

**What Will it Be? An Investigation of Play with Open-ended Materials
in a Preschool Classroom**

by

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study was to investigate what types of play children engaged in with open-ended materials in a public preschool classroom during the portion of the day that is scheduled for free play. The guiding questions were 1) What types of play are children engaging in with open-ended materials during free play? 2) What strategies do teachers use to support children's play with open-ended materials?

Procedure: The study was an action research completed in the researcher's full-day preschool classroom. The classroom was part of the General Childcare Program of a medium-sized school district in Northern California. Students were from predominantly Latino and African American ethnic backgrounds. At the time of the study 21 of 23 enrolled students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The methods of data collection were, staff member interviews, in-class observations of children's play and staff strategies to support play, and review of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised.

Findings: Children were observed engaging in solitary/constructive, solitary/dramatic, associative/constructive, and associative/dramatic play. The most frequently observed teacher strategy to support play was visually monitoring play from a standing or sitting position. Male students were observed playing with open-ended materials in the open space of the block area and at activity tables. Female students were observed playing with open-ended materials at activity tables.

Conclusions: Staff members did not use verbal communication as a strategy to support children's play. Professional development focused on teacher-child interaction can improve staff use of verbal communication strategies to facilitate play.

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Introduction to the Study

I began working in the field of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in 2007 and have served as an early educator in a variety of public play-based programs providing services to young children and their families. The settings I have served in are a university based toddler program, part-day Head Start preschool in a rural community, after school program at an elementary school, full-day Head Start in an urban community, California State Preschool in diverse settings. The families I have served have been racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, as well as from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. My undergraduate educational background is in human development with an emphasis in child development, and it is from this perspective that I approach work as an early childhood educator. The relationship between child development and early childhood education fuels my curiosity and informs my teaching practice. In my teaching practice, I strive to know my students, to nurture a classroom culture of warmth and exploration, to plan according to children's interests, and to facilitate young children's communication of ideas, creativity, and learning. Providing place, time, and attentiveness to play in the early childhood classroom supports my philosophy of teaching. Play is a natural and widespread characteristic of child development, and in the play-based early childhood classroom, children's play informs curriculum as well as the learning environment. The investigation of play presents the opportunity to observe child development in action within the early childhood classroom.

The study of play appealed to me after completing the Sonoma State University course *The Role of Play in Development and Learning* with Dr. Bacigalupa and Dr. Filp-

Hanke. Prior to the course, I was unfamiliar with the extent of definitions of play, research on play, and diversity of theories of play in early childhood. As an early childhood educator in play-based programs, I have come to understand the significance of play for young children as a tool of learning, yet the course provided a theoretical context for play as well as incentive to be an advocate for play-based learning.

The definition of play that I take from the course is based upon the work of Fromberg and Bergen (2006), and includes the following elements:

- play is freely chosen and self-directed
- play is transformative giving new meaning to common objects, ideas, and actions,
- play relates to and builds upon prior knowledge and experiences,
- play is active engagement whether individuals are using their minds or bodies,
- and play is enjoyable

The projects that remain most with me are the writing of my personal play history and the design of a learning story. Through the play history, I connected personal recollections of meaningful play experiences from childhood to major play theories, as well as my approach to play in my teaching practice. Significant play experiences in my childhood shared the elements of freedom to choose how I would structure my activity and use of play materials, creativity, and unstructured time to pursue play. As I reflected on my personal history of play, I questioned whether the experiences that have shaped my play history are available to the children whose lives I am now influencing in my

work. Are the children in my classroom experiencing play as defined above, or is their play different than this theoretical definition of play?

The learning story assignment required that I closely observe a child during play and document all that the child was learning through play. The observation period was followed by the design of a play situation that would serve to extend the child's learning through a playful experience. Considering that this type of observation, planning, and implementation of environmental changes should ideally be driving my students' learning experiences in the classroom, it was fascinating to examine the variety of cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical skills that a child uses and develops through play.

For the project, I chose to observe a 33-month old boy who loved to play with trains, whom I will call Cody. Cody loved trains and his parents had purchased him many toys that were character-themed and specific to the train play theme. I was interested in the idea of decontextualization. As defined by Morgenthaler (2006), "Decontextualization refers to the level of similarity between the play object and its make-believe function" (p. 65). The question that arose during my observations of Cody was, "Would Cody be able to imagine that an unspecific play material (blocks) could be part of his play with trains?" Through concrete manipulations of objects, children are practicing skills that will help them make the transition from concrete to abstract thought (Halpenny & Petersen, 2013). During the planned play episode, Cody was provided with train tracks but no trains. Rather than vehicles, foam blocks were offered to him during his play. At first Cody was confused and asked where the trains were, but with adult scaffolding by asking interrogative what, why, and how questions, Cody used the blocks for trains and was able to make the mental connection that a block could be a train in his

play. It is amazing how the mind of a child so smoothly grasps concepts, and the subtle developmental changes and learning that occur when one takes the time to closely observe and support children's play.

Observation, reflection, and change are foundations of reflective teaching.

Reflective educators are in tune with their students, the instructional environment, and the personal history that defines who they are as an educator and how they relate to their students in teaching practice. A professional goal that I have is to be a reflective educator who is responsive to the fluidity and delicate balance of children's freedom and adult input in young children's explorations and learning. How can I, as an educator, implement reflective teaching in a play-based environment? This question guided me to my choice of thesis project. I wanted to explore play, but more specifically play with unspecific objects like building materials (blocks, Legos, manipulatives). While we learn to help support children's imaginative play in the dramatic area where they are provided with props and encouraged to pretend, what types of play are occurring in other classroom areas? Is imaginative play encouraged and supported in areas where there are less specific play materials?

Problem Statement

The purpose of the study is to investigate what types of play children are engaging in with open-ended materials in a public preschool classroom during the portion of the day that is scheduled for free play. For this study open-ended materials are defined as materials that do not have a single purpose of use; they are flexible allowing children to use them to develop their own play themes focused on how they choose to use the

materials (Broadhead & Burt, 2012). The guiding questions of the project are: 1) What types of play are children engaging in with open-ended materials during free play? 2) What strategies do teachers use to support children's play with open-ended materials?

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

Introduction

Young children's natural curiosity and enthusiasm for fun can be a platform on which to support learning in early childhood education settings through intentional, well-planned, and responsive teaching. Most early childhood educators share a belief that learning in the early years should be engaging and child-directed (Lee, 2006). In early childhood, children learn through their play (Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). Play has been a significant feature of early childhood education programs for years (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Through play young children generate knowledge, practice skills, and create representations of their world (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). While there is agreement upon the widespread nature of play, a unified definition of play remains elusive (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

The review of related literature is guided by the research questions 1) What types of play are children engaging in with open-ended materials during free play? 2) What strategies do teachers use to support children's play with open-ended materials? The chapter will discuss the following topics: defining play, the play scale, imaginative play and learning, early educator approaches to play, the cognitive preschool and the playful preschool, quality in early childhood education, and lastly, conclusions and connections to the current study.

Defining Play

Most early childhood educators can generate attributes of what they believe constitutes play, but there is no specific agreed upon definition of what play is (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). Definitions of play and theories of play have built upon the work of theorists of different fields including, child development, psychology, and education. Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, and Singer (2009) in their book *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence*, define eight features of play:

- it is enjoyable,
- has no goals beyond the play itself,
- is unplanned,
- is actively engaging,
- is captivating to the player,
- frequently involves a personal reality,
- is non literal,
- and may have an imaginative make believe component to it

Play is not uniquely human, but imagination is (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, Van Hoorn, & Almy, 1987).

Piaget (1962) has contributed to the field of early childhood education and some of his ideas remain significant influences in early childhood classrooms and teaching practices. Piaget proposed the concepts of assimilation and accommodation in his theory of cognitive development (Piaget, 1999; Halpenny & Petersen, 2014). Assimilation

ensues when new information is organized based on a current understanding of one's world, while accommodation occurs when new information does not fit into one's present understanding of the world and thus the worldview or schema, must be adjusted to incorporate the new information (Piaget, 1999; Halpenny & Petersen, 2014). In relation to play, from this perspective, children are active learners within their environments who construct knowledge through experience with their surroundings (Piaget, 1999; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008). This illustrates the value given to child-directed activities and free-play in early childhood classrooms. As such, children benefit from learning environments that encourage active learning through exploration and intellectual challenge. In play, children freely choose and structure their activity, are actively involved with their environments, and waver between reality and pretense. Play becomes an ideal setting for assimilation and accommodation. Adults provide appropriately challenging environments to encourage exploration and facilitate children's construction of knowledge. However, we live in social environments as well as physical environments and humans are inherently social beings.

Social setting is significant in the construction of knowledge, because of the power of communication, the connection of language to symbolic thought and pretense, and the value of enhanced learning experiences that occur in social settings (Vygotsky, 1978). In play, children create imaginary worlds, assign pretend roles to objects and people, and navigate through social rules (Vygotsky, 1978). In play, children make sense of their social histories, current social setting, and their diverse social abilities. Social interaction enriches play by adding elements of knowledge and experiences from peers and adults.

Imaginative play is the realm where children can practice moving from concrete to abstract thought, as they act independently of their actual environments. For this study, play is defined by the following qualities: play is freely chosen and self-directed; play is transformative, giving new meaning to normal objects, ideas, and actions; play relates to and builds upon former knowledge and experiences; play is active engagement whether individuals are using their minds or bodies; and play is enjoyable (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006). A working definition is the beginning of a study of play. The importance of play in learning is given greater power in society when there is agreement on what play is, and the situations, interactions and environments that support learning through play (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). A play scale is essential in desiring to describe play and how it differs developmentally depending on the players,

Play Scale

Parten (1932) studied social participation of preschoolers and developed categories to describe the behaviors she observed among children. Behaviors were identified as unoccupied behavior (the child watches and follows anything exciting and when there is no excitement the child is unoccupied), onlooker behavior (the child watches the play of others staying close to the play and asks questions about the play), solitary play (the child plays alone with materials different from those around them and is unconcerned with the play of others near them), parallel play (the child plays alone with materials that are similar to the peers around them), associative play (the child plays with other children with similar materials and there is communication between children), and cooperative play (the child plays in a group of children where every child has goals for the play and a distinct role in the play) (Parten, 1932). These categories of social

participation remain a tool used to describe the play of young children. For the purposes of the following study these categories are relevant to the descriptions of types of play in a public preschool classroom.

Piaget identified the developmental sequence of play as beginning with functional play, followed by constructive play, dramatic play, and lastly games with rules (Halpenny & Petersen, 2013). Smilansky (1968), working with disadvantaged preschoolers, described stages of play development and built upon the play stages of Piaget. Smilansky emphasized the social nature of play as well as the impact of dramatic play, specifically sociodramatic play on children's holistic development (Smilansky, 1968). The stages of play development described by Smilansky are functional play; playing with one's physical body (includes imitation and repetition of movement); constructive play (play that creates and constructs); dramatic play (play that is a recreation of the present world into an imaginative world that pleases the child); and games with rules (play that is organized around accepting rules and adjusting behavior to act within the agreed upon set of rules) (Smilansky, 1968). These stages extend beyond early childhood.

Smilansky emphasized sociodramatic play as a distinct well-developed form of dramatic play. Dramatic play and sociodramatic play share elements of imitative role play, make-believe meaning given to objects, make-believe influences on actions and situations, and persistence, but only sociodramatic play includes interaction and verbal communication (Smilansky, 1968). Sociodramatic play is prevalent in preschool and decreases in frequency beyond the preschool years. Smilansky stressed the role of language and interaction in mature sociodramatic play, arguing that sociodramatic play is active and setting the physical environment is not enough to motivate sociodramatic play

(Smilansky, 1968). As the following study takes into account the strategies teachers use to encourage play of children with open-ended materials, the Smilansky stages of play development are a relevant tool to describe imaginative play. Despite the many ways that play is evident within the activities of young children and its history in early childhood education, there is ever present a debate about its role in early learning (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Whitebread, Jameson, & Lander, 2009).

Imaginative Play and Learning

Play is an integral part of child development and a component of developmentally appropriate practice in preschool (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Young children need to play. Children develop, and practice a variety of cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical skills through play (Almon, 2003; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Hanline, 1999; Ok, 2000; Ramani, 2012; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008). Early childhood education settings provide environments where children's play can be encouraged and supported as a vehicle of learning, because for children, play and learning are not mutually exclusive (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Bodrova, 2008; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; DellaMattera, 2010). Sociodramatic play incorporates a variety of socioemotional and cognitive skills as children share ideas, build upon prior knowledge, create imaginary situations, assume roles, and negotiate roles (Ashiabi, 2007; Bodrova, 2008; Smilansky, 1968). In play, children manipulate the materials of their environment to build knowledge and understanding of their world (Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Ramani, 2012; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Children maintain their internal concepts

about their surroundings which may differ from the external reality (Bodrova, 2008).

Imagination is created by building upon a child's unique experiences and can be seen in the play of young children (Bodrova, 2008). Through imaginary play children express their ability to understand abstract ideas and think symbolically (Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Singer, Singer, Paskon, & Schweder, 2003). This ability to begin to practice symbolic thought is a precursor to later requirements of formal schooling.

In play, children are practicing skills they have already mastered, but also exploring new possibilities. Make-believe play reveals a child's current understanding of the world and it is through play that their knowledge can be extended (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Smilansky, 1968). Play requires flexibility and provides an instrument through which young children can develop executive cognitive skills (Whitebread, Jameson, & Lander, 2009). Bodrova argued that children who develop mature play, which makes greater use of symbolism, are more skilled at later academics than children who have not developed mature play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Bodrova, 2008). In her study of the impact of sociodramatic play on the school readiness of disadvantaged preschoolers, Smilansky found that sociodramatic play develops in children creativity, intellectual growth and social skills that are valuable not only in play, but in adult life (Smilansky, 1968).

How are children playing in current early childhood settings? Early childhood classrooms may be the only training ground for some children to learn to play as the structure of our education system segregates children by age, and the role of older children as play models in some instances has transitioned to early childhood teachers (Bodrova, 2008). As our society becomes more technologically oriented, and play materials have become more specific, the play of children does not look the same as it did in past generations. Early childhood education classrooms may be the settings where children are expected to play, but the play of children within most early childhood settings is not mature play (Bodrova, 2008). The play is not mature because rather than being thematically well-developed, imaginative, and encouraging language and social interaction, the play in early childhood settings is diminishing with the pressure to become increasingly focused on cognitive skills (Ashiabi, 2007; Bodrova, 2008; DellaMattera, 2010). Bodrova and Leong (2003) described mature play as being comprised of the following elements: imaginative situations, multiple roles, clearly defined rules, flexible themes, language development, and length of play. Children are active learners who need rich environments of physical materials and social interaction to develop mature play. The classroom environment and the teacher's participation in play influence the learning and development that occurs through play (Ashiabi, 2007; Chien, Howes, Pianta, Burchinal, Ritchie, Bryant, Clifford, Early, & Barbarin, 2010; Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Bodrova, 2008).

Early Educator Approaches to Play

The relationship between adults and children in a learning environment is a valuable factor of children's development (Vygotsky, 1978). Intellectually challenging learning environments provide choice for children and a variety of experiences that encourage children to manipulate their concrete surroundings, which will build cognitive connections that can later help with the learning of abstract concepts (Halpenny & Pettersen, 2012; Piaget, 1999). Early learning environments that afford time and space for children to creatively manipulate materials help children to exercise and expand their developing cognitive skills. As children construct their knowledge, teachers, as more knowledgeable adults, can support children's learning through intentional teaching (Halpenny & Pettersen, 2012).

The significance of the relationship between adults and children during learning can be illustrated by the zone of proximal development which is the space where children are able to complete a task they are unable to complete alone with the help of a more knowledgeable adult or peer (Vygotsky, 1978). Early childhood educators can help children navigate through the zone of proximal development when they intentionally support children's learning through sensitivity to a child's unique developmental level. For Vygotsky play was a driving force of child development because it provides a safe setting where children can express their developmental level (Bodrova, 2008). Adults have a valuable role in the development of children's learning. Vygotsky (1978) building on the work of prior constructivists researchers brought a focus to the interactions between children and adults in learning. One can know what a child can do

developmentally on their own but there are also skills that are developing in the child that can only be understood when they are viewed in light of what the child can do with the help of a more knowledgeable adult or peer (Vygotsky, 1978). Assessing children on developmental skills that have been reached without considering skills that are still developing does not give a clear picture of what the child has learned.

Teachers in early childhood settings assume different roles as they interact with children in play and utilize various strategies to observe and extend children's play in preschool (Hirsh-Pasek, Golikoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Lee, Kinzie, & Whittaker, 2012). Early childhood teachers have varied opinions about the teacher's role in children's play. However, teachers decide the significance of play in their early childhood classrooms and how they as teachers will be involved in children's play (Ashiabi, 2007; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010).

An initial strategy of supporting children's play is the design of the learning environment (Bodrova, 2008; Ok, 2000; Samuelsson & Carlsoon, 2008; Smilansky, 1968; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). If play is to be the vehicle of learning, children need a rich space as well as ample time to become immersed in play. Teachers who set the stage of the classroom may first plan a learning environment that generates and encourages learning experiences through play. Teachers' roles may include providing props, introducing and helping children navigate new roles and play themes, and helping children plan and sustain play (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Ok, 2000).

Engaging in meaningful conversation with children about their play is a second strategy of supporting play in early childhood classrooms. Communication and language are important in representing ideas and regulating behavior (Whitebread, Coltman, Jameson, & Lander, 2009). Early childhood education should stress interaction and communication between children and between children and early childhood educators (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Ok, 2000). In order to scaffold learning and guide children's play towards concept development, early educators must communicate with children (Bodrova, 2008; de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenberg, & Weitzman, 2005; Ok, 2000; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Smilansky, 1968; Tomkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici, 2013; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013; Ashiabi, 2007). When children are able to verbalize, and plan their play, they are moving towards more mature play; language and social interaction is integral to active learning in young children (Ok, 2000; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Smilansky, 1968; Tompkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici, 2013). Communicating with teachers about play also allows children to reflect on their play and provides educators with a window into children's thinking. Successful teachers are actively engaged in planning learning goals that account for the uniqueness of each child. Teaching through play requires educators who have a strong understanding of how play fuels young children's learning, and skill in observing and extending learning through play (Bodrova, 2008; Emslie & Mesle, 2009).

In a study of classroom engagement and kindergarten readiness, Chien, Howes, Pianta, Burchinal, Ritchie, Bryant, Clifford, Early, and Barbarin (2010)

found that the classroom engagement model of free-play had the least gains of cognitive skills and language. Free-play is a prevalent classroom model for some play-based programs. In free-play without adult guidance toward learning goals, children are not encouraged to focus on learning (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013). Guided play can be a midpoint between free-play and adult-direction. In guided play, teachers can be players with children and as such, active contributors to learning. Teachers may carefully construct environments that focus explorations on specific learning that follows children's leads. Children benefit when teachers are actively engaged in helping them verbalize, process, and plan their play through reciprocal communication that draws out and expands children's thinking (Ok, 2000, Lee, Kinzie, & Whittaker, 2012).

Play with open-ended materials allows children to construct new understanding with a greater focus on the process of learning rather than a preconceived product because of the multiple uses of these materials. Mature players are able to use less specific props in their play as they grow in the ability to use symbolic thought giving new meaning to objects (Fleer, 2011). Children's play is often based on materials, themes, and activities that are familiar to them. However, play also provides a place of cognitive flexibility where reality and pretend merge, interact, and have the potential to become something unique (Ramani, 2012).

Questioning encourages children to use language, practice conversational skills, and model adults (de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenberg, & Weitzman, 2005). Open-ended questions invite children to elaborate their responses beyond a yes or no answer and practice using longer forms of discourse (de Rivera, Girolametto, Greenberg, &

Weitzman, 2005; Lee, Kinzie, & Whittaker, 2012). Similar to open-ended materials open-ended questions may elicit a variety of relevant responses. Flexibility and creativity of thought are desired skills of K-12 schooling.

The Cognitive Preschool and the Playful Preschool

Presently, there is a greater focus on cognitive skills rather than a holistic whole-child (cognitive, socio-emotional, physical) approach to preschool education, as our public education system within the United States has shifted to a greater focus on standards and standardized testing (Hirsh-Pasek, Golikoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; DellaMattera, 2010; Stipek, 2006). There has been a debate over teacher-directed versus child-directed learning in preschool settings and historically the two have been seen in opposition to each other (Fleer, 2011; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009). They are seen as opposite ends of a continuum, where on the one, end you have adult structured and controlled environments and at the other end children playing without purpose. The pressures involved with standards, standardized testing, and accountability that have been placed on public education is trickling down to preschool, as efforts are made to ensure that children are school ready at ever younger ages (DellaMattera, 2010; Stipek, 2006).

Early childhood educators are being pressured to teach academic skills at younger ages while the traditional socioemotional skills of early childhood education are marginalized (Bodrova, 2008; DellaMattera, 2010; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley & Nell, 2008; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010; Stipek, 2006; Almon,

2003; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997). However, current research supports a combination of child-directed learning and teacher-directed learning that yields a more comprehensive and developmentally appropriate environment for the development of the whole child (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Thomas, Warren & deVries, 2011). Demands for academics and accountability in line with K-12 changing standards is diminishing play in early childhood education (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; DellaMattera, 2010; Stipek, 2006). The focus on transmitting academic skills to young children may pressure early childhood educators to use methods of teaching that are inappropriate for young children and limiting of time and space for play (Ashiabi, 2007; Bodrova, 2008; DellaMattera, 2010). Children should develop cognitive skills in early childhood education, but academic skills do not have to be the predominant focus. Academic skills can be learned through play (Ashiabi, 2007; Bodrova, 2008; Chien, Howes, Pianta, Burchinal, Ritchie, Bryant, Clifford, Early, and Barbarin, 2010; Drew, Christie, Johnson, Meckley, & Nell, 2008; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013).

Quality in Early Childhood Education

In the United States quality in early childhood education is now spotlighted as increasing numbers of young children are entering early childhood education settings (McDonald, 2009). States, including California, are seeking ways to improve quality of programs in early childhood education. Quality within the profession of early childhood education requires tools which establish, monitor, and improve program quality, develop professional educators, and meet the diverse needs of the children and families served

through early childhood education programs. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised (ECERS—R) (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), and Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS) are tools to assess classroom quality and work towards higher quality programs. Taken together they are able to give a more holistic picture of early childhood programs by describing programs health and safety standards, classroom social climate, curriculum framework, and learning goals. All three tools depend upon criteria for assessing quality that are consistent with play-based curriculum.

Conclusions and the Current Study

There is no single definition of what play is, although most early educators agree that it is a defining aspect of early childhood education (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Sherwood & Reifel, 2010). In quality early childhood education programs children require time to engage in child-directed play-based activities. Observing a child's play as opposed to mastery of discrete academic skills is a more accurate example of future skills (Bodrova, 2008; Ramani, 2012). States are required to create early learning standards to align with K-12 standards, but standards do not allow much flexibility to focus on children's interests' and diverse skill levels (Stipek, 2006). To illustrate the power of play in learning in early childhood education classrooms, one must first know what types of play are occurring in the classroom. Play has a significant role in the learning of young children, but it is mature play that is associated with academic skills (Bodrova, 2008; Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golikoff, 2013). Is the play in public preschool classrooms mature and well-developed? How are teachers approaching play in early childhood classrooms? These questions led to the current qualitative exploratory study which seeks

to describe the types of play occurring with open-ended materials in a public preschool classroom, and the strategies that teachers use to support play in a public preschool classroom.

Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose of the study was to investigate what types of play children are engaging in with open-ended materials in a public preschool classroom during the portion of the day that is scheduled for free-play. The guiding questions of the project are 1) What types of play are children engaging in with open-ended materials during free-play? 2) What strategies do teachers use to support children's play with open-ended materials?

The study was action research, and was completed in the researcher's regular classroom. Hendricks (2013) explains, "In action research, practitioners systematically look at ways to deal with issues they are close to, such as instructional practices, social issues of schooling, collaboration with colleagues, or supervision of staff" (p.4). In this study, the focus was on the ways children in the researcher's classroom engaged in play with open-ended materials, and the ways in which staff members supported that play.

The methods of data collection for the study were participant observation and interviews. In the study setting, the researcher was a classroom teacher facilitating normal classroom activities and thus a participant observer (Hendricks, 2013). The choice of semi-structured interviews where the researcher prepared planned questions, but also allowed participants to share information relating to the planned questions (Hendricks, 2013), were designed to help understand staff member's instructional strategies, and philosophy of play in preschool.

The study was completed in a full-day preschool classroom located at an elementary school. The preschool classroom is part of the General Childcare Program of a medium-sized public K-12 school district in Northern California. As of the 2013-2014

school year the district ethnic distribution of students was estimated as 36% Hispanic/Latino of any race, 0.4% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3% Asian, 2% Pacific Islander, 16% Filipino, 30% African American, 9% White, 2% Two or More Races, with 1.6% of students not identifying an ethnicity. Within the district, distribution of enrolled students by gender is 52% male and 48% female. At the time of the study 23 children were enrolled in the full-day preschool classroom. The children were predominantly from Latino and African American ethnic backgrounds with a small number of students from mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. Twenty-one of the students were eligible for free or reduced meals and two students were enrolled as fee paying. There were 13 girls and 10 boys enrolled in the classroom ranging in age from three years to five years old. The center opened at 7:00am and closed at 5:30pm. Children attended class based on their contracted hours of attendance, which varied depending on parents' need for childcare. Most children arrived at the center by 9:30am and left the center by 5:00pm. Classroom staff included two fully-qualified Child Development Teachers (one of whom was the researcher), two Child Development Assistants, and one Substitute Child Development Assistant. Site administration was overseen by a full-time Child Development Site Supervisor.

The daily schedule allows for three time periods exclusively designated for free choice, where all classroom interest areas are available for children to choose from. (See Appendix A) The classroom interest areas are manipulatives, music and movement, dramatic play, blocks, computer, reading/library, quiet area, art, science, Kimochis house (social emotional curriculum characters classroom home), and sand and water (See Appendix B). Typical materials available to children during free choice by area are:

- Manipulative Area- assorted large and small wooden puzzles, magnatiles, bristle builders, table top foam blocks, large lacing beads
- Music and Movement- CD player, assorted CDs, assorted child-sized instruments, movement mats, flannel song/story pieces, dancing scarves, sound identification games
- Dramatic Area- Assorted dress up clothes, pretend props (food, work, home, fantasy), baby dolls, child-sized home furniture, mirrors
- Block Area - foam blocks, large waffle blocks, block people and animals, trains and assorted train tracks, floor puzzles, natural wooden blocks, Legos,
- Computer Area- Two standard desktop computers with internet access
- Library/Reading- Assorted paper and board books, puppets, stuffed animals, pillows
- Quiet Area- Assorted sized pillows, stuffed animals
- Art Area- easel tempera paint, various sized paint brushes, paint cups, stamps, paint rollers, watercolor, drawing paper, markers, crayons, stamps, paper scraps, assorted collage materials, playdough
- Science Area- magnifying glasses, magnet wands, scale, magnetic shapes, acrylic natural specimens, natural items (pinecones, wood, shells, quartz), science themed books
- Sand and Water- Sand or water, assorted scoops, spoons, measuring cups, molds, magnetic fish and fishing poles, funnels
- Kimochis House- Characters and corresponding feelings pillows, child-sized chair

During free choice children choose where they want to work. However, some areas do have established classroom limits on how many children may occupy the interest area at one time. These areas are the quiet area, which is reserved for one child at a time, the dramatic area that allows a maximum of four children to play at one time, Kimochis House, which allows a maximum of two children to play at one time, the computer area, which allows a maximum of two children at a time, and sand and water which allows a maximum of three children to play at one time. Other interest areas are open to as many children as are able to play comfortably. The only interest area where there is the use of a time limitation on access is the computer area, where staff monitor computer turns to a daily maximum of 15-20 minutes.

Prior to beginning the study, parents of all enrolled children were contacted, informed of the purpose of the study, and their child was invited to participate in the study. Of the parents who gave consent for their child's participation, four children were chosen (two boys and two girls). All of the children were age four years or five years old and had strong verbal skills in English as reported by classroom teachers. The sample was a convenience sample. The children having been chosen based on contracted hours, allowing for, attendance in the morning free-play period (7:00-10:45 am) and in the afternoon free-play period (2:30-4:00 pm). Children were informed during large group circle time that the study would be conducted and that the investigator/their classroom teacher wanted to learn about how they play.

A combination Parten (1932) and Smilansky (1968) play scale was chosen to identify types of children's play (See Appendix D). The goal of identifying children's play was first, to describe each play episode as an observed behavior (Parten, 1932) and

as a point on the continuum of play development (Smilansky, 1968). The second goal was to describe the complexity of children's play. Complexity, as defined here, refers to children's engagement in play which features symbolic representation, the assumption and negotiation of play roles, language development, and social interaction. And lastly, the goal of observational data collected and organized using the play scale was to investigate how observed play behaviors of children with open-ended materials may relate to teacher strategies to support play.

Prior to beginning in-class data collection, one Child Development Teacher, the two Child Development Assistants, and the Substitute Child Development Assistant were invited to participate in the study through an informal interview with the investigator, and in-class observations of their strategies to support play. During the interview sessions staff members were asked to share information about their length of time working in the field of early childhood education, their definition of play, the role of play in preschool, strategies that they use to support children's play, and their familiarity with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Dimensions Guide (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre 2008).

The goal of the interview sessions was to identify staff strategies to support play, and describe teaching staff member's definition of play, and philosophy towards play. The researcher hypothesized that staff member's definition of play, and philosophy towards play in preschool would relate to their choice of strategies to support play. The data from staff interviews would be used as a tool to establish possible strategies to look for during the in-class observations of children's play and teaching staff strategies to support play. The researcher was interested in staff member's familiarity with the CLASS

Dimensions Guide (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), because it is a tool to improve program quality by assessing the social and emotional climate of the classroom, with focus given to interactions between teaching staff and children. CLASS is a valuable tool of reflection, and training in CLASS is a requirement for most state-funded early childhood quality improvement programs, and state-funded professional development stipends in California. The investigator gave staff the option of having interviews audio-recorded and also used written notes of staff responses during the interviews sessions. Staff answers were transcribed for future data analysis.

In-class observations occurred over a six-week period during the winter, which was extended to eight weeks because of the winter holidays (the holidays limited opportunities for in-class data collection). Observations were planned twice weekly Wednesday and Friday for two weeks, Tuesday and Thursday for four weeks, and Monday and Wednesday for two weeks. The time of in-class observations alternated between morning and afternoon free-play sessions. In-class observations occurred for two 10 minute intervals with a five minute break between observations to organize notes. The investigator used a written observation guide of play scales and teacher strategies to record observations of children's play with open-ended materials and teacher strategies to support play.

The data collected from the informal interviews was analyzed and grouped by overarching themes that arose from teacher responses. The in-class observation data of teaching staff was organized to establish categories of observed teacher strategies. In-class observations of children's play with open-ended materials was analyzed and grouped according to type of play observed with particular attention to gender differences

in types of play. In-class observation data of teacher strategies to support play was compared to teacher reported interview data about the strategies they use.

The investigator also reviewed the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) scores and notes for Item 17 Using language to develop reasoning skills and Item 32 Staff-child interactions. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) was an annual requirement for the preschool classroom, because the classroom was funded through the state of California. Completion of Environment Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) is an annual requirement of all state-funded child development classrooms. The scores and score notes were compared to in-class teacher strategy observations and the differences in children's type of play with open-ended materials.

Limitations

The study is a qualitative action research study and therefore, not generalizable beyond the current setting, or settings that may have a similar composition. The sample size is small, and the duration of the study was short creating an added limitation. Concerning the length of the study, the observations occurred over an eight-week period in the winter. There were multiple holidays that conflicted with in-class observations. During holidays the center is closed. Two days in November and one day in December holidays occurred on scheduled observation days and prevented collection of in-class observation data. November and December are also months of overall lower enrollment of students at the center, because families are more likely to keep children home for winter vacations.

A further limitation is that the researcher as the lead classroom teacher is a participant observer in the study. While this adds a unique perspective to the classroom observations, there is also an increased occasion for bias because the researcher is close to the study subjects and setting. Review of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) item scores, and interviews with teachers were designed to decrease possible bias that may be present due to the researcher being a classroom teacher, looking for specific behaviors. Teaching staff members were given the opportunity to share their answers during the interview, and review and correct researcher notes prior to the close of the interview session. The use of written observations of children's play activity is a normal part of the researcher's typical teaching duties, and staff members were welcome to review observation notes if they desired. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all teaching staff and children, and field notes were kept in locked storage on site, available for review by staff members upon request.

Chapter 4

Results

Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale---Revised was completed on October 28, 2015. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale---Revised is required annually by the child development program, and had been completed as a regular classroom requirement. Two items included in the scale were relevant to the purposes of the present study. The two items are Item 17 Using language to develop reasoning skills and Item 32 Staff-child interactions.

Item 17 Using language to develop reasoning skills received a score of 3 (on a scale of 1-7). Significant observations from this measure noted that while there was some communication with children concerning logical concepts (i.e. identifying big and small colored counting bears), most staff did not engage children in back and forth communication or use interrogative questions to expand conversations with children. Item 32 Staff-child interactions received a score of 2 (on a scale of 1-7). Notable observations from this item were that most staff do not interact with children at the child's eye level during communication with students and while observing children's activities throughout the school day.

Staff Interviews

Staff interviews revealed staff members' responses to the six questions (See Appendix E) concerning time working in early childhood education, educational background in early childhood education, definition of play, the role of play in preschool,

strategies used to support play in the preschool classroom, and familiarity with the CLASS Dimensions Guide (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) (See Table 1). The purpose of the staff member interviews was to identify strategies used to support play in the preschool classroom.

All staff members had worked in the field of early childhood education for five years or more. Six years was the least number of years in the field for staff, and thirty-two years the greatest. One teacher held a Bachelor degree in Human Development with an option in Early Childhood Education, and had worked in the field of early childhood education for thirty-two years, and one staff member possessed a Child Development Assistant Certificate and had worked in the field for fifteen years. The two remaining staff members both had an educational background of one course in Child Development and had worked in the field for six years and eight years respectively.

Staff definitions of play varied with only two teachers sharing defining elements of play. The shared defining elements of these two teachers were “play and learning.” The two staff members who shared these defining elements of play differed in the length of time they had been working in early childhood education, one teacher had been working fifteen years and the other teacher eight years. One teacher defined play as “imagination, dramatic play, social interaction and fun,” and had been in the field of early childhood education for six years. The remaining teacher defined play as “exploring the environment and materials with no direction except for safety,” and had worked in early childhood education for thirty-two years.

Staff members' descriptions of the role of play in preschool also varied for each staff member. The roles of play in preschool generated by staff members were socio-emotional skills, social interaction, imagination, learning, verbal communication and discrete skills. Staff members' strategies also differed, yet three teachers discussed the use of materials in their strategies to support play. The remaining staff member described her strategy for supporting play as monitoring the safety of children. Only one teacher described social interaction as part of her strategy of supporting children's play. Her definition included, "imitation, play together and provide materials." Two staff members were familiar with the CLASS Dimensions guide, while the remaining two staff members were unfamiliar with the guide, but both reported that they had had similar trainings in the past. The two staff members who were unfamiliar with the CLASS Dimensions guide had also been in the field of early childhood education for the longest time period.

Table 1: Interview Responses

	Ms. Monet	Ms. Carly	Ms. Juana	Ms. Sue
Time in ECE	15 years	8 years	6 years	32 years
Education in ECE	Child Development Assistant Certificate from local community college	1 Child Development Class		Bachelor's Degree in Human Development with option in ECE Additional units in ECE from local community college and county office of education
Definition of Play	(play and learn)	(imagination, dramatic play, fun, social interaction)	(learn when play)	(explore environment and materials with no direction except safety)
Role of Play in Preschool	(socio-emotional skills)	(social interaction, imagination, learning)	(verbal communication, discrete skills)	(learning)
Strategies	(monitor safety)	(imitation, play together, provide materials)	(using materials in environment)	(set environment, introduce new materials)
Familiar with CLASS	Unfamiliar with CLASS (had similar training)	Familiar with CLASS	Familiar with CLASS	Unfamiliar with CLASS (had similar training)

Table 2: Frequency of Staff Member Strategies Observed

	Entering Play with Children in the Dramatic Area	Sitting with Children and Constructing Together	Visually Monitoring Children's Play From a Standing/Sitting Position	Observing Children's Play at Child's Level	Asking Interrogative Questions	Assisting with Routines
Ms. Sue			2			
Ms. Juana		1			1	3
Ms. Monet						1
Ms. Carly	1					1
Teacher/Researcher				6	10	
Totals	2	1	2	6	11	5

Note: Assisting with routines was not a strategy to support children's play, but three of five teaching staff members were observed doing this behavior during in-class observations

¹ All teaching staff member and children's names are pseudonyms

In-Class Observations Staff Strategies

During in-class observations staff members were observed using the following strategies to support play:

- Entering play with children in the dramatic area as a participant in children's cooking and home themed play (i.e. Ms. Carly sits in the Dramatic Area at the play table and requests food from children who are cooking for her at the play stove)
- Sitting with a child and constructing together (i.e. Ms. Juana sits in a child-sized chair at the Lego table and builds together with Samaia)
- Asking interrogative questions (Holding up what she built from Legos, Ms. Juana asks Samaia, What's this?; Teacher/researcher asks, "What are you making, Lucas?")
- Visually monitoring children's play from a standing or sitting position (Ms. Sue is across the classroom sitting in the adult sized chair in the Manipulative area watching as a child completes a puzzle)
- And observing children's play at the child's level (Teacher/researcher sits on the rug beside Lucas and watches as he builds with blocks)

Only one staff member other than the teacher/researcher used a strategy to support play with open-ended materials during the in-class observations (See Table 2). This teacher used interrogative questioning as she built with Legos together with a child.

[Ms. Juana sits at the Lego table in a child-sized chair. Ms. Juana searches through the Lego box handing pieces to Samaia and helping her build. There is little communication verbally. But the two build cooperatively]

[Ms. Juana holding up what she has built asks Samaia]

What's this? After she had built a 'tree' which she hands to Samaia

Monitoring children's play from a standing or sitting position was the most frequent strategy observed among teaching staff members other than the researcher. The most frequent strategy used by the teacher/researcher to support children's play was interrogative questions.

In-Class Observations of Children's Play

In-class observations of children's play with open-ended materials yielded the following categories of play: solitary/constructive, solitary/dramatic, associative/constructive, and associative/dramatic (See Appendix D). Some children preferred to build quietly and alone with materials like Legos and magnetiles. Other children played alone, but communicated out loud about their play with open-ended materials. Still others played cooperatively with friends building together and some played cooperatively and verbally identified pretend play roles and imaginative uses of open-ended materials (See Appendix C).

In two of the in-class observations of children's play with open-ended materials children transitioned from associative/constructive play to associative/dramatic play by

the end of the play observation. Following are two examples of these observations from an observation on Tuesday, December 8, and Wednesday January 6, 2015:

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

T: What are you making?

Benjamin: A boat it's dropping. We want it like this on the top. But it's gonna break. A shape it looks like [gestures with hand in a diagonal motion]

T: A ramp?

Benjamin: there's a camera on top in the circle and they jump like this [gestures with hands]

Benjamin: We baby ninjas. Because they're baby ninja turtles

Jose: [Does not add comments but watches Benjamin as he explains]

Benjamin: They can fly a little bit like this [gestures with hands] Come on let's play

Benjamin to Jose: You wanna get some water [both boys go to the water jug to get a drink]

T: You have cars now. What are you doing?

Benjamin: We have a lot. We have 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 . . . 12

T: How many Benjamin?

Benjamin: 12

Jose: I don't want to do that

Benjamin: Pretend you died now. You can fly

And, Wednesday, January 6, 2015

T: What are you building?

Jose: A house airplane [uses rectangular Lego blocks to outline the edge of the Lego table. Then places a Lego person on top]

Linda: Is he walking?

Jose: [Drags Lego man into middle of rectangular block]

Jose: [To Linda] No it just Legos can be

Jose: [To Benjamin] Pretend you can fly

T: Where are you going?

Jose: In the moon

T: I wonder if he will need a space ship. Or a space suit?

[Jose flies person around the table]

T: You're flying up there. What's up there?

Jose: [leaves the Lego table]

[BREAK]

Jose: [Goes to rug with Benjamin and Frank. He builds a house with large floor waffle blocks and foam blocks. Linda sits on the rug in the middle of a waffle block structure 'her hideout']

Jose: Us is to build a hideout too [Gathers blocks from the block shelf]

Linda: We have more than you guys

Jose: We have a lot them than you. Their name is McQueen tires. I paint them green

[END]

During these transitions, the researcher was using verbal communication through interrogative questions as strategies to support children's play.

Most of the in-class observations of play with open-ended materials involved male target students. Only one of the female target students, Samaia, engaged in play with open-ended materials during the scheduled in-class observations. The second female target student, Marina, did not engage with open-ended materials during any of the scheduled observation periods. This was unexpected, because prior to the study Marina often created detailed "parties" with Legos at the Lego table. The preferred play material

of Samaia was table top builders, specifically magnetiles and Legos. The male target children spent time playing with table top open-ended materials (Legos, magnetiles) and with Block Area open-ended materials (foam unit blocks, large waffle blocks) in the open rug space of the Block Area. Male target students were more likely to engage in play with open-ended materials in varied classroom areas of interest, while the observed female student mainly used table top open-ended materials, or worked at the Lego table.

Conclusions

The Early childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) data from the beginning of the study noted a score of 3 (on a scale of 1-7) for Item 17 Using language to develop reasoning and a score of 2 (on a scale of 1-7) for Item 32 Staff child interactions. These findings were supported by staff responses to strategies used to support play during the interview session, and in-class observations of teaching staff strategies to support children's play. Only one strategy listed by staff members incorporated aspects of social interaction among adults and children, and only one staff member other than the researcher used communication with children and interrogative questions as strategies to support children's play. Noting that three of four staff discussed materials as part of their strategy of supporting play, the researcher returned to the ECERS-R data for Space and Furnishings and Activities which received subscale scores of 7.0 and 5.20 (on a scale of 1-7) respectively. This data supported teacher responses that preparing materials is a strategy they use to support play in the preschool classroom.

In-class observations of children's play with open-ended materials yielded the following categories of play: solitary/constructive (i.e. Lucas builds a ninja firehouse independently in the block area with foam blocks), associative/constructive (i.e. Jose and

Samaia, build a structure together from magnetiles), and associative/dramatic (i.e. Jose and Lucas build a choo choo train and track from Legos and take turns driving their trains around the track). Interesting is that in some instances of associative/constructive play, when children were encouraged to communicate with the researcher about their play the children then transitioned to associative/dramatic play. In the study children's play moved from Associative/Constructive to Associative/Dramatic often times with the aid of teacher communication, specifically, interrogative questioning.

In regards to observed gender differences, boys were more likely to play with open-ended materials in different classroom interest areas (Blocks, Manipulatives, Lego Table) while the sole girl observed in the study preferred play with open-ended materials in table top settings (Manipulative Table, Lego Table). However, due to the small sample size and lack of observations of the second female target student, these results are tentative. It could be that these gender differences are unique to the students chose for the study. A larger sample including more male and female target students would need to be studied prior to drawing conclusions about gender differences. Yet, the results do fuel more questions. Are female students encouraged to use open-ended materials in more large motor interest areas like the block area? This may be a relevant question for future study.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

As previously noted, this study is a qualitative action research study. It is not generalizable beyond the current setting, but it does raise questions of how play is used and supported in the present early childhood education classroom. To the degree that other classrooms may be similar to the one in the study, readers can use these results to guide their thinking about the play practices in their own settings.

Study results yield that most staff members in the preschool classroom did not use communication between teaching staff and children as a strategy to support play. This result aligns with a finding that preschool teachers do not usually have extended conversations with preschoolers that encourage questions, problem solving, and critical thinking (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). The most frequent strategy of teachers other than the teacher/researcher was visually monitoring children's play from a standing or sitting position. In relation to staff member answers to questions of strategies they use to support play in the preschool classroom, three staff members emphasis on providing materials, and one staff member's emphasis of monitoring safety align with in-class observations of strategies. Only one staff member noted playing together as a strategy to support play, and this staff member was observed in-class engaging in children's play in the dramatic area. It is pertinent to note that this staff member also reported that she was familiar with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System Dimensions Guide (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

The results raise questions of how early educators working in play-based public programs understand the significance of children's play, and how they as educators can

support well-developed play. The answers of most of the teaching staff members in the study yielded answers of what play is, and strategies of supporting play in the preschool classroom that did not acknowledge adult-child interaction. Play was treated as a natural occurrence that only needs to be monitored by teaching staff. This view is not aligned with what quality improvement tools like Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009) are requiring. During the study, children's play moved from Associative/Constructive to Associative/Dramatic play when a teacher interacted with them, often times with the aid of teacher interrogative questioning. Thus children were not only communicating together around their play with materials, but they transitioned to communicating together, sharing ideas, and negotiating meaning of materials. In essence they were practicing symbolic thinking (Bodrova, 2008).

A shortage of communication between staff and children takes away from teachable moments to support children's play and draw out their communication of ideas and learning. Teachers do not often reflect on how they use questions in their teaching (Lee, Kinzie, & Whittaker, 2012). Early childhood teachers emphasize socioemotional skills and play as tools of learning, while parents may rather see the mastery of discrete skills for their young children (Ashiabi, 2007). However, to center attention on the power of play in learning, early childhood teachers must plan learning activities, establish and monitor learning goals, and draw children's focus towards learning goals as they explore (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2013), all of which builds upon adult-child interaction within rich learning environments.

For this study setting, initial improvements can be made to strengthen teacher strategies to support play, by training all teaching staff in the Classroom Assessment Scoring System. This would be beneficial not only to the classroom staff, but the child development program as a whole, and prepare the program to reflect on its quality in service to children and families, and opportunities to increase quality. Such training can be costly, but focusing teaching staff on instructional support strategies can improve teacher-child interaction (Tomkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici, 2013). Supporting early educators' continued professional development in early childhood education is a strategy to increase the quality of programs serving children in early childhood (Wilcox-Herzog, McLaren, Ward, & Wong, 2013) and thus positive developmental outcomes for children.

Future questions may focus on strategies of early childhood educators to help children develop mature forms of play, and questions reflecting on the frequency of communication between adults and children in play. Attention may be given to the wealth of opportunities to support language development and creativity when attention is given to children's imaginative play with open-ended materials. Notable also is how children of different genders supported in their play with open-ended materials.

The study also raises questions about the child development program's philosophy of play and definition of play, since the program describes itself as play-based. This study suggests that teachers may need support in understanding the program philosophy of play and how teachers fit within that philosophy. The reflective nature of this study helps to show areas where educators can question and reflect on their teaching practice and to further learn to be intentional in their teaching of young children.

In regards to state and federal policy, it is important that Early Childhood Education programs that are publically funded are aware of developmentally appropriate practice, and tools to move towards professional quality. Similar, to the state requirement of completion of an annual Environment Rating Scale assessment, public early childhood programs would also benefit from annual required Classroom Assessment Scoring System assessments (CLASS). CLASS emphasizes the classroom process over physical materials and design of environment, and the social interactions within an early childhood classroom are just as important as the materials available to children (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004). Also, the availability of corresponding professional development opportunities for teaching staff, provided by the state, would support strides towards quality improvement and strengthen early childhood education services to children and families.

In summary, this action research study was designed to answer the questions of what types of play are children engaging in with open-ended materials in a public preschool program, and what strategies do teachers use to support children's play. The methods of data collection were participant observation, staff member interviews, and review of the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005). The observed play behaviors of children engaged in play with open-ended materials were solitary/constructive play, solitary/dramatic play, associative/constructive play, and associative/dramatic. Children sometimes made the transition from one category of play to another with teacher support of play through interrogative questioning. Teachers' use of strategies to support play in the preschool classroom varied. Some teachers reported that they monitored children's play for safety, pretended together

with children, or set up the materials in the classroom environment. The most frequent teacher strategy observed during in-class observations was monitoring children's play from a standing or sitting position. This strategy is not aligned with what research tells us about the importance of social interactions between adults and children in early childhood education classrooms (La Paro, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004).

The results of the study provide an impetus to further research on the topic of play with open-ended materials, and the strategies teachers use to support play. Play-based curriculum is preferred by quality improvement tools like Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008), and Developmentally Appropriate Practice (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009), but how are teachers supporting play?

As young children build knowledge, manipulate ideas and expand their imagination through play experiences, they are honing their ability to understand abstract ideas and think symbolically (Emslie & Mesle, 2009; Singer, Singer, Paskon, & Schweder, 2003), which is fundamental to the future requirements of formal schooling. As learning commences in the play of the young child, in what ways can early educators nurture and strengthen it?

Appendix A

Daily Schedule

Full Day Preschool Daily Schedule

7:00-9:00 Free Choice Work Time (Greeting/Health Check/Breakfast)

8:55-9:05 Warning and Clean Up

9:05-9:25 Outdoor Play

9:30-9:40 Large Group

9:40-9:50 Small Group

9:50-10:45 Free Choice Work Time

10:45-10:55 Warning and Clean Up

10:55-11:30 Outdoor Play

11:30-12:15 Hand Washing and Lunch

12:15-2:30 Rest Time

2:30-3:00 Wake up/ Snack/Table Activities

3:00-3:50 Free Choice Work Time

3:50-4:00 Warning and Clean Up

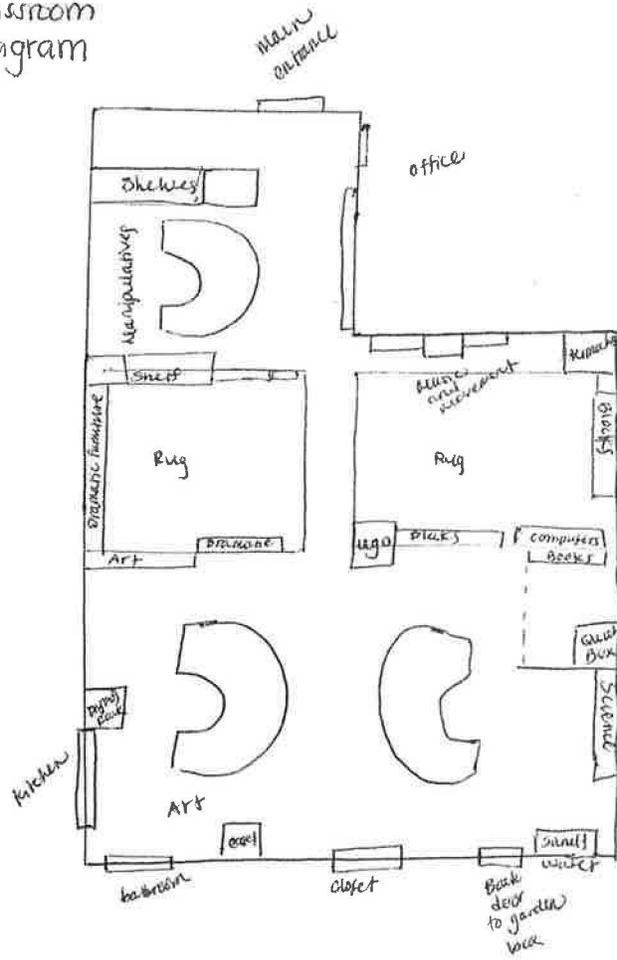
4:00-5:00 Outdoor Play

5:00-5:30 Quiet Activities/Goodbye

Appendix B

Classroom Diagram

Classroom
Diagram



Appendix C

Sample Written Observation Guide/Notes Taken

In Class Observation, Wednesday, November 18, 2015 AM 10:20-10:45	Researcher Notes and Codes
<p>1) [Ms. Sue is across the classroom sitting in the adult sized chair in the Manipulative Area watching as a child completes a puzzle]</p> <p>2) [Ms. Juana stands near the easel in the Art Area helping children to get new pieces of paper to paint on, and assisting them with taking their pictures to the drying rack]</p> <p>3) T: [Sits in a child-sized chair beside the children as they build on the tabletop with magnetiles]</p> <p>Jose: Okay, build it slow don't crash it. You build it slow up here. [Touches gently a tile that is near the top of the structure] I don't need it crash [Associative-conversation, same materials/constructive-constructing and creating]</p> <p>Monica: I know. We have to be careful</p> <p>Jose: I think we need some of these [small square magnetiles]</p> <p>Samaia: Ahhhh. [The structure tumbles down]</p> <p>Monica: [To a child walking by] Don't be mean to school Marina</p> <p>Jose: [Stacks triangles on top of the structure]</p> <p>Monica: Keeps falling off</p> <p>Jose: [Makes pyramids with small squares and equilateral triangles and places them at the top of the structure]</p> <p>Jose: Hey let's make some space ships [Removes the pyramids from the top of the structure] [Dramatic-tiles become spaceships]</p> <p>Jose: [To Samaia] You make these space ships. Let's put people here [inside the space ships]</p>	<p>Child/Children: (Samaia and Jose)</p> <p>Materials: Magnatiles (translucent magnetic shape builders)</p> <p>Setting: Kidney table</p> <p>Teaching Staff Present During Observation: Teacher/Researcher (T), Ms. Sue, Ms. Juana</p> <p>1) Sitting and monitoring a child's play</p> <p>2) Assisting with routines</p> <p>3) Sitting near children and observing play</p> <p>Type/Types of Play Observed:</p> <p>Associative/Constructive</p> <p>Dramatic</p>

Appendix D

Play Scale

	Functional Play: Play with physical body	Constructive Play: Play creating and constructing	Dramatic Play: Play recreating present world into an imaginative world
Solitary Play: Playing alone with materials different from others	Solitary/Functional	Solitary/Constructive	Solitary/Dramatic
Parallel Play: Playing alone with materials similar to others	Parallel/Functional	Parallel/Constructive	Parallel/Dramatic
Associative Play: Playing with other children with similar materials and communication		Associative/Constructive	Associative/Dramatic
Cooperative Play: Playing in a group of children where each child has a play goal and play role		Cooperative/Constructive	Cooperative/Dramatic

Appendix E

Staff Member Interview Questions

- 1) How long have you worked in early childhood education?
- 2) What is your educational background in early childhood education?
- 3) How do you define play?
- 4) What role does play have in the preschool classroom?
- 5) What strategies do you use to support play in the preschool classroom?
- 6) Are you familiar with the CLASS (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System)?

Appendix F

Human Subjects Approval

Institutional Review Board <irb@sonoma.edu>

To

Naomi Martinez

CC

Matthew Benney Chiara Bacigalupa

09/22/15 at 12:14 PM

Sonoma State University
Institutional Review Board

September 18, 2015

Dear Ms. Naomi Martinez

Subject: IRB Application # 2595, WHAT WILL IT BE? AN INVESTIGATION OF IMAGINATIVE PLAY IN A PRESCHOOL CLASSROOM

I am pleased to inform you that your application to the Sonoma State Institutional Review Board has been reviewed and approved as **Exempt A-1**. Please contact Carol Hall or me immediately should you encounter any unforeseen difficulties, or make any significant changes to your planned procedures.

Thank you for your cooperation with our processes. We wish you the best of fortune as you complete your research project.

Sincerely,

Matthew Benney

Chair, SSU IRB

Reply Reply to All Forward More

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