throughout the six-week study, many themes focused on similar concepts and ideas presented throughout the curriculum activities, for example hibernation and winter animals. The children drew on their knowledge of and experiences with the theme, and what they learned through the read alouds to explore and expand their understanding each week.

Conducting this study has helped me become a stronger teacher, as I was able to observe the development of my three-year old children over a six-week period. My observations of and interviews with the children, along with the results of the weekly parent surveys enabled me to understand how the theme-based curriculum created a focus for learning and provided the children with a greater engagement with new
areas and concepts. Through their engagement, the children were able to build upon their literacy skills and understanding of different texts. Their use of a library book bin enabled the children's ability to consistently explore books across a wide variety of genres. The children continuously looked through these stories. There were a few stories within each theme that stood out to the children and provided the children with the opportunity to take on the role of teacher and read the story aloud to a friend or a group of their peers.

Literacy development starts at a young age and I found through my teaching and the implementation of the Center’s theme-based curriculum throughout our classroom centers enabled the children to explore a variety of new ideas and expose them to many literacy opportunities.
Appendix A: Observation Sheet

Name: Date:

Theme of the week:

**Circle time/Read aloud**

Story read:

Duration:

Notes:

**Themed based play centers**

Center observed: Center observed:

Duration: Duration:

Description of activity/center: Description of activity/center:

Notes: Notes:
Appendix B: Interview

Name:                          Date:

Prompts:

• What center did you choose to play in today?

• Why did you choose that center?

• What did you play with there?

• Show me the objects you used. What did you do with them?

• Did any friends help you?

Child Responses/Notes:
Appendix C: Parent Survey

Child: 

Date:

Theme of the Week:

1. Did your child have any discussions with you about the theme that was being focused on this week? If yes, what types did you discuss?

2. Did you notice your child implement any new items or scenarios in their play experiences at home this week? Is yes, what types of items did you see?

3. How did your child respond to the activities at school this week? How would you describe his or her level of excitement or interest?

4. What other new information/facts did your child share this week that you noticed were related to our theme?
References


