The role of play in emergent literacy acquisition

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Abstract

Observations of 17 preschool children document that the intentional integration of literacy-related, textual materials and teacher guidance to classroom play centers increased the frequency of activities related to emergent literacy such as social interaction, reading, and writing. Play centers under study were restricted to dramatic play and block areas. In both areas, few or no attempts to read or write were observed prior to the addition of literacy-related materials. The materials encouraged children to attempt these behaviors. In all cases, teacher guidance was found to reinforce children’s existing behaviors, helping to model correct usage and scaffold students’ learning. The results of this study suggest that play in preschool environments enhances the development of emergent literacy skills.
Introduction

Literacy development begins in the early stages of childhood and is an ongoing process (Christie, & Enz, 1992; Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Vukelich, 1993). Early behaviors such as “reading” from pictures and “writing” with scribbles are an important part of a child’s literacy development. Development occurs in a child’s everyday life, including at home, at school, and in the community. Acquisition of literacy starts at home, as children observe their parents reading the paper writing a shopping list, or otherwise. When children leave home, teachers play an important role in literacy development.

Every child is curious about how language works. They explore, discover and invent literacy as they actively participate in society (Goodman, 1984). The definitions they create are not concrete. As they learn more and experience the material in different ways, their definitions will change (Kucer, 2005). The preschool years are a significant time in a child’s life. Early concepts about literacy are modeled from the experiences and interactions children have with readers and writers, as well as through their own attempts to read and write. Children learn the functions of literacy through both observations of and participation in real-life settings in which reading and writing are used. With the support of parents, early childhood educators, and teachers, and exposure to a literacy-rich environment, children will successfully progress from emergent to conventional reading and writing (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003; Christie, & Enz, 1992; Einarssdottir, 1996; Hanline, 2001; Justice & Ezell, 2004; Roskos, Christie, Richgels, 2003).

Preschool classrooms are one environment that supports young children in exposing them to reading and writing. Because preschool years are a significant time in a child’s life, a thorough understanding of methods for exposing preschool-age children to emergent literacy skills is
required. If educators and parents do not immerse their children in literacy-rich environments, then children will not be exposed to basic literacy skills. Without literacy exposure and experiences, parents and educators risk leaving their students at a disadvantage as learning progresses.

Children’s play can be exploited to provide an environment that promotes literacy even without the children’s awareness. This research looks at the role of play, specifically involving literacy-themed materials and teacher guidance, in literacy acquisition for preschool children. Of particular interest are the literacy activities that occur in different learning centers, including the block area, dramatic play area, science area, computer area, and sand table in the preschool classroom. Also under investigation are the roles of environment and teacher guidance in children’s literacy acquisition. As already noted the more students are exposed to and interact with reading and writing, the better foundation they will have for gaining initial understanding about reading and writing. This will then help them to become successful and confident readers and writers.

Theoretical Framework

A simple definition of literacy is the ability to read, write, listen, comprehend and speak a language. However, literacy has become exceedingly multidimensional with many definitions. Kucer (2005) defines literacy as “learning to effectively, efficiently and simultaneously control the linguistic, cognitive, sociocultural, and developmental dimensions of written language in a transactive fashion” (p. 4). Each of these four dimensions is significant in every interaction with print. This theory coincides with the four-resource model of reading proposed by Luke and Freebody (1990), which involves code breaking, assignment of meaning, use of text, and analysis of text. The linguistic dimension, or code breaking, develops understanding of the
relationship between spoken and written language. The cognitive dimension is the meaning maker. In the cognitive dimension, meaning is assigned to language and conveyed to others. It is important to note that children draw on unique experiences and prior knowledge when assigning meaning to language. Therefore, the construction of meaning from one person to the next can be different. The sociocultural dimension of literacy focuses on how one’s culture and society play a role in the acquisition of literacy in a student’s life, and involves the use and analysis of text. Students in the developmental dimension create and refine their own rules to understand literacy.

With a complete definition of literacy, the next issue of interest is the acquisition of literacy skills. From the time children are born, they are brought into a literate world. They begin to assign meaning and communicate with their environment. Heath (1982) defines the taking of meaning from written sources as literacy events. Examples of such literacy events include having bedtime stories read aloud; reading cereal boxes, road signs, on television ads; and playing games. According to this theory, children are exposed to literacy daily in a variety of ways. Children learn language through exploration of their environment, but they also learn from adults modeling and scaffolding them. The adults support the children by providing children with language data, feedback, and structured, predictable environments (Kucer, 2005). An example is when a child points to something and says, “Have that,” the adult who wants to focus on the meanings and intentions behind the words might say, “No, you may not have that.” Within the scaffolding that occurs between adults and children, the adults are often teaching the children cultural lessons.

Social and cultural theories have important implications for understanding how children learn about reading and writing. Gee (1989) argued that by participating in literacy events, children construct cultural models for literacy. Sociocultural theory demonstrates that learning
occurs through participation in social, cultural and historic contexts in which text plays an important role (Kucer, 2005; Larson & Marsh, 2005). It emphasizes that knowledge is not an individual process but is a social process. The learner is an active member who takes responsibility for learning and constructs goals and purposes for literacy learning. This theory shifts attention to that fact that people are social beings, and social identity is derived from the various groups of which people are members (Gee, 1989; Kucer, 2005).

The New Literacy (NLS) theoretical framework represents an ideological model where “the nature and meaning of literacy are constructed in specific social practices of participants in particular cultural settings for particular purposes” (Larson & Marsh, 2005 p. 20). Larson and Marsh (2005) reflect that literacy only makes sense when it is studied in the context of social and cultural practices of which the students are a part. The principles of NLS are all embedded in the practices of everyday life. Students need to experience texts, class instruction, field trips and other forms of instruction that connect to social goals and cultural practices of their daily lives.

The constructions described above provide a framework for developing emergent literacy in a preschool classroom. Early childhood is an important period during which a foundation for learning is constructed. This makes preschool critical to the development of emergent literacy skills. Careful incorporation of play into the preschool environment can enhance this development and bolster a lifetime of reading and writing.

Literature Review

A preschool classroom provides multiple opportunities to explore literacy through play. Literacy-related play has seen significant attention from recent researchers. Specifically, most of the body of research focuses on the role of emergent literacy in the classroom; the role play has in supporting literacy growth for emergent readers as well as how the physical arrangement of
the classroom and selection of literacy-enriched materials can increase student’s literacy behaviors during play. A substantial amount of research has been conducted looking into emergent literacy and dramatic play. However, there has been a paucity of literature looking into other learning areas in the classroom, including the block, science, writing, and art areas.

Emergent Literacy

Opinions of reading instruction have changed considerably in the last few decades. In the 1980’s, educators were led to believe that they should not provide print materials in the classroom because young children were not ready for it. Now, research suggests that learning to read and write is a process that takes years, starting at an early age.

From birth, children begin to make meaning of and communicate with their environments (Goodman, 1984). Goodman argues that children use a variety of cues as they become literate to help understand and develop oral and written language. The development of oral and written language is embedded in children’s experiences with literacy. All children are curious about the workings of language. They explore, discover and invent literacy as they actively participate in society. Children actively collect data from their environments, create their own rules and understandings of how written and oral discourse take place, and test their theories through writing and speech. The definitions they create are not concrete; their definitions will change as they learn more and experience the material in different ways (Kucer, 2005).

The development of these early literacy skills for preschool-age children is known as emergent literacy. Emergent literacy refers to a child’s entrance into the world of words, language, books and stories and encompasses the foundation upon which children’s conventional reading and writing abilities are built (Byrne, Deerr, & Kropp, 2003; Christie, & Enz, 1992; Einarsdottir, 1996; Hanline, 2001; Justice & Ezell, 2004; Roskos, Christie, Richgels, 2003).
Specifically, this term is used to describe the behaviors, skills, concepts and experiences children have with reading and writing that begin to shape their understanding of print (Einarsdottir, 1996). The emergent literacy foundation is acquired from birth through the end of preschool, at about age 6 (Justice & Ezell, 2004). Researchers believe that young children begin to learn how to read and write through experiences with both oral and written language (Roskos, Christie & Richgels 2003, Wayne et al. 2007, Justice & Ezell, 2004). During the emergent literacy period, children are swiftly developing important beginning skills, such as listening, speaking, print and word concepts, alphabet knowledge (Justice & Ezell, 2004), as well as the relationship between print and speech and the functions and forms of the written language. As young children begin to explore print, they begin to make connections and form an initial understanding that print is a tool for making meaning and a way to communicate. This combines both oral and written language (Roskos, Christie, Richgels, 2003).

During the emergent years, children observe and interact with language in many ways. Young children best understand and appreciate reading and writing when it is part of a meaningful context (Morrow & Rand, 1991), such as making signs. Children also learn through hands-on, age-appropriate interactions. Preschool classrooms offer many traditional learning opportunities for young children to explore literacy. These include the circle area where teachers read stories, model writing, as well as story telling. But research suggests that teachers can provide even more opportunities to explore literacy in learning centers such as dramatic play, blocks, science, and manipulative areas.

*Play in Preschool Classrooms*

Play has many definitions. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines play (Play, n.d.) as “the spontaneous act of children”. This agrees with the common perception that play is
impulsive and without direction. As a consequence, many discount the value of play in a learning environment (Wohlwend, 2008). However, when properly harnessed in the classroom, children’s play can play a crucial role in many learning activities. Specifically, play can be adapted to build children’s foundations for literacy. Play exercises creative dispositions such as curiosity, imagination and fantasy. Such exercise can help to create new learning experiences for children. It is often easier to learn through experience than through observation.

As previously mentioned, play in a preschool classroom can take form in learning centers. By playing in learning centers, children are building on and expanding their oral and written language. As they interact with other children, students expand their vocabulary and help them to develop their linguistic skills. Interactions with written text around learning centers familiarize children with the concept that written language is a form of a communication, composed of words with individual meanings. Aside from the benefits to emergent literacy, play also fosters cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Hall, 1991).

Children’s play and emergent literacy development has been the subject of research during the last several decades. Morrow and Rand (1991) reinforce the idea that play provides an ideal setting for emergent literacy. As children play, they explore the world from multiple perspectives. They test and explore the knowledge they already have and rework their definitions for things. Since children live in a print rich society, they frequently bring it into their play. Using print is important because becoming literate starts with understanding the ways in which written language is used. As written language is used in their play, children discover many of its features (Owocki, 1999). Children’s exploration and interaction with oral and written language, like the world in general, helps to form new understanding of the mechanics of language. Play-related literacy activities, in which children can experiment with reading and writing in
meaningful contexts, can help emergent readers move from non-conventional to conventional forms of reading and writing (Christie, & Enz, 1992).

The general benefits of play on children’s literacy development are well documented. The more play and language-filled activities children participate in, the more words, concepts, and understanding of books and print they attain (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2004). Research has shown how a literacy-enriched play environment exposes children to valuable print experiences and gives them practice on their narrative skills (Roskos, Christie, Richgels, 2003).

**Dramatic Play**

Dramatic play is also known as pretend, fantasy, or make-believe play (Chrisitie, 1991). Much of the research on play and literacy has focused on dramatic play. This could be because of its prevalence during the preschool years. Although pretend play may look unimportant to the casual observer, there is a vast amount of learning taking place. Dramatic play fosters development (Davidson, 1996). It gives students the opportunity to be in charge and take on the roles of other people. Dramatic play encourages children to use rich, detailed language. Christie and Enz (1992) summarize research that shows that student’s dramatic play provides opportunities for children to display their growing understandings of print as well as the role of pretend reading and its effects on literacy development and vocabulary acquisition.

Exploring the dramatic play area supports literacy. Although children in the emergent years may be unable to read or write, during their play they have rich opportunities to talk and listen (Rybczynski & Troy, 1995) as well as explore what it is like to be a writer and use the tools writers use (Strickland & Morrow, 1989). The dramatic play area itself is not what facilitates children’s emergent literacy development. Rather, it is interactions children have with other children and the props that have been included in the area that facilitate emergent literacy.
development. Props in the play area invite children to engage in play and continue to explore and build on their understandings (Goldhaber et al. 1996).

In reinforcement of the importance of dramatic play, Morrow (1990) conducted a study examining rates of voluntary literacy activities in 170 middle-class students between the ages of four and six years. For general literacy-related activities, and reading in particular, incorporation of dramatic play (referred to as “thematic play” in the study) resulted in a substantial and statistically significant increase in the number of children engaging in literacy activities. These results were demonstrated in a variety of classroom settings, all of which involved different aspects of dramatic play. While it is noted in Morrow and Rand (1991) that the number of students engaging in literacy behaviors is still quite small even when dramatic play is incorporated into the classroom, virtually no students engaged in such behaviors when not exposed to dramatic play.

Classroom Environment

Effective early literacy instruction and classrooms provide preschool students with developmentally appropriate settings, materials, experiences and social support that encourage early forms of reading and writing to grow and develop into conventional literacy (Roskos, Christie, Richgels, 2003). The role of a classroom’s physical environment is often overlooked. The physical environment includes space, materials and the setting. Most educators focus on content and instructional plans for the classroom rather than its layout (Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991). Although content is critically important, research has been conducted to see if the space, materials and the physical setting have a significant impact on children’s learning (Christie, & Enz, 1992; Morrow, 1990; Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Vukelich, 1993; Wayne et al. 2007; Wohlwend, 2008). The findings from these investigations
have important implications for creating classroom play areas that encourage rich, literacy
related play (Christie, 1991). Awareness of any effects of the physical environment on students
can help teachers to structure play settings to promote literacy.

Spatial arrangement alone can have a significant impact on children’s behavior and
learning abilities in the classroom. For example, subdividing a large classroom into smaller
spaces may facilitate some behaviors, such as verbal interactions, fantasy and cooperative play,
better than larger, more open spaces (Neuman & Roskos, 1990; Morrow & Rand, 1991).
Moreover, well-defined classroom settings relying on intentional organization yield students who
produce more creative works such as art and written material than poorly defined settings or
rooms with random arrangements (Morrow and Rand, 1991). These studies suggest that careful
arrangement of a classroom can be harnessed to promote emergent literacy behaviors.

Neuman and Roskos (1990) discuss how play spaces can be created to increase
engagement in literacy behaviors. They develop a specific strategy for arranging play
environments to promote literacy enrichment. Two of the four aspects of this strategy are
concerned with the physical layout of the classroom. First, play centers designed to promote
literacy use large structures such as cabinets or tables to clearly define boundaries between the
centers. Second, those centers focusing on literacy are removed from noisier areas of the
classroom, which may serve to distract students engaging in play. The results of the study were
positive, with students demonstrating more purposeful and directed learning when subjected to
the environment developed by Neuman and Roskos (1990). The results of this study are also
supported by the results of a later study, which found that environments rich in print promote
literacy acquisition in preschool children (Christie, & Enz, 1992).
Adding Literacy Materials to Play Centers

To support emergent literacy in the preschool classroom, not only is room arrangement important, the selection of materials available within each area is also crucial. In early childhood classrooms, adding literacy props to children’s play environments can significantly increase literacy behaviors during play (Morrow, 1990; Morrow & Rand 1991; Newman & Roskos, 1990; Wayne et al., 2007). Proper selection of the available props can help improve their effectiveness.

Many play centers, and especially the dramatic-play area, should include theme-related literacy materials. Specific themes might include props to emulate a grocery store, a veterinarian’s office, a doctor’s office, or a kitchen area. Children will be more likely to incorporate literacy behaviors into their play if props are available that suggest reading and writing activities (Christie, 1991). In particular, theme-related reading and writing materials lead children to engage in a variety of literacy behaviors during dramatic play (Christie, 1991; Christie & Enz, 1992; Morrow 1990; Vukelich, 1994). Literacy-related play activities allow children to process their growing awareness of the functions of written language and practice with emergent reading and writing.

Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts and Bendict (2007) conducted a study on nine African-American preschool children from low-income families enrolled in three urban preschool classrooms. The Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) assessment was used to assess how well the classroom environment supported early literacy development. Initial ELLCO scores established a baseline literacy level for each child in the study and were used to determine the effects of any environmental adjustments to support literacy behaviors in the classroom. Literacy props such as books, writing materials and toys with printed words were placed in various play
centers throughout the classrooms. The ELLCO scores of the subjects showed dramatic improvement in the children’s literacy after exposure to various props.

In a study by Neuman and Roskos (1990), criteria were offered such as appropriateness, authenticity and utility when selecting literacy props to be included in various play settings, including the kitchen, office and post office. The research found that children participated in more literacy activities when exposed to literacy props. Children used reading and writing in more purposeful and complex ways in literacy-rich play centers than they did in more traditional play centers that did not emphasize literacy materials. Literacy play tended to be more sustained and social in literacy-enriched play centers.

Additional research supports the concept that carefully selected thematic props within play centers helps to increase children’s engagement in literacy activities (Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Vukelich, 1993). Vukelich (1993) observed peer interactions between kindergarteners about writing in a literacy-enriched play environment. During the four-month study, the dramatic play area was infused with literacy materials to support play settings such as a restaurant, shoe store and veterinary hospital. As a result of this study, Vukelich noted that by using props such as costumes, tools and literacy materials to play the roles in each setting, children’s behavior demonstrated that writing serves various functions and peers provided information about the features and meaning of print.

Investigations done by Neuman and Roskos (1991), Morrow and Rand (1991) and Christie and Enz (1992) all use the same design. First, children are observed playing in traditional, non-literate play settings. Then, theme-related literacy props were added to the dramatic play area. After a short delay to allow the novelty of the props to pass, children were observed playing in literacy-enriched play centers. These studies support the role of materials
added to the play areas. Material inclusion brought a significant increase in the amount of literacy activities during dramatic play. For example, children were observed writing letters, making imaginary shopping lists, and looking at recipe cards when pretending to cook.

On the other hand, a study done by Vukelich (1994) looked into the addition of environmental print in five play settings, including a restaurant, post office, shoe store, a veterinary hospital and a camp site. Fifty-six kindergarten students were examined from a diverse group primarily of low socio-economic status. Three classrooms were each assigned a unique setup:

1. exposure to context-appropriate environmental print through peer play,
2. exposure to context-appropriate environmental print through peer play with adult guidance, and
3. a classroom with no intervention.

The results suggest that, by enriching classroom play centers with environmental print and labels, as well as providing time for interaction with peers or adults, children are helped to make discoveries about print and its meaning. Understanding that print has meaning is important for young children becoming literate language users.

*Teacher Guidance*

Teachers and parents play a vital role in guiding children’s understandings of things. Research that focuses on groups of children’s play with peers in the presence of adult support in literacy-enriched play settings (Chrisite & Enz, 1992; Neuman & Roskos 1990; Vukelich 1994) draws support from Vygotsky’s (1978) theory that adults monitor a child’s current level of knowledge and provide “scaffolding” (changing the level of support to support to fit the child’s need) to extend the child’s knowledge (Vukelich, 1994). This is known as the “zone of proximal
development”, Vygotsky’s term for the difference between what a child can do without help and what the child can do alone.

In many of the studies that have been conducted on the relationship between literacy and play, teacher guidance has been an important factor. Research shows that, in classrooms where teachers introduced literacy materials and made suggestions for their use, children participated in more literacy activities and with greater variety than in classrooms with no guidance (Christie & Enz, 1992; Morrow, 1990; Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts and Bendict, 2007).

Christie & Enz (1992) looked into the long term effects of two types of interventions on preschool play patterns and literacy development. These included materials only, in which theme-related literacy materials were added to the dramatic play area; and materials with adult involvement, in which teachers suggested and modeled the use of the materials to encourage children to use the literacy materials during dramatic play. Three types of assessments tools were employed to evaluate student performance, including the Concepts About Print test, an emergent writing rubric to assess early writing, and a letter recognition test to assess students before, during, and after the study. Results showed that the addition of literacy- or theme-related materials and teacher involvement was more effective in encouraging literacy-related play behavior than the materials-only intervention. Looking at the literacy assessments from the beginning and end of the study shows that both groups made significant literacy gains during the time period, with no significant difference between the two groups. While this may call into question the effectiveness of teacher involvement, the study was severely limited in scope. A total of only 32 students were involved, split between two classes sharing a common teacher in the same school. It is difficult to draw broad conclusions from such a small study.
In a more recent study by Wayne, DiCarlo, Burts and Bendict (2007), teachers were instructed both to incorporate literacy-related props into play centers and to provide guidance and support to students during playtime within the center. Teachers were instructed to invite children to each center, model the use of the literacy prop, encourage the children to use the prop, and give praise to children in proximity who engage in literacy behavior. This study showed that, with the addition of both the literacy props and teacher guidance, each classroom showed a significant increase in literacy behaviors among preschool children during play.

Based on an earlier, comprehensive study (Morrow, 1990), Morrow and Rand (1991) found that adult support was a critical aspect of enhanced literacy activities. With adult support and guidance, children in literacy-rich play centers participated in more playtime literacy behaviors than children in thematic centers without adult guidance. In addition to exploring other literacy-related issues, the Morrow (1990) study examined two groups of 39 students each, with one group engaging in unguided thematic play and the other engaging in guided thematic play. The increase in literacy activities when children were exposed to adult guidance was both substantial and statistically significant.

Consistent with studies, the classroom environment and teacher behaviors play an important role in the number of times children engage in literacy behavior during free play.

Other Play Centers

The previously-mentioned studies mainly examined literacy materials and the behavior of children in dramatic play areas. However, meaningful literacy experiences are not limited to this one center. Literacy materials can be incorporated into various classroom play centers in order to increase opportunities for children to engage in literacy behaviors. Pickett (1998) did a study looking at the use of block play on ten children in a first-grade classroom. The study was focused
on the possibility of an increase in the frequency of voluntary literacy behaviors during block play, when enriched with materials and with adults modeling literacy use as children played. Enrichment in the block area included paper, writing tools, books, pictures, paper, rulers, sign-making supplies, and labels to containers. It should be noted that the adult models of literacy did not direct play; rather, adults played along side the children, modeling and discussing ideas. Pickett’s study showed a modest increase in literacy behaviors with the enrichment of the environment compared to the un-enriched environment. The most notable change was the presence of an adult model with the enriched literacy environment. When both were present the literacy behaviors increased dramatically. The results of this study suggest that adult modeling and interaction during block play does contribute to the increase in literacy behaviors of young children.

Literacy related play is a practical and meaningful way for educators to support preschool children in their literacy development. A significant amount of research has focused on the role play has in supporting literacy growth in emergent readers. Included in this was the focus on the physical environment, the careful selection of literacy-enriched materials as well as the role of an adult support. The extensive amount of research that looks into the role of play and literacy focuses on dramatic play. However there continues to be a scarce amount of research looking into other play learning areas in the classroom, including the block, art, manipulatives, science and art areas.

Methods

The study took place in a classroom funded by the federal Head Start program. The Head Start program provides preschool services free of charge to families who are at or below the poverty level. The building was located in a low-income, residential neighborhood in a city of
moderate size in the state of New York. The school cared for children from six weeks of age through kindergarten age. Of interest in this study were children attending universal prekindergarten (UPK) in a full-day program. These children attended preschool for a maximum of five 6.5-hour days per week.

Participants

All participants of this study were students in a single UPK classroom. The class consisted of 17 children, 10 of whom were girls, from low-income families. Typical daily attendance in the classroom varied between 15 and 17 children. There were 13 African American students, 2 Latino students, 1 Asian student, and 1 Caucasian student. English was a second language for two of the children. The ages of the 17 participants were between 4 and 5 years. The abilities of individual students varied; while some students were already capable of identifying and writing their names, others showed no sign of recognition. The family backgrounds of the children were equally variable, with some living in a single-parent household, others in foster care, and still others in two-parent households.

In this study, informed consent was obtained from the parents of the 17 students. The informed consent protects the rights of all the participants. All names listed in this study are pseudonyms, and all identifying marks have been removed from collected artifacts. These actions helped to protect the rights of the children and preserve their anonymity.

In the classroom were two adults. The first, a white female, was a certified teacher of early childhood education with five years experience in Head Start. The second adult in the classroom was an African male who was the teacher assistant. He had taken courses in early childhood education, but held neither a teaching certificate nor a Child Development Credential. The two had worked together for four years.
Researcher Stance

The researcher in this study was the classroom teacher. She was a certified teacher in early childhood birth through grade two. She was working toward her masters in literacy. The teacher had been teaching at Head Start for five years prior to the study. The teacher in this classroom was responsible for planning the curriculum and organizing the environment to fit the needs of the students. The classroom environment fostered direct instruction as well as hands on play. The researcher’s initial belief was that preschool age children are always learning and developing their understanding. As they explore, children redefine their understanding and create new ideas. The researcher also believed that children learn through play. When children feel safe and comfortable in their environments, they will feel free to explore and test new theories. Play provides an avenue for children to enhance their emergent literacy skills through exploration.

Method

This study observed students’ interactions (especially interactions related to literacy) in different play centers around the room. These included science, block, and dramatic play areas; manipulatives, such as tabletop toys and puzzles; sand and water; and a personal computer.

Research proceeded in four stages. In the first stage, preliminary observations of the children were conducted in all of the play centers under consideration. Anecdotes were recorded that document the interactions of the participants alone, with other students, or their environment, and whether the students were engaging in literacy-related activities. These records were used to identify a subset of the play areas that warranted further study and suggested opportunities for literacy enrichment in these areas.

The second stage of the research more closely observed the selected play areas. Detailed reports and student artifacts documented the children’s interactions within these areas.
Preliminary analysis of the reports categorized the interactions according to specific literacy-related activities. These activities were broken into three primary categories:

1. Social interactions, in which children demonstrated an understanding of vocabulary and attempted to communicate;
2. Reading activities, in which children exhibited an understanding that print carries meaning related to language;
3. Writing activities, in which children attempted to convey meaning through basic writing or mimicry.

The third stage of this study introduced literacy-related materials to the selected play centers. Materials such as thematic kits, writing implements, drawings, books, and environmental print were placed in the play areas. These objects were not discussed with the students, but the students were allowed to use the objects freely. Documentation of the students’ interactions in the presence of these objects and collected artifacts were used to contrast behaviors in the presence of literacy-related materials to behaviors in the absence of such materials.

In the final stage, students were introduced to the literacy-related materials by the teacher. She explained the significance of the materials, engaged in play with the students, and suggested possible uses for the objects. Detailed observations of the students’ behaviors following the instructional period were recorded and artifacts providing evidence of these behaviors were collected. Based on the observations from all four stages of research, analysis suggested relationships between engagement in literacy-related activities and each of play, literacy materials, and teacher instruction.
Ensuring Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability

Mills (2007) defines four aspects that characterize the validity of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility of this study is ensured by virtue of the researcher’s relationship with the students. As the regular classroom teacher, the researcher causes no disturbance to the environment through observation. Furthermore, the study of all 17 members of the class and multiple play areas provided multiple sources of data, represented in both anecdotal records and collected student artifacts, to help triangulate relationships between the factors under observation. The triangulation supports the confirmability and dependability of the results. Transferability was assured through detailed documentation of the classroom environment, the methods used, and specific characteristics of the students.

Data Collection

Multiple tools were used to collect data for this study. The primary tool was active observation, recorded in field notes detailing the interactions of the students as they engaged in the play centers. Artifacts were also collected to support the recorded notes. These artifacts may include drawings or student writing.

Analysis

The observational period of this study lasted three weeks during the fall of 2009. Anecdotal notes were recorded daily and samples of the students’ work were collected as they became available. Initially, observations were made in six play centers: the block, dramatic play, art, and science areas; the personal computer and the sand table. After two days, four play centers (the art and science areas, the personal computer, and the sand table) were eliminated.
from observation for three reasons. First, the length of time available for observations restricted
the number of areas for which substantial and meaningful data could be collected. Second, initial
observations noted that both the personal computer and science area promoted solitary play
without opportunities for social interaction. Third, it is comparatively difficult to substantially
incorporate meaningful literacy materials into areas such as the sand table. Data from the
discounted observation areas were collected but will not be included in the analysis.

The dramatic play area was selected for further observation because a substantial volume
of prior research has been conducted on the effects of dramatic play on literacy and because the
area presents several opportunities to incorporate literacy-related materials. This play area
provides an opportunity to validate the results of these previous studies on the current subject
group. Furthermore, the dramatic play area was very popular with the students, which ensures a
broad base of subjects will interact with the environment in ways meaningful to this study.

The other area chosen for further study was the block area. The block area was also very
popular with students. Initially, the block area contained no literacy-related materials. This
provided a very strong emphasis on the effects of such materials on the behavior of students once
the materials were introduced to the area. It should also be noted that the lack of existing
research on the effects of literacy-related materials and teacher guidance in block play centers
offers the opportunity of this study to contribute new information to the field of emergent
literacy.

Findings

Analysis of play revealed three specific aspects. Support for social interaction describes
the effects of literacy-related materials and teacher guidance on the communication between
multiple students engaged in play within a single play center. Support for emergent reading
measures the impact of materials and guidance on the development of preliminary behaviors that reflect an understanding of the concepts about print and the significance of written language. Finally, support for writing development is observed in the subjects’ increased awareness of the mechanics of writing, such as directional principles, and attempts to convey meaning through actual writing or mimicry.

**Support for Social Interaction**

Social interaction provides learning opportunities through participation with others. The participants are active members in the learning process, each taking responsibility for learning and instructing others in both obvious and subtle ways. The observations made during this research provide ample evidence of the utility of social interaction as a tool for promoting emergent literacy.

Initial observations and anecdotes in the dramatic play area (which had a kitchen and community helper clothing, no literacy materials) showed children interacting with each other. A representative play session demonstrates typical student interactions:

Wanda, Jasmine, and Ayana, were exploring different roles in the dramatic play area. Jasmine dressed in doctor play clothes with a badge and a doctor’s kit. As she entered this new scenario, she declared, “We are doctors.” Ayana looked up and said, “I don’t have an appointment—she does,” as she pointed to the baby doll in her hand. Wanda then ran over and yelled, “Doctor, doctor! Somebody died!” Jasmine walked over with an otoscope and taps the doll on the knee. She then states, “she not gonna die, she not hurt.” Ayana stepped out of her role and corrected Wanda on the proper use of the tool, explaining, “That is for the ears.” Jasmine then stated that she wanted a snack and Wanda walked off to get her one.
During this observation, children moved freely from one topic to another while interacting with each other. The student exchanges reflect the prior understanding that learning takes place in social environments where interaction occurs (Vygotsky, 1978; Vukelich, 1993). In the above example, Ayana is seen to instruct Wanda on the proper use of an otoscope after observing Wanda’s misuse of the tool.

A mock restaurant called “The Steakhouse” provided an opportunity to place literacy-related materials in the dramatic play area in a meaningful way. The restaurant was sectioned off from the rest of the area and marked with a large sign declaring the name of and operating hours for the restaurant. Scattered within the area were mock menus, writing implements, and notepads for taking orders. Environmental print was included to convey the context of a restaurant: signs prohibiting smoking or encouraging hand washing were posted on the walls. These materials immersed the children in a playful environment that supported social interaction and the use of literacy-related materials. With up to four simultaneous players in the area, children assumed various restaurant-related roles and interacted freely with each other and the props: children placed or recorded orders, pretended to cook food, and took reservations for other students. The importance of this environment is demonstrated with a particular student exchange:

Eddie approached Karimah and offered her a menu, asking, “What do you want, customer?” Karimah responded, pointing to pictures in the menu, “I want pizza and cake.” Eddie scribbles on his notepad, stating, “That will be five dollars, please.”

The interaction between the two players provides instructional reinforcement to both students. While no direct instruction takes place in this example, both actors are subtly reminded of the function of written materials (menus and order pads) in a specific context (a restaurant). This
exchange also served as a demonstration from external observers, encouraging other students to later mimic this behavior.

Teacher guidance in the mock restaurant did not appear to have a significant effect on the amount of social interaction between students. The children were motivated to engage other students in this area even before the teacher included herself in play. However, the teacher was able to direct the social interaction and offer hints about proper restaurant protocol. In a particular example, the teacher played the role of a waitress, and presented students with a bill after pretending to serve them food. Prior to this event, no children were observed presented a bill at the end of service; Eddie was observed mimicking this behavior after witnessing the teacher’s example.

In the block area, children were initially observed exploring with the blocks and small block people and animal figurines that were found in the area. Children often were engaged in solitary or parallel play (Davidson, 1996), in which children respectively play without regard to others or perform similar activities in the vicinity of other children. An example of solitary play was seen when Ayana began sorting through animal figurines while naming each of them: “This is hippo, a tiger. I don’t know this. A lion.” At the same time, Karimah tried to stuff blocks in a garbage truck and move it around. When Karimah became aware of Ayana’s activities, she engaged in parallel play, speaking aloud the sounds and actions of each animal, such as stating, “I see a monkey it goes, ooh, ooh, ah, ah!” while beating her chest with her fists. While not as obvious as the direct instruction observed above, Karimah subtly provides instructional reinforcement to herself and Ayana without directly interacting with Ayana. Even without awareness, children bolster learning in each other through play.
Social interactions between children became more frequent during the overall observation period, but this is not easily attributed to the inclusion of literacy-related materials. For example, Ernie was building a town using blocks. Eddie asked if he could assist, and the two began constructing the town together. While such instances became more common, they did not revolve around the new materials added to the play centers. Thus, it is possible that the increased interaction is actually due to increased familiarity among the students.

Teacher guidance had a much more substantial impact on social interaction than did the inclusion of literacy-related materials. The teacher frequently assumed a role as a “co-player”, in which she assumed a role in the children’s play, but did not attempt to lead the session. In most cases, the teacher’s presence in a specific play area attracted more children to that area and got them more thoroughly involved in play. The teacher was also able to draw attention to the literacy-related materials placed within the play centers and modeled the use of such materials to the children. For example, in one play session, a drawing of a hospital, previously unnoticed by the students, was introduced by the teacher as a blueprint for construction of a hospital out of blocks. She pointed to different parts of the drawing and asked the children for blocks that matched the appearance of the region. The children, having learned a possible function for the drawing, began using other drawings as blueprints for the construction of block buildings.

Support for Emergent Reading

Emergent reading represents the behaviors, skills, concepts and experiences children have with reading that begin to shape their understanding of written language. Play provides opportunities for children to be free and explore the idea of reading. Children’s awareness of written language is exhibited, for example, when children ask about the meaning of signs or when they recognize the story in a specific book.
Initial observations of the dramatic play area (before the addition of literacy-related materials) showed limited instances of early reading. However, this is reflective of a limited variety of literacy-related materials in the play area at the time of observation. The sole example of a preliminary demonstration of emergent reading skills was exhibited when Keon picked up a plastic bottle of water and asked of Janet, “Do you want some juice?” Janet replied, “That’s not juice, it is water. Look,” as she pointed to the label.

Instances of emergent reading increased with the addition of literacy-enriched materials. This is consistent with the findings of Christie and Enz (1992), who found that a dramatic play area offers opportunities for children to display their growing understandings of print and the role of pretend reading. The mock restaurant described above offers several opportunities for children to interact with written materials and environmental print in a setting that simulates a real-life environment. For example, Jasmine and Leon demonstrated reliance on print in restaurant play. Jasmine pretended to serve Leon alphabet soup from a can in the play area, instructing him, “You have to try this. It’s good.” After serving him, she asked, “Was it good? It’s alphabet soup.” She pointed to the can label, with a picture of a bowl of alphabet soup and the words “Alphabet Soup”, while inquiring about the food. Later, she approached Leon and said repeatedly, “Are you smoking? Sorry, no smoking. Look at the sign. No smoking,” as she directed his attention to a no-smoking symbol on the wall. Jasmine’s reliance on the soup can for contextual clues demonstrated her rudimentary understanding that the label carries significance. Her mention of the no-smoking sign shows her awareness of environmental print around the play area and the meaning associated with different signs.

Prior research suggests that adult involvement enriches the quality of children’s play (Chrisite & Enz, 1992; Neuman & Roskos 1990; Vukelich 1994). This phenomenon was also
observed in the present study. In the following example, student Ernie is observed demonstrating emergent reading skills using the props placed in the dramatic play area. Although his demonstration was not prompted by the teacher, her presence helped reinforced his play and offered subtle guidance for the use of the written material in an appropriate way:

*Ernie picked up the cookbook and began flipping through one page at a time.*

Teacher: What should we make?

Ernie: Cake. This one. *He points to a picture of a cake.*

Teacher: Let’s see. What do we need? *She points to the words.* Sugar and Milk.

*Ernie fetches a plastic milk carton.*

Teacher: What do we need next?

Ernie: Put this in there. *He points to picture in the cookbook.*

*Ernie pats the food in the pan as depicted, turns the oven on and places the food in the oven.*

Ernie’s use of the cookbook demonstrated his awareness of several print concepts described by Clay (2005), including recognition of the front of the book and turning pages from left to right. However, Ernie still relied on pictures to convey a message. In this scenario, the teacher pointed to the words in the cookbook and read some them to help Ernie begin to understand that the print carried a message.

In another example, the teacher asked Richard, standing at the front desk, if a reservation was available at three o’clock. The teacher pointed to the 3 o’clock time and asked if the slot was empty. While children had previously used the area to write down food orders, the teacher demonstrated the proper use of a reservation book. Subsequent uses of the book by several children reflected their new understanding of its significance.
In contrast to what was initially observed in the dramatic play area, early observations of the block area revealed no reading behavior. Children were only building with blocks and playing with the block figurines. Enriching the environment with literacy props yielded the only observed reading behavior involving a book. Richard was observed paging through a book about building. Environmental print added to the area was used more heavily. For example, drawings of block structures in the area became a fundamental aspect of the social interaction described earlier. In another example, Quincy built a road on the floor of the block area and placed a stop sign along the road. He yelled, “Stop!” while pushing a toy car up to the stop sign. Quincy was aware of the meaning behind the sign.

Teacher guidance played an important role in encouraging the use of literacy-related materials in the block area. During a particular play session, the teacher entered the block area while three children (Karimah, Quincy, and Eddie) were building block structures. The teacher constructed a building next to Karimah. After the teacher finished building, she said, “I need a sign saying this is a police station,” and placed a police sign next to her building. The children in the area began to designate their structures as places around a community. Eddie declared that his building was a fire department, locating and adding to his structure a fire department sign. This demonstrates the students’ use of road and community signs as a form of communication.

Support for Writing Development

No children were observed attempting to write before literacy props were added to the dramatic play area. The materials necessary for writing were not yet available in the area, and children did not bring writing implements from other areas of the classroom into the dramatic play area. After literacy materials were introduced into the dramatic play area via the mock restaurant described above, several observations documented children’s attempts at writing. The
themes of the students’ writing reflected the context of the restaurant. For example, Ayana, acting as a waitress, asked Karimah, a patron, “What do you want?” Karimah responded that she wanted “chicken nuggets with sauce.” Ayana made marks in imitation of writing on five lines of the page shown as Artifact A in the Appendix. She started at the top of the page and moved down as she progressed, which demonstrates her early understanding of the directional principles of writing. In a similar example, Eddie pretended to collect payment from Leon for a meal. He asked Leon to sign for his purchase on a piece of paper listed as Artifact B. Leon correctly spelled his name on a single line of the page. Leon was more advanced than Ayana, demonstrating his awareness of the directional principles of writing, basic knowledge of the alphabet, and the proper spelling of his name.

Teacher involvement played an important role in directing the attention of students to writing instrument and reinforcing the significance of writing. The recipe card shown as Artifact C reflects the attempt of Ernie to record the recipe for a milkshake. This example was created with the assistance of the teacher, who explained to Ernie the purpose of a recipe card. The teacher provided context for the writing task, and Ernie responded with scribbled lines that he imagined said, “Milk and mix it up. Then you get a strawberry on. Then you eat it.” While the student is unable to write the words, he does understand the directional principles of writing, keeping his writing aligned with the ruling on the card and moving the pencil from left to right. In other instances, the teacher provided reinforcement and highlighted the parallels between reading and writing by pretending to take children’s orders. As she wrote the orders, she pointed to the names of the items listed in the menu to show the students from where the words were taken.
As was the case in the dramatic play area, initial observations of the block area found that no children included writing in their play. Once clipboards, paper, and pencils were introduced into the area, children immediately began playing with these tools. Some children drew pictures on the paper, while others experimented with writing. The writing and drawing did not necessarily relate to the block theme, e.g., Richard correctly wrote his name on a piece of paper (Artifact D), declaring, “I’m the teacher!” He asked the teacher (who was not involved in play during this observation) how to spell her name and how to write the letter “I”. In other instances, the children’s efforts more directly paralleled the themes of the block area. Artifact E shows a picture of a house made by Janet after looking at block blueprints and stating, “I can make that house.” The picture captures basic elements of a house, and Janet attempted to write her name across the top. The writing reflects her understanding of the directional principles of writing and the significance of letters as individual symbols that are collected to form words. However, she does not have sufficient understanding of the alphabet to properly write her name.

In the block area, teacher guidance did not appear to have a significant impact on the students’ use of the writing materials. The teacher modeled to the students how some of the materials could be used. For example, after building a block house, the teacher wrote the words “Police Station” on an adhesive note and affixed it to the building. The teacher then suggested to Keon that he make a sign advertising that his building was a firehouse (the building’s function was previously stated by the student). Keon was unreceptive to the suggestion. In this and other observed cases, the students used writing materials in manners similar to those employed before the teacher offered her guidance.

Overall, this study found children engaging in emergent literacy activities within the dramatic play and block areas in the preschool classroom. The intentional inclusion of themed
literacy materials and teacher guidance resulted in an increase in the number of literacy events undertaken by the students.

Implications

The results of this study lend support to the concept of using play and literacy-related materials to support emergent literacy in classrooms. A number of observations suggest that children engage more frequently in literacy activities when exposed to literacy-related materials within play areas. In the dramatic play area, literacy-related, themed materials served as a catalyst to persuade children to engage in emergent literacy behaviors (such as social interactions or emergent reading and writing) during role-play activities. In the block area, literacy behaviors that were infrequently observed prior to the introduction of themed materials were observed more frequently after the materials were made available to students. Without the materials, there was little opportunity for students to engage in literacy behaviors.

It is important to note that the literacy behaviors in which the children engaged did not appear to depend on the children’s skill levels. Children at all stages in reading and writing development were observed attempting activities supported by the materials. Although some children were more successful in their use than others (for example, some students could only make stray marks on sheets of paper, while others could write letters, and still others could write whole words), the use of literacy-related, themed materials supports emergent literacy development in children with a broad range of initial skills.

Teacher guidance was an important factor in enticing the students to play with themed materials, especially in the block area. The dramatic play area supported social interactions and encouraged children to invoke emergent literacy behaviors even without teacher guidance, but this behavior was rarely seen in the block area before the teacher introduced and modeled the use
of the materials for the students. Nevertheless, teacher guidance was still important in the dramatic play area, offering the children reinforcement and subtle hints about the possible use of the materials.

Additional studies should be considered to expand the scope and significance of this research. The time constraints placed on the observation period prevented the investigation of longer-term effects or the role of literacy and themed materials in other play areas. Even during the brief period of this study, literacy behaviors were observed to improve in some students. However, a study that investigates the children over the course of an entire year, or perhaps over several years, might better isolate the effects of play and literacy-related materials on long-term literacy development. Investigation of the use of play and materials in other areas of the classroom might suggest useful forums for literacy development distinct from dramatic play or block areas.

These results suggest that literacy-related materials and play in general can serve an important role in the learning process. Teachers should consider preparing their environments to include literacy materials and play centers in the classroom. This and other studies suggest that these classroom changes support increased literacy activity in children. Children are given the freedom to explore literacy at their own paces, taking advantage of materials to support their development of literacy skills. Although it appears that children are simply having fun, important learning occurs during play. When combined with teacher guidance to model the use of materials and provide support to the children, they engage in emergent literacy activities much more frequently than without such materials or guidance.
Conclusion

A study was presented that observed children engaging in emergent literacy activities within dramatic play and block areas within a preschool classroom. The inclusion of themed materials and teacher guidance to model the use of these materials was shown to increase the number of literacy events observed in the subjects. The results suggest that play and literacy-related, themed materials have an important role in supporting the development of emergent literacy skills in young children. The effects of both play and themed materials were observed in children in a broad range of developmental stages.
References


http://www.m-w.com.


Artifact A: Front (left image) and back (right image) of a sheet of paper on which Ayana pretended to take Karimah’s order in the mock restaurant.
Artifact B: Eddie swiped Leon’s mock credit card and asked him to sign this sheet of paper. The name has been redacted to preserve Leon’s anonymity.
Artifact C: After the teacher explained the purpose of a recipe card, Ernie attempted to record the recipe for a milkshake.
Artifact D: While using a clipboard in the block area, Richard wrote his name and declaring himself the teacher. His true name has been concealed to preserve his anonymity.
Artifact E: A picture of a house drawn by Janet after looking at a mock blueprint and stating, “I can make that house.” She has attempted to write her name at the top of the page.