

## **Developing Literacy through Play**

**Alissa Marie Mielonen**  
*Buffalo State College*

**Wendy Paterson**  
*St. John Fisher College*

*Researchers agree that language and literacy derive from the first days of a child's life. Children become literate members in society by listening and interacting with the people that surround them. This study examines how children develop literacy through play by looking closely at the benefits of uninterrupted play and how it encourages language development. The development of language skills, including reading and writing competence, through social interaction, was observed to see how literacy development occurs within a home environment. This study also offers successful strategies to use during play that will enhance reading and writing skills within young children.*

Seven years into the educational milieu created by No Child Left Behind, it is abundantly apparent that opportunities in school for children to develop social skills such as group learning and playing collaboratively together are being replaced by additional time spent on core curriculum activities. As a child interacts with parents, siblings, families and eventually teachers and classmates, these interactions occur primarily through play. Poor social skills result from limited social interactions which (in theory) interfere with language development. Language and literacy are built from the first day of a child's life. Literacy can be defined as the ability to interpret and understand messages relayed from others as means to communicate (Tsao, 2008, p.515). Literacy skills are constructed from the knowledge of spoken language.

Through communicating with others, young children develop their own linguistic competence and this allows children to develop their communicative abilities throughout their lives. Linguistic competence will enhance the child's knowledge and facilitate learning and growth. When children play and communicate through play, they are learning how language works and gaining an understanding of how to interact with other people. Eventually, children connect the meaning of spoken language to written language, which is the key to success in school. This particular phenomenon is important to study because we believe it is crucial to understand how children develop literacy through play.

Researchers agree that language and literacy derive from the first days of a child's life. Tsao (2008) believes that a child develops literacy skills from hearing language spoken around them (p.515). Saracho (2002), Meek (1991), and Heath (1983), believe that children develop literacy skills through different types of settings such as the print they see around them and hearing stories read aloud to them (as cited in Williams & Rask, 2003, p.528). Saracho and Spodek (2006) state "During play children participate in reading and writing experiences that develop the literacy skills they need for formal reading instruction" (p.716). The purpose of our study is to examine how children develop literacy through play so that we can implement effective play strategies for literacy learning in classrooms. In particular, we have identified three key questions:

1. What are the benefits of play for language development?
2. How do children develop language skills including reading and writing competence through social interaction?
3. How can I implement playful social interactions in my literacy classroom?

If we can show how literacy skills are developed through play, we can improve the reading and writing competence of students through playful activities. Through play children may also develop competence in social skills. This study also offers successful strategies to use during play that will enhance reading and writing skills within young children.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

The theorists who have studied the relationships between literacy development and play include Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Brian Cambourne. All four theorists suggest that when children interact with the world around them, they are likely to remember first-hand experiences rather than vicarious experiences that are told to them by others. According to these theorists, children learn most by performance, not by prompt. "Montessori's theories about children have influenced the way all early childhood programs are structured today" (Mooney, 2000, p.23). Maria Montessori believed in setting up a productive environment where children could develop their literacy skills without even knowing it. Montessori schools are constructed to suit the needs of young children by providing them with child-size furniture and all materials within their reach. Montessori believed in allowing young children the opportunity to become "self-constructivist" learners (Mooney, 2000, p.23). According to

Montessori, “children learn best by doing, and through repetition” (Mooney, 2000, p.29). In order to facilitate the development of competence and responsibility, Montessori believed that teachers should include ample amounts of free time for children to structure their own work and play (Mooney, 2000, p.29).

Piaget explained his theory of children’s cognitive development through labeling of age-based stages. Of most relevance to this study young children were thought by Piaget to be engaged in the “concrete operational” stage of cognitive development. In the stage of concrete operations, children develop “reversibility” which allows them to retrace the steps of their thinking (Mooney, 2000, p.78). Once children develop the capability of directing the path of their thoughts, they are able to problem solve on a higher scale. In the concrete operational stage, children also begin to give specific meaning and detail to objects rather than simply naming them. With this “reversibility” children begin to think abstractly.

Piaget’s theory suggests that children construct meaning by interacting with their surroundings. The way a child interacts within an environment is what creates learning (Mooney, 2000, p.61). Furthermore, Piaget believed that children come to understand concepts by engaging in play. Play offers a natural way for children to express ideas. Children learn by watching and imitating situations around them. Piaget believed learning through trial and error enhances a child’s cognitive abilities (Mooney, 2000, p.63). Cognitive skills that are related to a child’s reading and writing abilities may be developed through make believe (Tsao, 2008, p.518). Building on Piaget, Roskos and Christie (2004) believe that as children engage in play, they are using their memories to assist to connect their play to pre-literacy skills such as naming and symbolic thought. Children recall their past play experiences and create new meanings each time they play. (as cited in Tsao, 2008, p.518).

Russian sociologist, Lev Vygotsky first articulated the theory that “the world children inhabit is shaped by their families, communities, socioeconomic status, education, and culture” (Mooney, 2000, p.83). He called this “social-constructivism.” The context and contacts children experience influence how they will interpret the world around them. The ethics and morals instilled in children early in life will affect how they react to situations throughout their lives. Young children also learn from each other. Vygotsky believed children, “develop language skills and grasp new concepts as they speak to and listen to each other” (Mooney, 2000, p.83). He explained how children learn when they play: “Language and development build on each other.

When children play, they constantly use language. They determine the conditions of make-believe. They discuss role and objects and directions. They correct each other. They learn about situations and ideas not yet tried” (Mooney, 2000, p.83). Social interactions involving language that children experience during play helps construct their literacy knowledge (Tsao, 2008, p.518).

Brian Cambourne developed his theory of “The Conditions of Learning” as it applies to literacy learning after he observed children’s learning within his own classroom. Cambourne, a seasoned teacher, conducted research in language acquisition and found that children had to construct their own knowledge to deeply learn it. Cambourne created a model that teachers can use to facilitate language learning. The model includes: immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, approximations, employment, and response. *Immersion* requires the child to be constantly exposed to language. Language needs to be surrounding the child in all aspects of learning. *Demonstration* means the child learns by observing a model and then practicing independently. *Engagement* involves the child’s active participation. *Expectations* should be implemented that are suitable for the particular learner. Expectations are created, but not limited to, goals that the child should reach. *Responsibility* means that the child must decide for herself/himself what actions s/he will take. *Approximations* are when the child attempts to apply knowledge to the situation in what is often called “trial and error.” *Employment* offers the child opportunity to practice what has been learned and apply knowledge to new situations. *Response* provides the child with feedback from the facilitator of the language learning (most often an adult). Often children will value feedback from significant adults and seek approval of their language use. These conditions assist teachers in understanding student discovery learning. Cambourne believes that these conditions of learning create “an interactive and dynamic experience between the learner and the content” (Rushton, Eitelgeorge, and Zickafoose, 2003, p.12). In play, the conditions of learning are achieved, allowing children to practice and engage in oral language and transfer it to literacy learning. When children are engaged in play, they must use language in order to communicate and negotiate meaning (Cambourne, 1995, p.186).

### ***Play and Literacy***

Literacy can be loosely defined as, “the ability to read and write” (Tsao, 2008, p.515). Play is defined as “voluntary engagement in enjoyable activities.” Following the theory of social

construction, it is apparent that literacy skills may evolve naturally during play for young children. Prior to the mid 1900s, the common view was that play should be something that must be experienced outside of school walls (Hall, 1991, p.3). In 1987, Hall noted that teachers were teaching literacy in a very controlled manner. The result of this was impacting students in a negative way; “Children had to ignore everything they knew about learning and submit to the ownership of their learning” (Hall, 1991, p.4).

Research within the last 25 years or so indicates a more positive connection between literacy learning and play. Researchers assert that play enhances a child’s emotional, social and cognitive development. Researchers also agree that a play environment that is rich in literacy can develop early literacy skills within young children (Hall, 1991, p.3). Social interactions encourage children to learn through authentic experiences. In addition, early childhood researcher Klenk (2001) mentions social interactions during play “do not hinge on formal instruction, they are authentic and purposeful” (p.150).

Perhaps one reason for the shift in thinking is the increased need for literacy in everyday life. According to Werquin (2005), “In a society where literacy is not an option but a must, it is easy to imagine the stress felt by someone who has difficulty reading a sentence” (p.33). Therefore, in today’s society, a common goal among educators is to encourage students to be literate, contributing members of society. The role of play in the construction of practical literacy and communication skills is; therefore, important to document.

Young children interact with family members, peers and teachers throughout life. The children transfer their social interaction skills from one context to another. More specifically, families play a large role in successful literacy learning in young children. Williams and Rask (2003) conducted a study to research how families support their child’s literacy development. The participants in their study consisted of four different classes of 6 year olds in the United Kingdom. The purpose of the study was to research how literacy development occurs through social interactions within a home environment. Williams and Rask learned that through the support and modeling of their families, children develop literacy skills that emerge from situations they are encountering with their families (p.528). For example, reading stories together enhances children’s reading and writing skills by teaching children that the words on the page carry meaning.

The home environment a child is raised in often determines the quality of social interactions and development of literacy skills that the child is likely to develop, but losses in home contact can be compensated institutionally. Neuman (2000) researched a family literacy program aimed at promoting parent-child interactions. The participants in the study included 30 women, most of whom were African American, and 19 years of age. The women attended a literacy program and parenting classes for a time period of 3 months. While the parents were in class, they were provided with child care for their children. The mothers that were selected for this study were judged as not providing adequate literate home environments; therefore, the childcare center served as a model to demonstrate quality care and meaningful interactions. Neuman observed that these adolescent mothers had difficulties interacting with their children as they became toddlers. Although the purpose of the study was to enhance communication and literacy skills among the mothers and children, the childcare center was most successful in providing activities that promoted literacy learning for the children (Neuman, 2000, p.158). The young mothers observed what literacy learning looked like. Commenting on the study, Neuman (2000) believes that literacy skills were developed in the children through social interaction at the childcare center, not necessarily from improving skills in their mother-child interactions (p.158). Therefore, he concludes that although family influence is crucial, other sources of social interaction contribute to literacy growth.

### ***Developing Literacy through Play***

In a meta-analysis of play studies, Hall (1991) found that a number of research reports reflect the relationships between play and literacy. Hall summarizes the conclusions of these studies related as follows:

1. Play as a fundamental cognitive activity is preparation for more complex cognitive activities such as literacy.
2. Symbolic behavior in play is related to the understanding of a representational system like written language.
3. Language behavior in play is related to literate language.
4. When children are offered play experience with literacy-related resources, they act in literate ways (p.8-11).

Studies that support conclusion 1 indicate that children learn more complex knowledge through play. For example, Gentile and Hoot (1983) state, “through painting, children become aware that images on paper are meaningful and say something” (as cited in Hall, 1991, p.8). Hall (1991) believes that children recognize things have meaning by experiencing them during play, but that the relationship between play and literacy is somewhat “incidental” (p.9). In other words, Hall implies that the relationship happens naturally rather than deliberately and literacy is learned when experiencing play.

Studies that support conclusion 2 imply that children learn how to write by expressing their thoughts orally when playing. Through symbolic play children have the opportunity to pretend and create something that has meaning to them. Isenberg and Jacob (1983) state, “symbolic play, the process of transforming an object or oneself into another object, person, situation, or event through the use of motor and verbal actions in a make believe activity, provides an important source of literacy development” (as cited in Hall, 1991, p.9). Symbolic play encourages literacy development by facilitating children’s knowledge of how sounds and symbols work as they communicate in the play setting.

Studies that support conclusion 3 imply that the language that children use during play is similar to the language children will use when they begin to read and write. Research shows that children who are engaged in sociodramatic play use language to develop scripts, thus merging the literacy skills of reading and writing into play. Having practice with these skills, allows children to transfer their knowledge to reading texts within a school setting (Hall, 1991, p.11).

Studies that support conclusion 4 are based on research that integrates the use of literacy-related objects into a play setting so that children have the opportunity to deliberately develop literacy skills. Isenberg and Jacob (1985) examined two four-year-old girls while playing in a literacy rich environment and found that the girls used literacy activities at home and at school. The two girls showed that when children are provided with literacy-related objects, regardless of the setting, engaging in play will only enhance their literacy skills. Isenberg and Jacob concluded from their observations that young children can develop literacy skills by engaging in play (as cited in Hall, 1991, p.11).

Independent of Hall’s review, researchers Saracho and Spodek (2006) showed that given particular objects within a setting, children will engage in reading and writing activities during play (p.716). Saracho and Spodek (2006) state, “A play and literacy relationship become more

striking as play helps young children explore and comprehend the interactions between these two realms of activity” (p.708).

### ***Facilitating Literacy through Play in the Classroom***

Research suggests that play will offers children time to apply developing literacy skills in a creative setting. Implementing literacy and play in the curriculum is developmentally appropriate for young children. Tompkins (2005) believes that integrating literacy-related objects in a play setting is becoming a popular trend that teachers are facilitating in the classroom (as cited in Giles & Wellhousen, 2005, p.383).

Hall (2000) conducted a naturalistic research study to see how children develop literacy skills through sociodramatic play. The study took place in a British classroom of 35 children. The ages of the participants ranged from 4 to 5 years of age. The sociodramatic play area followed a garage theme. The teacher’s intention was that the children would visit a real garage and then construct a replica using literacy resources that were available within the classroom. The children constructed signs, an office and a workshop place in the designated area of the room. The teacher facilitated events and posed problematic situations that the children would have to integrate into their garage experience. For example, the children were encouraged to request permission to build from the local town hall. The children wrote letters requesting permission. The children were also encouraged to apply for jobs at the garage. This application process facilitated the growth of the children’s reading and writing skills. The results of this particular study indicate that through the use of sociodramatic play, children constructed writing pieces that were meaningful and purposeful. The reading and writing the children did for the garage were meaningful because they used literacy-related objects to accomplish real world goals. Hall concluded that by implementing this sociodramatic play experience in the classroom, the teacher helped the children learn how to truly enjoy literacy-related activities while developing their literacy skills (p.194-204).

The teacher’s role in promoting playful learning is to “develop the children’s literacy learning in the context of play, provide opportunities for quality interactions and cultivate spontaneous and flexible literacy behaviors in young children” (Saracho, 2004, p.205). Such quality interactions among young children will teach them how to be successful communicators

in the real world. Wilford (2000) discussed five literacy goals that educators should keep in mind when facilitating literacy with young children. The goals are:

1. Encourage symbolic processes; allow children to create meaning to objects
2. Facilitate language growth; as children are playing, their language will grow by conversing with others
3. Model the ability to problem solve in a meaningful context; playing games with rules or confronting a dilemma while playing, children should learn how to work through the situation independently
4. Motivate persistence in literacy- learning how to work through a difficult book or learning how to print, children need motivation to build their self-esteem
5. Promote joyful engagement- allowing children to choose high interest level texts and games according to their liking will insist that literacy learning is enjoyable (p.6-7).

These goals can serve as a guide for educators to create a literacy rich classroom.

Educators should primarily focus on creating an active learning environment for young children where the children construct their own meaning and practice the use of developing literacy skills. For example, Patton and Mercer (1996) suggest that “Child-initiated learning centers promote learning through play by motivating students to engage in active learning experiences” (p.2). Active learning through learning centers and play promotes literacy skills in children by allowing them to apply their prior knowledge as well as use higher order thinking skills to gain new information independent of others.

As researchers document the relationship between play and literacy, it is becoming obvious that by allowing children to play, literacy skills develop naturally. The relatively recent shift in thinking among educators about the benefits of play and its connection to literacy provides a strong foundation for our research.

### ***Method***

This case study took place in the home environment of one of the two young participants chosen to provide a naturalistic setting for observing two young girls engaged in play. The home is located in a rural neighborhood. More specifically, we observed the girls playing in one of the participants bedroom and outside in the backyard. The particular home environment was selected purposefully because it is the home of one of the participants. The parents were willing to

provide a comfortable and familiar environment that was easily accessible for me and for the participants.

The participants involved in this study are two five-year-old Caucasian, Euro-American girls. The participants will be identified in this study as Jenny\* and Jamie\* to protect their anonymity. Their families are middle-class. The girls are friends, comfortable playing with each other. Prior to this study, both girls recently completed Kindergarten at the same school. Jenny is the youngest of four children in her family. Her development level is considered by adults she comes in contact with “above average” for a five year old girl. She lives in a literacy rich environment where her parents and siblings read to her daily. Jenny is able to interact confidently with all people she comes in contact with. Jenny’s linguistic abilities have developed from social interactions with her older siblings, whom she mimics constantly. Jamie is the eldest of two children in her family. Her development level is also considered “above average” for a girl her age. Jamie is often given much responsibility to care for her younger brother, thus giving her the opportunity to cognitively develop at a fast rate. Linguistically, Jamie is able to communicate effectively with those around her.

The types of data that were collected from this study were observation field notes, videotapes, interviews, children’s drawings, journal reflections, and simple attitude scales. Open-ended field-notes were used throughout my observations and allowed me to note the development of literacy through play among the participants. We focused my observations on specific examples of reading and writing competence that we saw in the girls’ social interactions. A limitation of field-notes was that sometimes the flow of conversation is rapid and it is hard to record every single event.

We videotaped the participants playing and interacting with each other. The advantage of videotaping our observations within this study allowed us to re-play the footage of interactions between the two participants to closely analyze their patterns of language interaction. A limitation of videotaping is that the participants may consider the filming as an intrusive method, causing the girls to hold back what might be natural interactions.

We interviewed both girls when we first arrived at the home environment. We chose to use an informal ethnographic interview (who, what, where, when, why, and how questioning) because it is non-intrusive and seemed developmentally appropriate for five year old participants (See Appendix A). The interviews were done separately and were beneficial because they

allowed me to understand each child's level of thinking while giving me insights into their language development. Spontaneous children's drawings were collected during this study. These were beneficial to us because they allowed us to see reading and writing skills that the participants developed through play and engaged in spontaneously.

Journal reflections were used at the end of the play experience. The participants were given a sheet of white paper which read, "Today I..." and they were told to write about their favorite part of the day (See Appendix B). This was beneficial to me as an educator because the reflections allowed me to see what types of play were meaningful to the girls themselves.

At the end of the play experience we asked the girls to complete an attitude scale (See Appendix C). The girls were given a sheet of paper stating "When I play I feel..." and they were told to write how they feel. After the attitude scale, the girls were given a simple iconic rating scale that would give them the opportunity to "rate" their experience in play after the observations were complete (See Appendix D).

We approached the home environment in a non-intrusive manner. We arrived in the afternoon when the parents and children were available and left at 5:45 PM. The length of this study was five hours. I collected four hours of videotape and one hour of field notes. The data was collected from the time we arrived in the home until the time we left. Since we were greeted by both participants upon arriving in the home, we informally interviewed them individually and quickly wrote down their responses. As the participants went off to play, we immediately began video taping them as they headed for the bedroom. The bedroom was arranged in an open floor plan format, so we managed to position ourselves in the corner of the room near the door. Although the girls recognized that someone was video taping them, we kept a low profile and did not interfere with their playing. After only a few minutes, they ignored us and were fully engaged in play with each other.

After the participants played in the bedroom for two hours, they went outside. We followed them during the transition with the video camera to catch every conversation. We videotaped the girls playing outside for an hour. We positioned ourselves in the corner of the pool area because they were playing both in and out of the pool. At times, while the girls were swimming we moved closer to them in order to record their conversations over the splashing of the water.

In addition to videotaping in a bedroom and outside, we also videotaped the girls playing in the dining room area. We videotaped the girls going back inside to play in the dining room area. Again, we stress that it was necessary to follow them closely during transitions so that we could hear and record the conversations that took place. We noticed that there were several cabinets in the dining room the girls headed straight for. We taped closely as the girls searched through the cabinets finding the materials they wanted to play with. The girls pulled out paper, markers and crayons. We videotaped as they began to spontaneously draw pictures and color with each other. We videotaped the girls playing with moon sand; sand that sticks together similar to play-dough. Then, the battery on the video camera died, so we wrote copious field notes.

When we noticed that the girls were getting tired of playing, as they began to lay around and not engage in much activity, we called them into the kitchen/dining room area. We asked them how their day was and to write about their favorite parts by completing the statement “Today I...”. We handed them a blank sheet of paper to write on and told them to sit in separate areas. We told them they could use any writing utensil. After the journal reflection, we asked the girls to record how they “felt” during play. Following the attitude scale, we asked the girls to complete the iconic rating scale that had 3 smiley faces as to how the day went overall. Then we collected all documents and helped the visiting participant get ready to go home.

### ***Data Analysis***

After organizing the data, we looked through the interviews, videotape, field notes, and documents to consider its overall meaning. The data collected from this study was organized in the sequential order in which it occurred. We made sense out of the interviews and gained information about each girl’s level of literacy by analyzing the way they interpreted and responded to the questions. The data from the interviews helped me better understand how the girls use language when they play.

The analysis of the videotape was extremely beneficial. During the analysis of the videotape, we focused on events and conversations that the girls engaged in that specifically displayed developing literacy skills. This was a beneficial analysis because we could control the video play-back and record written notes as it progressed. We cataloged the data of the specific

communication and language skills we observed that may impact reading and writing competence.

After reviewing our field notes, we understood how children develop competence through social interaction with one another. The field notes were helpful in determining the literacy development that occurs through conversations. The field notes also provided us with specific times that events and conversations occurred. We used this data to help us understand the benefits of play for language development through social interactions.

The writing samples were filled with insights as to what the participants truly valued throughout the play experience and showed a direct connection between their play experience and their natural tendency to write about it. The journal reflection gave us a sense of specific activities that the girls enjoyed that might encourage literacy learning. The attitude scale provided us with information as to how the participants felt throughout the play process. The iconic rating scale allowed us to see if the participants truly enjoyed this play experience. We will consider all the evidence of literacy practice in spontaneous play collected from the documents to specifically design playful social interactions for literacy classrooms.

### ***Results***

Using Cambourne's framework for Conditions of Learning, we noted specific examples from observations, field notes, interviews and written samples that provided evidence that these young children were engaged in the construction of their own knowledge. The girls were immersed in language the entire time they were playing. They communicated with each other using language each of them already knew, and they constructed new language as well. Jenny used some language that Jamie was not familiar with. For example, when Jenny was describing photographs of her family members that were placed on her dresser, she used the terms "great grammy" and Jamie questioned the meaning of great. Jenny explained that this was the mother of her grandmother. Throughout the play experience, the girls used language as a primary way to communicate.

The girls developed literacy skills through demonstrations from one another. For example, Jamie began to organize Jenny's room. Jamie moved items such as Beanie Babies and WebKinz (types of stuffed animals) to a shelf. Jamie demonstrated how to set the stuffed animals in a particular way according to height, size and color. Jenny observed her demonstration and

began to assist moving the stuffed animals. The demonstrations from Jamie encouraged Jenny to do the same in order to get an acceptable response from her peer.

Jenny and Jamie were fully engaged in their playful activities. The girls were engaged both inside and outside. Inside, the girls decided to engage in playful activities in Jenny's bedroom. They organized stuffed animals, they played house, they played farm and they played dress-up. Rather than demonstrating the parallel play of younger children, the girls were engaged completely with one another as they constructed their play. Outside, the girls swam with each other and discovered several outdoor animals to observe (grasshopper, cricket and bees).

Jenny and Jamie had expectations for one another as soon as they began playing. They overtly expressed these expectations by suggesting to one another what they should do next. The girls caught onto each other's expectations by listening to key suggestions and prompts, with occasional use of bribes, ex. "If you don't help me organize then I am going back downstairs." Upon arrival, Jenny expected Jamie to engage in play with her. When Jamie entered Jenny's room, she expected Jenny to organize their play area. Throughout this study, I noticed the girls set expectations for each other the entire time. For example, during conversations, both girls expected open and effective communication during conversations with each other. At one point, Jenny showed how expectations support learning when she expected Jamie to swim in the in ground pool with her. The conversation went as follows:

Jenny: "Jamie, aren't you going to swim?" (*Jamie was standing near the edge of the pool, watching Jenny swim.*)

Jamie: "I'm not a good swimmer."

Jenny: "I will put the rope up, so you don't accidentally go into the deep end." (*Jenny puts a safety rope across the border of the shallow entering the deep.*)

Jamie: "I'm just going to go play over here." (*pointing to a stone area*)

Jenny: "I will give you a raft, this way you can float." (*Jenny hand Jamie a round doughnut shaped float.*)

Jamie: "I am still not a good swimmer Jenny."

Jenny: (*Yelling*) "Put the float around you and jump in, you are not going to die!"

Jamie: *Puts the float around her waist and jumps in screaming.*

From this conversation, it is apparent that Jenny had high expectations of Jamie even though Jamie expressed her fears and even tried to become engaged in another activity. Jenny used her

knowledge and experience of the pool to help comfort Jamie and encourage her to achieve more even though she was not originally familiar with a pool.

The girls displayed responsibility by engaging in appropriate activities without specific adult guidance. Jamie tried to get Jenny to organize and clean her bedroom. Jamie stated, “Your mom will be happy if we clean your room.” Jamie knew it was her responsibility to help her friend clean up their mess. On the other hand, since this was not Jamie’s house, she was also interested to see how much trouble she could get away with. Jamie tries to influence Jenny to steal things from her sibling’s room through the following conversation:

Jamie: “I found this bear, is it yours?”

Jenny: “No, that is my brother’s bear, he gave it to me when I was little.”

Jamie: “Does your brother steal out of your room?”

Jenny: “No, he doesn’t come in here.”

Jamie: “Maybe we should go look for your stuff in his room.”

Jenny: “No, I want to stay in here.”

Jamie: “Jenny, if your brother steals your stuff we have to get it back, lets go see.”

Jenny: “Okay.”

The girls went into Jenny’s brother’s room, explored around and touched a few things on his dresser. Jenny advised Jamie they should go back to her room to play. From this conversation, Jenny demonstrates responsibility by knowing that she is not supposed to be in her older brother’s room and influences her friend to do the right thing by returning to play.

When the girls played with moon sand, Jenny reminded Jamie not to mix the colors because they would get “messed up”. Jamie mixed two colors slightly, looking at Jenny for approval and Jenny took responsibility and told her, “If you do that again, we have to put it away, my mom will get mad.”

The girls used approximations when they were swimming in the pool outside. Jenny used her trial and error experiences in the pool to encourage Jamie to join in swimming. Jamie tried to do the swimming moves Jenny taught her and ended up sticking with what she felt was comfortable.

The girls demonstrated employment when they engaged in a spontaneous drawing session. The girls discovered drawing materials and immediately conversed with each other to determine what they wanted to draw. Jenny began drawing a flower and Jamie quickly copied

her. About half way through drawing each petal on the flower, the girls switched papers and decided that they should color in each others petals. The girls reinforced the fact that this “sharing” was a great idea and repeatedly looked at each other’s papers to see how they were doing. The girls then switched back and completed their drawings. Jenny wrote “Jamie, I love you” on her own drawing, and Jamie wrote “Mommy” on her own drawing. This shows that Jenny understands the concept of audience in writing whereas Jamie does not. The girls used what they learned from each other and what they already knew in order to create these spontaneous drawings. This was an example of social construction in its purest sense. Jenny and Jamie used responses as a form of feedback when conversing with one another. For example, when Jamie did not want to get into the pool, Jenny responded to her in a scaffolding manner in order to convince her to do the desired act (swim).

The benefits of play for language development include the use of oral language, complex cognitive abilities, reading and writing skills, challenges, experimentation, approximations, and negotiations. Before the girls engaged in play I informally interviewed them separately. During the interviews, both girls exhibited an advanced level of language development for their ages, however, Jenny was more talkative than Jamie. Jenny gave specific details in her answers, while Jamie’s answers were a little off topic. The girls used language to engage in dramatic play. When the girls were occupied in dramatic play, they faced many challenges (setting up, agreeing, role-playing) and were able to navigate through them. Dramatic play offered them an enjoyable language learning opportunity.

The girls engaged in the symbolic play of “house”. The girls used oral language to communicate with each other and used experimentation with objects around the bedroom to make their symbolic roles meaningful. Jenny immediately took advantage of a desk in her bedroom and covered it with a cloth. Jenny explained her role was going to be the mom and she is going to iron clothes on the desk.

Jenny: “Look! Sometimes I iron on this...” (*placing a cloth over the desk*)

Jamie: “Can I bring animals over there?”

Jenny: “I am going to be the mom and iron clothes on here.”

Jamie: “Pretend you say...’Bring me all of your clothes honey’.”

Jenny: “Bring me all of your clothes, Honey.”

Jamie: “Pretend I am not listening and you have to say it again.”

Jenny: “Bring me all of your clothes honey!” (*slightly louder*)

Jenny began to tell Jamie what to do as if she were really her mother. Jamie was acting like a rebellious child by telling Jenny, “pretend I’m not listening...” Eventually, the girls were engaged and pretended that they went shopping, to the daycare and built a farm. This shows how Jenny and Jamie use fantasizing, role playing, and problem solving which is important in literacy background knowledge. When readers approach text, they have to be able to interpret characters actions and feelings. This pretend play teaches the girls how to understand text. Throughout this symbolic play the girls’ use of oral language facilitates their literacy learning. This validates Isenberg and Jacob’s (1983) claim that when young children transform themselves into a specific role in symbolic play they are using oral language to communicate, and this in turn influences the development of written language (as cited in Hall, 1991, p.9).

Results of this study show that children develop language skills including reading and writing competence through social interaction by simply engaging in play. When given the opportunity to play together and learn through inquiry, young children *naturally* develop language skills through communicating, which in turn supports the development of reading and writing competence. When the girls were engaged in a spontaneous drawing activity, it was apparent that by imitating each other and sharing their ideas, they motivated each other to write a “message,” something co-constructed for an audience- each other.

During the play experience, Jenny and Jamie discovered a cabinet full of art supplies. Crayons, markers and paper were at their fingertips. Through social interactions during play, the girls engaged in spontaneous drawing and writing because the materials were available to them in this home environment. The girls communicated with each other while drawing, together, and after starting their own pictures, even switched drawings so that the other one could complete it. This was an example of total collaboration between author/artist and audience. The girls supported each other’s development in reading and writing competence by drawing and communicating freely as one. The girls wrote words on their pictures. Jenny wrote first, and when Jamie noticed her writing, she decided to mimic the literacy act. Jenny wrote, “Jamie, I love you” and Jamie wrote, “Mommy”. The girls used their phonetic knowledge of letters and sounds to create words that have meaning to them. These drawings show that when young children have the opportunity to create freely without direction and guidelines, they are able to create meaningful images independently and collaboratively and may even choose to write words

without being prompted to do so. The results from the drawings the girls created validate the statement that Gentile and Hoot (1983) argue, “Children become aware that images on paper are meaningful and say something” (as cited in Hall, 1991, p.8).

### ***Discussion***

Since the girls had an opportunity to participate in non-guided play, they engaged in literacy learning activities through social interaction while playing. After observing the videotapes, it is apparent that the environment plays a significant role in encouraging this. Implementing playful social interactions in my literacy classroom can be done effectively by creating a literacy rich environment that offers a dramatic play area and a variety of writing and drawing supplies.

At the end of the play experience the two girls were asked to reflect upon their day. They were given a sheet of paper and told to complete the sentence “Today I...” Jenny completed the sentence describing her thoughts and feelings. Jamie completed the sentence describing specific activities that were meaningful to her (See Appendix B). The girls completed an attitude scale to record how they felt during the play experience. The results indicate the language skills of each girl (See Appendix C). The girls also completed an iconic scale to rate their overall experience throughout the day. The results of the iconic scale indicate that the girls enjoyed their play activities (See Appendix D).

The results from the videotapes, journal reflections, attitude scale and iconic rating scale provide evidence that many complex literacy skills develop naturally through play. The data shows that young children who are involved in playful social interactions will develop literacy skills naturally. When provided with the opportunity to have personal choice and to socialize, the girls engaged in their own form of literacy learning that was meaningful to them. Collecting written responses without extensive prompting, for example in the journal reflections and spontaneous drawings, allowed us to see exactly what activities were meaningful to them.

We can implement playful social interactions in classrooms by allowing children the opportunity to communicate with peers in natural ways. In this particular study, literacy materials were “found” and used in a fun and engaging way. Setting up a literacy rich environment can be done by setting out particular materials for children to “find” and use on

their own. These results prove that Vygotsky's social construction can facilitate literacy learning in young children when they construct it themselves.

The purpose of our study was to learn how to implement playful social interactions in my literacy classroom. Such a social environment would allow us and others to create a classroom where literacy learning takes place in authentic ways through playful social interactions that may be designed by either the teacher or the children themselves.

Jenny and Jamie truly reflect how young minds work when given free choice. Young children need to have time to explore through their inquiry thought processes to discover their own meanings. Such construction of meaning is the "end product" of reading. Literacy practice was evident in Jenny and Jamie's social interactions with each other. They shared each other's language intimately, developed new knowledge from each other, had the opportunity to be creative and let their own motivation and imagination take control to play with what interested them, again driving their communication.

Setting up opportunities for children to work collaboratively in partnerships where both participants feel comfortable and safe with each other appears to support the development of language. For example, when the girls engaged in drawing they worked collaboratively in order to complete each others drawings. They felt safe enough to know that their contribution to the artwork was going to be accepted. The girls unintentionally supported each other's development in reading and writing competence by drawing and communicating together.

Allowing children to scaffold each other encourages them to make decisions and take responsibility for that learning. During play, Jenny scaffolds Jamie in order to get her to decide to swim. At first, Jamie was hesitant, and Jenny responded to her in a scaffolding manner in order to convince her to do the desired act. Through intrinsic motivation of peer pressure and Jenny's gentle prompting, Jamie agreed to swim with Jenny.

Role play, fantasy play, and playing with objects and costumes contribute to the girls' ability to transcend themselves and become whatever their heart desired. During dramatic play, the girls chose the roles they wanted and acted out the lives they imagined living. This transcendence into other characters assists young children in understanding text and relating to characters.

Children appear to set expectations for each other that may be even higher than those the teacher sets. For example, when Jenny expected Jamie to jump in the pool and swim

comfortably. Children can be responsible when playing by using the knowledge they already have and constructing new knowledge from interacting with their peers.

By understanding the dynamics of playful learning, I can implement a play environment in my classroom that fosters social interaction among my students. This in time will allow them to create and engage in meaningful experiences with language that will naturally develop their literacy skills. This study directly contrasts with current practices of teaching to curriculum and to the test.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

Play is a social phenomenon that children truly enjoy. Literacy skills appear to develop naturally within the context of this highly social interaction. While the benefits for literacy from play have been studied, it is accurate to say that educators still struggle to implement play in the classroom. This can result from overemphasis on rigid curricula and lack of understanding of how play develops literacy skills. Future research may focus on the teacher to explore why educators know that play is good, but do not implement regular times for social interactions within their classroom in order to facilitate literacy learning. A longitudinal study in multiple classrooms that use playful social interactions contrasted with classrooms that do not may reflect the benefits of play for learning literacy skills in a school environment.

## References

- Cambourne, B. (1995). Toward an educationally relevant theory of literacy learning: Twenty years of inquiry. *The Reading Teacher, 49(3)*, 182-190.
- Gentile, L., & Hoot, J. (1983). Kindergarten play: The foundation of reading. *The Reading Teacher, 36*, 436-439.
- Giles, R. M., & Wellhousen, K. (2005). Reading, writing, and running: Literacy learning on the playground. *The Reading Teacher, 59(3)*, 383-385.
- Hall, N. (1991). Play and the emergence of literacy. In J. Christie (Ed.), *Play and early literacy development* (pp.3-25). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Hall, N. (2000). Literacy, Play, and Authentic Experience. In K. Roskos & J. Christie (Eds.), *Play and literacy in early childhood: Research from multiple perspectives* (pp.189-204). New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Isenberg, J., & Jacob, E. (1983). Literacy and symbolic play: A review of the literature. *Childhood Education, 59(4)*, 272-276.
- Klenk, L. (2001). Playing with literacy in preschool classrooms. *Childhood Education, 150-157*.
- Mooney, C. (2000). *Theories of childhood: An introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget & Vygotsky*. Minnesota: Red Leaf Press.
- Neuman, S. (2000). Social Contexts for literacy development: A family literacy program. In K. Roskos & J. Christie (Eds.), *Play and literacy in early childhood: Research from multiple perspectives* (pp.153-168). New Jersey: Erlbaum.
- Patton, M., & Mercer, J. (1996). Hey! Where's the toys?: Play and literacy in 1<sup>st</sup> grade. *Childhood Education, 73(1)*, 1-10.
- Rushton, S. P., Eitelgeorge, J., & Zickafoose, R. (2003). Connecting Brian Cambourne's conditions of learning theory to brain/mind principals: Implications for early childhood educators, *Early Childhood Education Journal, 31(1)*, 11-21.
- Saracho, O. N. (2004). Supporting literacy-related play: Roles for teachers of young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 31(3)*, 201-206.
- Saracho, O. N. & Spodek, B. (2006). Young children's literacy-related play. *Early Child Development and Care, 176(7)*, 707-721.
- Tsao, Y. L. (2008). Using guided play to enhance children's conversation, creativity and competence in literacy. *Education, 128(3)*, 515-520.

Werquin, P. (2005). Literacy: Words count. *OECD Observer, 251*, 32-34.

Wilford, S. (2000). *From play to literacy: Implications for the classroom*. New York: Child Development Institute.

Williams, M., & Rask, H. (2003). Literacy through play: How families with able children support their literacy development. *Early Child Development and Care, 173(5)*, 527-533.

## **Appendix A**

Figure 1: Informal Ethnographic Interview Questions

Who do you like to play with?

What do you talk about when you play?

Where do you like to play?

When do you play?

Why do you talk when you play?

How do talk when you play?

**Appendix A**

Figure 2: Jenny's Response

Informal Ethnographic Interview- Child #1

Who do you like to play with?

Uhh... Emily, Iris + Madison

What do you talk about when you play?

toys

Where do you like to play?

at Kandyland kids

When do you play?

After lunch

Why do you talk when you play?

so we get to know each other

How do talk when you play?

Saying, "Hi + Hello"  
+ saying "how you doing?"

**Appendix A**

Figure 2: Jamie's Response

Informal Ethnographic Interview- Child #2

Who do you like to play with?

"I like to play with my doggy Sammy"

Is there anyone else? - NO - cuz my brothers a "freako"

What do you talk about when you play?

Nothing

I just say "nee" on slides + swings + sometimes I dont use hands

Where do you like to play?

outside + in the park

When do you play?

After dinner or before dinner

Why do you talk when you play?

bc I like to

How do talk when you play?

"The way I really do talk"

**Appendix B**

Figure 1: Journal Reflection

Today I...

Appendix B

Figure 2: Jenny's Response

Today I... Had FUN WITH  
EMILIE WENT I  
PLAY WITH HER.  
WE PLAYED  
WITH MOM  
SAD. I HAD  
THAT SHE  
CANCUMAGAN.

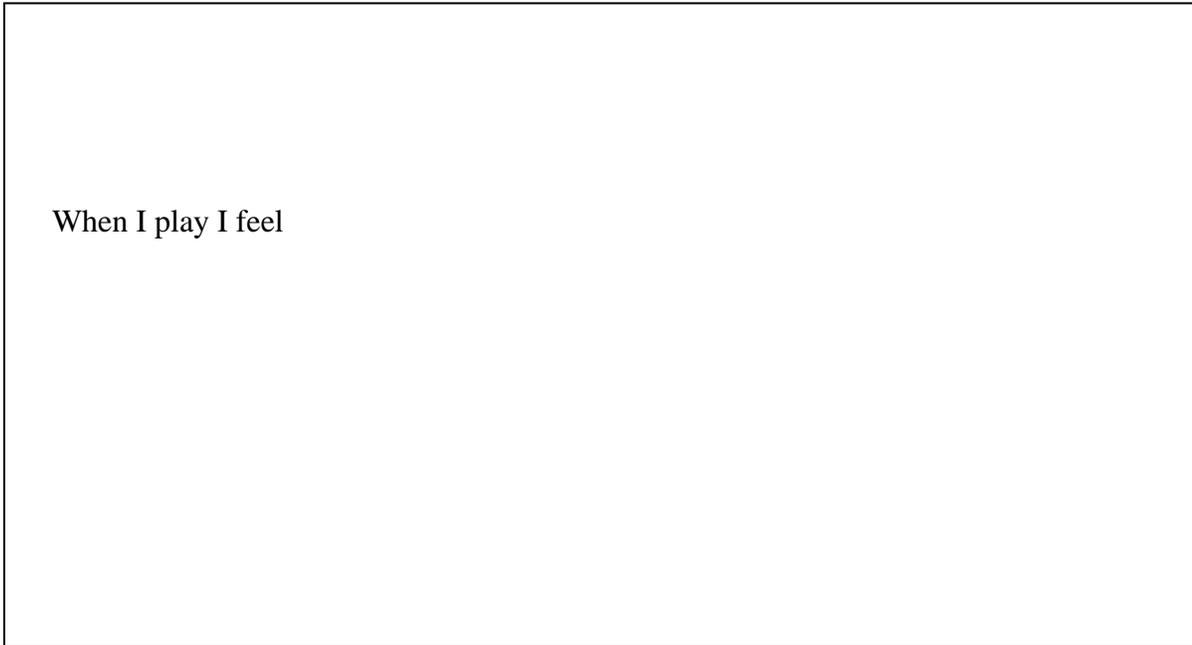
Appendix B

Figure 2: Jamie's Response

Today I... I had swimming  
in the pool.  
I so vack as Trd.  
me and Jenna  
fond a G has not.  
we could and  
play school!

**Appendix C**

Figure 1: Attitude Scale



**Appendix C**

Figure 2: Jenny Response- top

Jamie Response- bottom

When I play I feel HAPPY

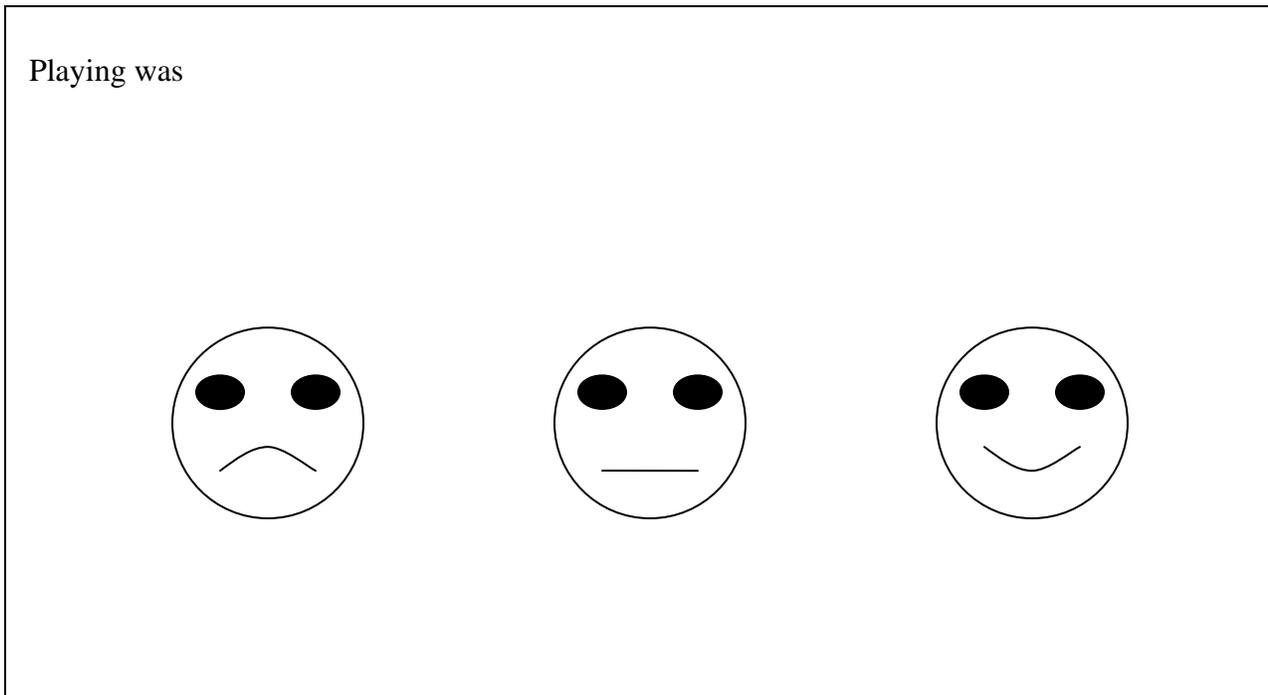
---

When I play I feel

dissy

**Appendix D**

Figure 1: Iconic Rating Scale

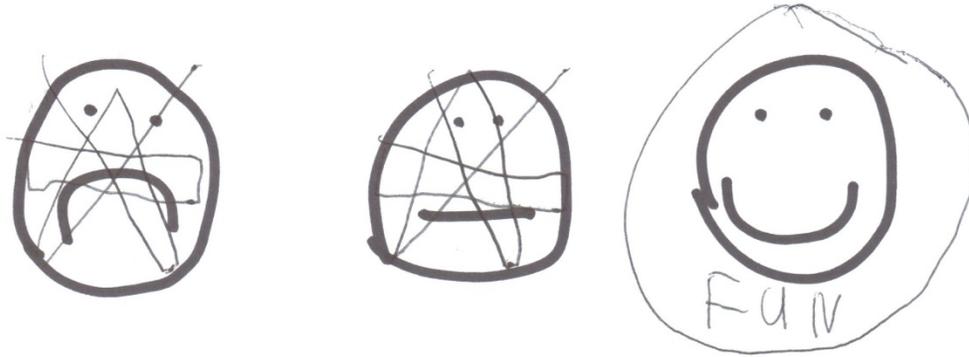


**Appendix D**

Figure 2- Jenny Response-top

Jamie Response-bottom

Playing was



Playing was

